when the wolves are silent and only the moon howls

by deathrae

Summary

There's a thousand stories out there of wedding-night kisses that involve superhuman canine teeth embedded in the carotid artery, a gift of eternal un-life in exchange for loss of humanity. But there are no stories about a honeymoon hospital stay and superhuman healing granted to save your wife from broken bones and an anesthetic allergy in exchange for primal hunger and a killer monthly cycle.

Notes

As is true with a lot of fan theories from media I follow lately, I don't personally ascribe to the werewolf!Nicole theories, but they're still a lot of fun to think about. And, apparently, to scribble 3500 words about in like 12 hours. So, to hell with it, here's my take on "what if Nicole Haught was a werewolf."

(Title from a George Carlin quote.)
Chapter 1

It was the dream again. Which wasn’t the most accurate way to put it. More so it was a memory, clouded by her sleeping mind so that a few of the details were hazy and some of the transitions didn’t quite make sense, but otherwise relatively faithful to the truth.

She woke up in a hotel room, which was to be expected on her honeymoon with the vibrant, crazy, brilliant doctor she’d met at a concert in Vegas. What wasn’t to be expected was the sensation of bandages around her mid-section and one of her arms in a cast and a throbbing, cold pain that felt somehow newer, somehow more important than the rest, on her left shoulder.

Nicole, you’re awake, thank god.

She didn’t feel awake, her head foggy with painkillers. She turned a little, bringing resurgent aches to the forefront of her mind when her ribs protested the move.

No, sweetheart, stay still a little longer. You’re not done healing.

There was something about how she said it that seemed strange, noteworthy even.

What happened to me? she asked, mostly, her mouth a little cottony with sleep and morphine.

There was an accident while we were climbing. You’re allergic to thiopental, did you know that?

She shook her head. The words didn’t seem real.

You almost died, sweetheart. I... I panicked. I’m sorry.

For what? she asked.

Her wife’s gaze tracked off her face and slid, guiltily, to her shoulder. She turned a little more to look and found a near perfect semicircle of gouges shaped like teeth, too large, too sharp to have been human and too precise to be animal.

Shae, she whispered, fear fighting through the haze of painkillers, distant but growing more pressing. What did you do...?

I was going to tell you everything, Nicole, I swear I was. It just all happened so fast.

And then pain, silvery and cold in the burning, inevitable way of glacial ice, pulsing and spreading through her blood like fire.

The dream ends the same way it always does. Shae’s eyes, wide and tinted gold in the lamplight and hungry, watching her with a need, a fever, that isn’t real. Isn’t human.

Nicole woke up growling and ravenously hungry. Calamity Jane noticed the disturbance, but the only sign she was paying any attention was an imperious flick of her tail from where she sat in her perch on a carpeted tree that Nicole had shoved into a corner of her bedroom by the window the day she moved in.

She wrestled down the inhuman sound of discontent that was still rumbling in her chest and shook her head to clear off the last bits of dream-memory, like shaking water off her hair. She ran her
tongue over her teeth, satisfied that they were the proper shape, and got up, stretching creakily. A quick pat to Calamity Jane’s head earned her a soft purr and a languid blink, and she headed down the hall of her small home to the kitchen to dig through whatever leftovers she still had in the fridge.

The dream was new, since she’d arrived in Purgatory, and felt like some kind of weird punishment to keep her from forgetting the crazy twists her life had gone through in the last five years or so. She’d learned of Ghost River County from some contacts in the... less than human circles Shae had introduced her to, and had been promised up and down that she wouldn’t have any trouble crossing the boundaries of the Triangle. That had mostly been true. She’d crossed physically without trouble, which was a relief, since she’d already had the transfer papers filed for joining the Purgatory police department and it would’ve been hell to explain why she was trying to reverse them. But she wasn’t convinced she’d come across unscathed, exactly, if the repeated nightmare was any indicator.

She pulled leftover Chinese off the bottom shelf and grabbed a fork, leaned against the counter, and started eating. Cold pork lo mein eaten standing in a dark kitchen was hardly the pinnacle of cuisine, but it quieted her grumbling stomach.

Nightmares aside, a little lost sleep wasn’t such a bad trade for a comfortable one-story home out past the limits of downtown where she was just at the edge of the town and the nearest proper suburb, where a soundproofed basement meant that even if her neighbors heard something weird a few nights a month, they chalked it up to wandering suburban foxes or maybe a few of the fabled coyotes that the sheriff kept blaming for some of the weirder deaths outside town.

There her thoughts turned, pivoting back to what she’d been thinking about when she went to bed the night before. Before her shift, she would drop by the bar-and-restaurant a block from the station. She knew she wasn’t the only... weird thing in town—that much had become obvious almost immediately after she got to town. But that raised more questions: what else was here? She hadn’t been here long enough to hit the turn of the month, and she wanted to know what else was local before things got ugly.

And everything she’d heard pointed to two things. First, in the broader sense, was the Earp family, which she’d heard whispers of even before she’d crossed provincial lines. Second, in the specific, was one Waverly Earp, waitress at Shorty’s and, by all accounts, a dang genius at her job and in general. If anyone was likely to have seen some weird things around Purgatory, she was betting it would be Waverly.

She looked at the clock on her kitchen wall, frowning. It was barely five in the morning. She had hours yet before her shift would start.

“Well, Calamity,” she said, if only to hear something in her home other than the creak of pipes and the central heating unit, “Guess I have more than enough time for a run.”

Her cat said nothing, but that wasn’t a surprise.

Nicole tipped the front of her hat down as a few civilians walked by on the sidewalk and muttered polite hellos to her. She hesitated in front of the saloon doors until they’d walked further on down the way, looked over the façade of the building, and then tested the door. It opened, and she slid cautiously inside, looking around at the warm, homely interior. The place was utterly deserted, except for a young woman standing behind the bar to clean. Just as Nicole pulled her Stetson off her head and opened her mouth to say something, one of the taps blasted open, drenching the poor
woman in what looked from a distance like seltzer water.

“Gah—geez!” the woman sighed, as she finally got the tap off and slapped her hands down on the bar. “Perfect.”

“I didn’t know Shorty’s had wet t-shirt competitions,” Nicole called out, grinning as warmly as she knew how, running her fingers over the brim of her hat. What had she come in for again? She knew enough to know it was Waverly Earp behind the bar, and she remembered deciding to come talk to her, but for the life of her, looking at that face, she couldn’t remember why. Did she even need a reason beyond saying hello? “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Waverly sighed, grabbing a bar towel and mopping at her shirt. Nicole approached, a little wary, but grinning like the sun. “Just uh, a bit jumpy. Had a crazy night.”

“Sorry I wasn’t here to see it,” she said with a laugh, and offered her hand across the bar. “I’ve been uh, I’ve been meaning to introduce myself. Nicole,” she explained, as Waverly took her hand. Her fingers were a bit sticky, but gripped gently. Deep in Nicole’s chest there was a pull, for just a moment, and she wanted... something. Maybe everything. She imagined pulling Waverly’s hand to her mouth, kissing her knuckles, licking her fingers clean after the accident with the tap. “Nicole Haught.”

“Hi,” Waverly said, the words more a breath than anything else.

“And you,” Nicole continued, finally releasing Waverly’s hand as an afterthought, “Are Waverly Earp. Quite a popular girl around here.”

“Oh you know,” she said, grinning shyly, “It’s all in the smile and wave.”

This close, Nicole could smell her clothes, her shampoo, under a layer of seltzer water. She smelled incredible. It was distracting as hell, put frankly, and after a moment she realized she was staring.

“Could I get a cappuccino to go?” she asked, scrambling for something to say that wasn’t you’re gorgeous.

“Oh,” Waverly said, and was it just her, or did she sound almost a little sad about it? Probably it was just her. “I’m really sorry, but uh, we’re not actually open yet, so...”

Nicole blinked. She could tell by sound and smell the bar was empty, but she looked around, pretending she’d only just noticed. “Right!” she said, and laughed at herself, spreading her hands. “Okay, my bad. Well, when I see something I like, I don’t wanna wait.”

Waverly watched her, her expression impossible to read, and Nicole froze.

Don’t scare the straight waitress, she thought furiously, and fought the urge to kick herself in the shin.

“And uh, your door was open,” she added hastily. “So...”

“Right,” Waverly said, looking toward the door as if she expected someone new to come barging in. She flipped the bar towel in her hand and dabbed it against her shirt, then sighed. “God, I’m sopping wet,” she said, filling the silence with a self-deprecating good humor that had Nicole laughing way too easily. Down girl. “You know, I keep telling Shorty to fix the darn taps...” She grinned, the expression somehow clumsy, but endearingly so. “I’m sorry, do you mind just, uh,” she raised her hands, shielding her eyes for a moment in a moment of charades.
“Oh! Sure, of course,” Nicole said, and turned to face the door. She waited patiently, her back to the bar. For a moment she tried not to listen, but in the otherwise silent room, it was hard not to. She heard Waverly turn, heard the shuffling of fabric on skin as she shimmied out of her shirt.

The creaking of seams as fabric threatened to tear was almost cacophonous to her ears, and she frowned. She was still trying to work out what was going on behind her when Waverly spoke again, stammering through a soft, “Oh- oh crap, uh—uh, Officer? I’m stuck. So...?”

Nicole turned to look over her shoulder, catching sight of a tangle of cloth, hair, and ensnared arms above an elegant cream bra and miles of soft tan skin.

“Oh!” she said, and hurried around the bar, reaching for the shirt wrapped up around Waverly’s elbows. “Lemme help you. I got you.” She pulled the shirt up and over Waverly’s head, then offered it back to her, trying not to look down at the poor girl’s chest for more than a second.

“Oh god,” Waverly was saying, with a smile that was equal parts uncomfortable and deeply embarrassed, “Good job you’re not some guy, right, or this would be really... really awkward.”

She ducked her head, grinning. This close, with this much exposed skin, Waverly’s scent was overpowering, and for a moment Nicole couldn’t think. Her shampoo was something strawberry, with just a hint of that chemical undertone that came with commercial hair products—her soap was something subtle, enough so that Nicole couldn’t quite pick it out of the mix, especially not with the sticky-sweet scent of the seltzer water still covering most of her skin. But she smelled soft, and clean, and warm, and the animal in her wanted to curl up in that scent and nuzzle against the hollow of Waverly’s throat, to lap at her collarbones and cover her in her own scent to warn off anyone else.

*God, Haught, get yourself together,* she thought, clawing through the haze of desire and interest and hunger. *She’s right in front of you!*

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“Um,” Waverly added, a moment later. “I, I owe you one.”

“Oh I can’t, no,” Waverly said, a little too fast. Nicole raised her eyebrows but listened patiently. “I mean, I’d love to. Like. *Like* to. Uh. But I have plans.” Waverly grinned, and Nicole could smell her anxiety, prickling its way across her skin, as well as something... else. Interest? “Yeah, I’m a planner! I like to know what I’m doing at least two, or, three, days in advance, and...” She shook her head, as if she’d just suddenly realized she was babbling. “I’m in a relationship,” she blurted next. “With a boy. *Man.*”

She didn’t smell like hatred or anger, and Nicole decided that was good enough for her. Enough, at least, to fight down the jealousy that threatened to sharpen her teeth. “A boy-man,” she mused, and grinned a downright wolfish smile as she started back around the bar. “Yup! I’ve been there. It’s the worst. Okay, well.” She picked up her hat and pulled a slightly dog-eared business card from her pocket. “Some other time,” she offered, tapping the card down on the bar before starting toward the door. “I mean it.”

She didn’t stop until she was outside in the fresh, clean Purgatory air, and she took a few deep breaths, trying to clear out her nose. Instead, all she could think about was Waverly. Waverly with the long, beautiful hair and olive skin. Waverly’s scent and shy, sunny smile lingered on her like a tangible thing, and she found herself grinning to herself, nodding at passersby more openly and
more warmly than she usually did. The people in Purgatory tended to be a little closed off, a little wary, and she had decided to take the more careful approach, mimicking their caution rather than trying to overwhelm them with friendly kindness. Especially until she knew what other supernatural creatures called Purgatory home, it wasn’t wise to assume anything.

Other Purgatory supernaturals. That’s why she’d gone into Shorty’s.

“Damn,” she muttered, pulling her hat lower down over her forehead and heading back to the station. “Not my best police work.”

When she got to work the place was at a dull roar of idle activity. Not many civilians around, which she was glad for, without quite being able to say why.

The station was, as it always was, a haze of familiar sounds and smells. The low rumble of voices, the whir of computer fans, and the occasional jangling of cuffs and utility belts as officers wandered from room to room. The bullpen and locker room smelled like gun oil, ink, and the warm, plasticky smell of hot ribbon in an active printer. The other officers tended to smell like fabric softener, boot polish, and their packed lunches (pastrami sandwich, leftover Italian, and a microwave burrito, today); the holding cells like unwashed human and stale beer. The sheriff’s office smelled like cologne, hunting trophies, and the very faint smell of enclosed, burning dust in his computer. Nedley was a great man and an even better sheriff but he wouldn’t know a can of compressed air if one fell on his head.

Today, though, there was something new. Two somethings, in fact. One was a woman—hair product and leather conditioner, gunpowder and whiskey. The other was... something. Something that looked, walked, and talked like a man but had something else under his skin. Something hidden, something trapped, something itching to rampage.

And damn if it didn’t have Nicole’s attention immediately. She’d heard grumblings around the bullpen about the snazzy new cross-border force using up some of the old offices on the western side of the station, but it was the first time she’d smelled them so clearly and it had definitely caught her eye. Or, her nose, at least.

“Mind if I deliver this?” Nicole had asked, picking up a box just as Nedley read the addressee and frowned.

“Be my guest,” he groused. “That Deputy Marshal is a thorn in my side as it is.”

Nicole nodded and took the box, eyeing the label. The plot thickens, she thought, and sauntered down the hall, humming to herself as if this were an utterly normal day.

She knocked on the door for the new “Black Badge Division” offices and let herself in, greeting the Deputy Marshal and the new woman with a falsely bright grin.

“Hey!” she called as she sauntered inside. “Check it out, another piping hot delivery from...” She examined the label as if she were not already familiar with it. “Wow, CSIS.” The Deputy Marshal stepped up close to her, leaning into her space, and the animal in her chafed at the display. “Oh,” she continued, as if she were blind to his leashed aggression. “I’m Nicole, uh, Officer Haught. Y’all getting settled in all right? What is all this stuff?”

It was way too easy to rile up the thing under the Deputy Marshal’s skin, when it came down to it. He had the coiled, tight look of someone who was used to keeping it under control, but her flippant invasion of his private sanctum had him on edge and he was radiating it in waves. She didn’t think his leather-clad deputy could tell, but the growling beast that lived under her skin could smell
“Nice to meet you, Officer Haught,” the Marshal said stiffly, and she pretended to smile when he did. “If you ever enter my offices again without knocking, I’ll have you arrested for treason.”

It was the same everywhere you went, really. There’s a reason the popular prefix for the weird and the alien is super-natural, and in Nicole’s personal opinion it was that all the core themes and behaviors you found in normal people were amplified tenfold in the non-normal ones. Wariness and seclusion tactics designed to keep communities enclosed so that no one left and no one entered? Amplified. Fear of the unknown that too readily changes to anger and hostility? Amplified. Posturing and aggression when faced with an unknown threat? Amplified so far it didn’t matter what you had below your belt—male or female or anything else, when you had something to fear from normies and from other supernatural types, you got aggressive, you claimed your space, and you let anything infringing on it know they were unwanted, right off.

Add to that the fact that he smelled like he used eau de sand and death as his cologne—at least one tour in the Middle East, probably Afghanistan, she’d stake her badge on it—and really she couldn’t even blame the guy. He was being hostile, he was marking out his territory, and he was playing it off as something based on security clearance, which was perfect for stealth. Not unreasonable. Hell, she was doing the same damn thing, if a bit more subtly. She just didn’t have a cross-border government task force to hold up her side of the threat. All she had was tooth and nail and a little less than six feet of raw physical presence.

She met his eyes, scanning, looking for any hint of what the hell it was that lurked inside him. Something in her was disappointed he hadn’t lashed out. That would’ve been more fun. More paperwork, but way more fun.

“Okay?” he asked, and she gave him a tense, uncomfortable smile that was in character for the bubbly, friendly neighborhood officer she’d come in as. He hadn’t grabbed her and leashed her, so she was willing to bet he didn’t know what she was either. Not yet.

“Nice to meet you too,” she said, rolling her eyes and spinning on her heel to head for the door.

She let it bang shut behind her and started forward, but she listened, ears pricked for what came through the door. A half second’s pause, and then the woman spoke, sounding utterly unimpressed by his display of alpha male posturing bullshit.

“She did knock, Dolls.” The woman scoffed. “You sure you don’t want to threaten her with death?”

“Penalty for treason is death,” he reminded her. “It was implied.”

Nicole snorted and headed back to her desk. Well, at least she had part of her answer. She definitely wasn’t the only supernatural thing in town.
Chapter 2

Nicole was not, as a general rule, a gossip. She didn’t like hearsay, and she didn’t like the way people talked about each other when they weren’t present. She found it distasteful, unprofessional, and, well, rude. But when your ears are good enough to pick up dog whistles, you overhear things. A lot.

It was part of why she’d wanted out of Calgary. She’d loved the city, before Shae, but now it was just too... much. Too many sounds, too many smells. She couldn’t get anything like restful sleep, not when she could hear a bus rattling over grates a block away or smell someone burning toast two floors up from her apartment. Not when she could smell the territorial mark of every dog that had crossed her block all afternoon and hear someone talking on their cell phone from halfway down the hall. The city was alive, night and day, and where once that had made her happy, to live in such a big, vibrant place, now it was overwhelming to the point of paralysis.

So she’d kept her ears open and looked for smaller towns that were big enough to hide supernaturals but small enough to avoid the clutter that came with densely packed humans.

“Purgatory? Folks say it’s cursed,” Mike had muttered, spinning poker chips through his fingers.

“So am I, now,” Nicole had said with a wolfish smile, as she laid down two pair.

“Fair enough.”

Purgatory was pretty much exactly what she’d been looking for. Small, but not so small that outsiders would never be accepted, and just friendly enough to the supernatural crowd that a lone oddball like her could hide in plain sight, at least a little.

Plus, the Purgatory Sheriff’s Department had a couple job openings. Something about a higher-than-average casualty rate for officers.

But it was still a small town.

And in small towns, people talk. A lot.

So, regardless of her opinions on gossip, overhearing people talking was how Nicole learned that Waverly Earp’s father had been shot dead 15 years ago, the same night the eldest Earp daughter was carried off into the woods and later presumed dead after a prolonged search. It’s how she heard that the middle daughter, Wynonna Earp, had been the one to shoot the drunken bastard, and that presumably the grief and trauma had been what made the girl, who had been 12 when she shot their father, “lose her damn mind.” A couple years later she’d been institutionalized after she claimed the house had been overrun with demons. It’s how she’d learned that after Wynonna was discharged, she and Waverly got shuffled around in the system a few times until they ended up with Curtis and Gus McCready. Every time she heard the story she noted that Gus’ name was spoken with respect and familiarity, Curtis’ with reverence and sympathy for the recent dead, and Waverly’s with affection and warmth.

Wynonna’s name, however, was spoken like a curse, spat out fast and avoided as much as one reasonably could without making conversation too confusing.

The gossip was also how Nicole learned that Wynonna was back in town ever since Curtis’ funeral, that she had somehow, to everyone’s utter bewilderment, been deputized by the visiting
Deputy Marshal, and that she was living on the Earp Homestead outside town again. It was how
she learned that Wynonna was generally not well-liked, for reasons that sounded sensible but also
smacked of small-town small-mindedness, and that most everyone in town was just waiting for the
day Wynonna snapped and killed someone else, or got sick of the charade and left town again.

And, last but not least, it was how she’d learned that, to Purgatory’s continued general confusion,
Waverly was going to move back to the Homestead with her sister, and had spent the last day or so
packing up all her stuff that she kept in the little apartment above Shorty’s. And as a related point,
she had learned that Champ Hardy had no end of negative things to say about the move, but not
anywhere where Waverly might hear him grousing about it.

This last had Nicole biting down throat-rending growls all morning as she struggled to pay
attention to the radio. Waverly was her own woman and could make her own choices, and while
her opinion of Champ meant about as much to Waverly as a ruffled bedskirt meant to Nedley, she
didn’t like the man. Boy. Whichever. Still, the fact that Nicole thought he was a brute who didn’t
deserve Waverly really was a personal problem, and it was not something for her to get worked up
over. Certainly not something for her to get so worked up over she almost snarled openly at a new
recruit who bumped into her on his way out of the kitchen.

Dispatch finally pulled her attention, a short but gruesome report crackling over the radio. She
listened, got on the wire to ask a couple clarifying questions, and then frowned, taking her notes
and knocking on Nedley’s door.

“I swear, Lonnie, if this is about the coffee in the kitchen again—oh. Nicole.” He brightened
considerably to see her, but then took one look at her face and frowned. “Door. Lemme see it.”

She closed the door and handed over her notes. He looked them over for barely more than 30
seconds while she shifted from foot to foot, itching to do... something. She wasn’t sure what. His
mustache quivered as his frown intensified, the lines around his mouth and his eyes deepening until
he seemed to have aged about 10 years in a single minute.

“Get Dolls on this,” Nedley said, his voice low.

“You sure, Sheriff?” she asked, matching his tone.

“I don’t like it, but I don’t have to.” He grunted. “This is definitely bigger than us.”

“Consider it done, sir,” she said, and nodded, heading back out of his office.

She hesitated outside the Black Badge office door. It wasn’t her intent to eavesdrop, but there was a
new voice inside that made her pause.

“These will be great resources,” she heard Dolls say, his voice actually showing a trace of real
gratitude, not just robotic disinterest.

“Sorry, uh,” said a lighter, familiar voice. Nicole’s heartrate skipped, then doubled. Waverly. “I
spent years on that research, so...”

“Welcome to Team Shut-Up-and-Do-What-He-Says,” Wynonna countered, and there was a pause
so long and mocking Nicole could practically see the wry smile on her face. “Sometimes we get
donuts.”

Nicole knocked and paused, remembering Dolls’ hissy fit from the last time she’d been at this
door. Beyond there was a moment of shuffling paper and creaking hinges, as of things being
shoved out of sight, and then Dolls’ shoes clicked once.
“Enter,” he called, and she opened the door, staying near the doorway.

Wynonna was lounging against the table, one knee propped up on a chair and a powdered donut, of all things, in one hand. Dolls stood near her, at parade rest, his attention turned toward the doorway to watch her.

Waverly sat on the edge of the table in an awkward half-lean, as if she were trying to block some of the stacks of files from view. She didn’t smell like seltzer water this time, but sun and clean mountain air and a hint of coffee.

Nicole blinked and pushed it aside, locking her eyes on Dolls. “Hey,” she said, her tone low to keep anyone in the hall from hearing. “You asked to be alerted whenever things come over the wire that seem...” She paused, as if looking for the word she wanted. “Unusual?”

“Yeah, we’re coming,” he said lightly, then turned back to the table. “Waverly, you’re dismissed.”

Waverly made a faint sound that might’ve been acknowledgement and looked away from him, her gaze flicking to the floor, then to Nicole.

She smiled. She couldn’t help it—who wouldn’t smile under the attention of Waverly Earp? Out of the corner of her eye she saw Dolls’ gaze track between the two of them, but she couldn’t make herself care about that. She ducked out of his way when he left the room, and shut the door behind him with one last grin at Waverly. Behind her she heard the two Earps start talking, but she kept pace with Dolls and led him back to her desk, scooping up the file and leading him to another small office. This was not something the entire department needed to know. She shut the door behind them.

“So what are we looking at,” he asked, his tone just as dry and professional as ever.

“Deputy Mayor,” she said, handing him the file and pulling up photos from the scene on a projector. “He was killed at the time capsule ceremony in the city earlier today. Fileted like a salmon.” She flicked through the photos for him. She half-expected him to level her with that flat, uninterested expression of his and question why she was telling him about it, but he just nodded slowly, taking in the photos. “Shirley Dixon’s journal was removed from the time capsule, but witnesses indicate nothing else was taken.

“And there’s another thing,” she added, opening a different folder on the computer to pull up a bit of security footage. “Bus stop in the city. Came in a few days ago. We were working on it, but Nedley and I think it’s connected. How’s your stomach?”

“It’s fine,” he said drily. “Go ahead.”

She nodded and hit play on the video, letting him watch the dismemberment twice through.

“Send me these files,” he said.

It wasn’t a request, it was a demand, but she bit down a surge of frustration and nodded. “I sent them before I knocked on your door.”

He looked at her, his expression difficult to identify.

“That’s all I’ve got,” she said, shrugging one shoulder. “But if anything else comes in seems like it could be even remotely related I’ll forward it to you. We’ve been running the database to see if our knife-wielding friend from the bus stop pulls any matches, but it’s slow-going. I’ll give you whatever we find on his priors.”
Dolls nodded, evidently satisfied, and crossed his arms over his chest with the folder tucked beneath one elbow.

“So tell me, Officer Haught. What’s your game here.”

She frowned at him, wary, and kept part of her attention on the set of his shoulders and the positions of his feet. The door to the room was still shut and she couldn’t see anyone beyond it through the frosted glass, but that was both good and bad.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Your game,” he repeated, sounding almost bored. “What is it, you’re in here so you can stay one step ahead? Hide your tracks?”

Fear trickled down her spine. “I don’t know what you’re—”

“Skip it,” he said, his tone turning just a bit more sharp. “Save us both some time.”

She felt her lip pull back from her teeth for a moment in a sneer, stifled it, and stepped closer to him. She didn’t get in his face, but she came close enough that even with her voice very, very low he could hear her clearly. “Let’s get one thing straight, Dolls.”

His tone was icy. “Deputy Marshal Dolls.”

She ignored him. “I didn’t ask for this,” she said, watching his eyes. “I didn’t exactly have a chance to work it into my career choice.”

He was watching her in return, and she wondered if he thought he could sense when people lied to him. “Late bloomer,” he said.

“Sure, if that’s the BBD slang for it. But I took up my badge to protect and serve. And until a day comes when I can no longer do my job, I’m doing it. I would prefer to do so without watching over my shoulder for foreign feds, but if I have to, I’ll disappear before you can radio your bosses.”

For a long, long moment he said nothing. He just stood there, watching her face. She tried to think nonviolent things, but she could smell her own fear, cloying and trembling, just as easily as she could hear the beat of his heart. It was a bit too fast, but she’d give him credit—other than that, he seemed utterly calm.

“I see,” he mused. “And I guess it doesn’t hurt that you won’t need a bulletproof vest until someone brings silver-jacketed rounds on you.”

She stepped backward slightly, her weight shifting to give her more time to run if he pulled something.

He didn’t. He just gave her a very cold smile. “I’ve been reading up on all these ‘coyote’ murders. If any of them match—”

“They won’t,” she said coolly. “Seeing as I only got here a couple weeks ago. Check the lunar charts if you like.”

“And next week?”

“Day shifts. At night I’ll be in my basement. Like I said. Protect and serve. Including from myself.”
He watched her closely. “Wolf pelts are valuable to my superiors,” he said, his tone light, almost casual.

She stuck out her jaw and raised her chin in open defiance. “I’ve been looking through the fire marshal’s filings. Been a couple bizarre, secluded arson cases since you got to town. I can make your time here very difficult before I ghost.”

That, she thought, gave him pause. “Arson.”

“You smell like sulfur and butane, Deputy Marshal. And I’ve learned to trust my nose.”

There was another long, tense silence as they eyed each other. She thought maybe he was sizing her up. Not knowing exactly what he was put her at a disadvantage. She was no Black Badge agent trained to fight supernaturals, but at least knowing would’ve given her an edge—the same edge he had on her, by knowing what she was.

“Let’s talk truce, then.”

She narrowed her eyes, not bothering to hide her wariness.

“Extra suspicion on me by the locals just means that BBD nukes this town from orbit to keep the supernatural stuff quiet. All of it. I’m a footnote to them.” He said it mildly, but she frowned. He was giving her a lot of information, and she didn’t think for a second he was doing so unintentionally. “So here’s the deal. I make sure your containment measures are up to code, and as long as I’m satisfied, no one up my chain finds out about your... furry little problem,” he said, his expression neutral, neither friendly nor hostile. “And in exchange, you keep your mouth shut and your ears to the ground. You hear anything that sounds like our side of the street, you make sure I hear about it before Nedley does.”

She growled, the sound low, quiet, but unmistakable.

“Haught,” he said, and though his voice didn’t have the quiet lingering weight of a threat, it had the absolute severity of a warning. “I’m here to contain and control, before my superiors decide the only good Purgatory is a dead Purgatory. And when they get involved, it won’t matter if it’s not silvered. You read me?”

She eyed him. “I read you. Not sure I trust you, but I read you.”

He grinned, and for a moment, he looked so human and ordinary it took her aback. “You don’t have to. But, since we’ve each got boots at our throats, might as well embrace the nihilism of mutually assured destruction.”

She frowned at him. “Deal.”

“Good. I’ll check your place over lunch, after I catch my deputy up to speed on this time capsule thing.”

She watched Wynonna leave first, wandering out through the hall with a pensive frown on her face and muttering something to herself about tequila. Dolls followed, jacket in hand, and Nicole got up from her desk with a slight frown.

“Uh, she all right?” she asked, bobbing her head to indicate Wynonna.
“No,” Dolls said and rolled his shoulder in a half-shrug. He said it so flatly that Nicole blinked and stared at him, trying to decide if he was joking. “Ready?”

“Uh,” she said again, the picture of eloquence. “Yeah, sure. We’ll take my cruiser.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, and she decided that it really didn’t surprise her that he was the type of person who didn’t like entrusting himself to someone else’s driving.

“I’m on shift still,” she told him flatly. “We’re taking my cruiser.”

He narrowed his eyes, but raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, or at least of grudging acquiescence. She led the way out to her car.

Dolls said nothing for the entire drive out to her home, which was neither surprising nor particularly uncomfortable. Fear was still draped around her shoulders like a stole, but it was down to a manageable level. It was still possible he was planning an ambush, but she didn’t think so. She didn’t smell the tension or hear the rapid heartbeat of someone preparing treachery. He’d gotten into her car and agreed to go to her house—her home turf—and while he could have ordered a squad to be ready around her place, there hadn’t been enough time for them to get into position before they’d arrive.

Plus, Dolls didn’t seem quite so full of leashed rage today as he did the first time they’d spoken. She wondered if he really was being straight with her, and just liked having a job in front of him. Maybe he was easily bored. There was something that seemed right about that, and also somehow amusing.

“Here,” she said simply. She pulled into the driveway and he looked over the front of the house, eyes narrowing. “Chill,” she added as she got out. “Like I said. It’s in the basement.”

He grunted, satisfied, and got out of the car, watching the corners of the house, the door, the windows.

“Mind my cat,” she said as she walked up the front steps and dug her keys out of her pocket. “She doesn’t like men.”

He said nothing, but as he walked inside she could smell his rising anxiety and hostility. She stepped aside and gestured for him to enter, waiting patiently in the entryway as he scanned the main level of the house. He moved with military efficiency, clearing each room, his pistol drawn.

“You done?” she called after him, when he’d made a circuit and returned to the living room. He frowned at her, but holstered his gun. “I live alone, other than Calamity Jane.”

He blinked, then looked to the side where she pointed, noting the ginger ball of fluff perched on the highest bookshelf in the room. Calamity Jane was watching him with wary, subdued hostility.

“Figured you were being sarcastic. How do you keep a cat?” he asked. “Thought they didn’t like shifters.”

“I had her long before I was bitten,” she said with a shrug, pocketing her keys and heading to the far wall. “So she puts up with me well enough, at least as long as I’m, oh, 80% human or so?”

He was quiet for a moment, watching her move an armchair aside. “An early warning system,” he said.

“Basically,” she said, and with a last grunt of effort shoved the armchair far enough over that a
wooden trapdoor was visible and accessible. “When she starts hiding from me, I figure it’s time to hunker down.”

“Not a bad system,” he said, and she looked up at him.

“Careful Dolls, that almost sounded like praise,” she said. His expression immediately soured.

“It’s Deputy Marshal—”

“Yeah I know,” she said. “But you’ve been calling me Haught all day and I refuse to be on a titles-only basis with a guy who’s seen my secret dungeon of a basement, all right?”

He pressed his lips together into a thin line and said nothing for a moment. “Fine.”

She grinned. “Maybe hanging out with the Earp is good for you.”

He ignored her and crouched down beside the door, testing the hinges. He slid a short wooden beam back and forth, examining the old crossbar-style lock. He pulled it open, then let go and watched it spring back into place.

“Solid construction. This lock on the trapdoor is a good detail.”

She shrugged. “It’s easy enough to open with a crowbar or a screwdriver from below, but not so much with brute force. My...” She frowned, searching for an appropriate word. “The one who bit me didn’t believe in chains. I had to put a lot of thought into it, and quick.”

He nodded and gestured with a hand. She slid the crossbar aside, opened the trapdoor, and stepped down into the mostly finished basement beneath her home. The space was already a modest size, but the floor space was limited further by thick soundproofing foam and a steel cage that dominated half the space, on the opposite side from the trapdoor.

“Talk me through this,” Dolls said, running his fingers speculatively over the foam and pacing a circuit of the room.

She shrugged uncomfortably. The sound of his voice was deadened slightly by the soundproofing, and the air felt too close, a little stale.

“Cage has two locks. The primary is electronic, and set on a timer. Won’t release until the sun’s up. The mechanical lock is a failsafe for if there’s a loss of power and the backup generator fails. The mechanical lock and the bars are a steel/tungsten alloy.”

“Keys for the mechanical lock?” he asked, circling the bars and tapping his fingers on them experimentally.

She pointed to a nail in the unfinished ceiling. “Hang up there.”

He frowned, following her finger. “Seriously?”

“The bar spacing in the ceiling is tighter so I can’t get my paws through,” she explained. “But it’s possible, barely, to get up and through when I’m me. Worst case scenario, I can stretch through and get them down to unlock myself that way.”

Dolls did another circuit of the room and kicked at the bars, examining the joints.

“It’s good work,” he said finally, dispassionate.
She sighed, more relieved than she’d really expected to be. “Yeah?”

“It’s acceptable,” he said, nodding absently. “Do you change outside the full moon?”

She blew out a breath. “I try not to make a habit of it.”

He looked at her, his expression neutral again. “Why’s that?” There was something about how he said it that made her think it wasn’t part of the checklist. Like it wasn’t something he needed to know, but maybe that he actually wanted to know. It didn’t tell him anything about her kill count or her cage, but it told him how she thought about it. What she believed.

So, she thought about her answer with a little more care. She thought about how it would feel to run as fast as the wind, to leap so high and so far it felt like flight. To feel the wind in her fur and snow crunching beneath her paws as she let herself be free in that feeling, in that moment. To live that, just for a little while. To feel that alive, that vibrant, that powerful.

She shuddered, but not from fear or revulsion. God, she wanted it with a desperation and passion that terrified her.

“Mostly because up until now I was in cities, and it’s really hard to explain that one on the evening news,” she said, a little slow, a little careful. “And I knew that if I did it more, got used to it, got comfortable, it would be easier and easier to do it again, even if it was risky. If I got hooked on it...” She shook her head. “That was an unacceptable risk. If it got like that, it’d only be a matter of time before I slipped up.”

“And what about now that you’re out here?” Dolls watched her, his eyes intent with an emotion she couldn’t name. Something personal, something that was too important to answer flippantly. Something that had nothing to do with Black Badge and everything to do with whatever this deal, this... connection, was between them. “You’re not in a city anymore, Haught.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” She let out a slow, measured breath. The animal of her wanted it. Wanted it so badly that just giving voice to the possibility, the option, felt like surrendering to it. She could feel it itching to act, to run, to change. She shook her head, pushing it down. Not now.

Dolls was quiet for a bit longer, watching her. His hands were loose, hanging at his sides, like it would be as easy to pull his gun as breathing, but he wasn’t radiating hostility anymore. Just a calm focus that she remembered having once, before Shae, before the bite. A total evenness of intention and emotion. There was part of her that loved the animal, but there was part of her that missed that quiet, all too human calm.

“My goal here is to keep Black Badge from turning Purgatory into a crater. Ordinarily, I would hand you over to BBD and call it a day.” Her nerves jangled like struck wind chimes and she let out a warning growl before she could stop herself. “But,” he said sharply, raising an eyebrow at her until she dropped her gaze and shut her mouth, “I’m a man of my word. I can’t deputize you without drawing a lot more attention, not with them already watching me like hawks about Earp. So while you are technically not under my protection, what you do safely isn’t really my concern. As long as you’re locked up under the moon, we have ourselves a deal.”

He held out a hand and she stared at it for a moment as if she had never seen a handshake before. This was not remotely what she had expected when she’d come to Purgatory. Hell, it wasn’t what she’d expected when she woke up this morning.

“All right,” she said, and stepped forward, clasping his hand in hers and shaking.
Chapter 3

Nicole went over the conversation with Dolls in her head for the third time. Had she messed up anywhere? Left loopholes for him to exploit? There was so much she didn’t know and she was so new to the supernatural scene...

Even if she hadn’t had those handicaps, mind games had never been her strong suit. Even before the bite she’d gotten by more on direct, confident action than on cleverly worded traps. She’d talked a big game about vanishing into the wind but she only knew one person who was even remotely likely to be able to help her get out, and Nicole already owed her for the work on her cage. If she really had to ghost out of Purgatory and god forbid she had to do it without help, her odds of actually ducking BBD’s attention were so low she might as well just swallow a silver bullet and save everyone the trouble of a drawn-out pursuit.

There’s a reason foxhunting involves mounted riders and dogs, after all, and it isn’t to ensure the fox has a nice leisurely stroll through the woods.

“Haught!”

Nicole jerked in her chair, yanking her head up to look at the Sheriff. He looked a little pale, and he was radiating tension even from across the room.

“Yes sir?”

“Surplus store. We’ve got shots fired, hostages.”

As if blown away by a strong wind, all her thoughts of leaving Purgatory vanished. She stood, flicking her gaze around the empty room. “Anyone on scene?”

“We are. Get your car.”

She cursed under her breath and grabbed her hat. “Yes sir.”

When they pulled up on the street in front of the surplus store she was scant feet behind Nedley’s cruiser. She pulled left, to block part of the road, and hesitated, letting her hearing equalize in the wake of the sirens. Normally she wore ear plugs on the road, to deaden all but the nearest, most relevant sounds, but there’d been so little time. Damn, but sometimes trying to keep her job post-bite sucked.

When she got out, Nedley was headed her way.

“We’re taking our cues from Dolls,” he said, his voice low. She nodded, keeping part of her attention on Dolls and Earp. “Tac Team will take too long.”

“Hostage-taking is about bargaining, right?” Wynonna was saying, quietly, to avoid anyone eavesdropping. She and Nedley were far enough that ordinarily, Wynonna’s efforts would have been enough. “We have things they want.”

“The combination?”

“And the Earp heir.”

“No. Too risky.”
“Hey!”

“They’ll kill you.”

Nedley frowned, scanning the road. “We’ve got two more cars on their way. For now, let’s keep an eye on the building.”

“We’ll want eyes on the back door,” Nicole noted, trying not to sound distracted. What the hell did “the Earp heir” mean?

“You said it yourself,” Wynonna continued, “They're trying to piece together some kind of spell. So if they think I can help them get what they want, then that's gotta be worth every person in there!”

Dolls hesitated, his face screwed up in distaste. He pulled an iPhone from his pocket and handed it to her, and now Nedley had turned to follow Nicole’s attention, frowning at the exchange happening a car length’s away.

“Give this to whoever's in charge. And—”

“Never get into a vehicle, never move to a second location.”

Nicole raised an eyebrow, just as surprised as Dolls. “You've been in a hostage situation before.”

Wynonna gave him a sly smile. “Sort of.”

“Well this time,” Dolls said firmly, “You're the law, and innocent people are depending on you. Now, your gun.”

“What?”

“They're not gonna let you in there with it. I'll get it back to you Earp. I promise.”

Wynonna hesitated, but with an expression of supreme displeasure, removed her Colt .45 from its holster and handed it to Dolls. He took it, then stroked behind Wynonna’s ear in a downright unsettling display of tenderness. Nicole narrowed her eyes, listening to Wynonna’s heart rate picking up with nerves and confusion. The moment ended, Dolls’ hand dropping, and the two BBD agents swapped places. “Here we go,” she muttered to Nedley, who gave her an odd look.

Wynonna turned and headed for the door of the surplus store, phone in hand and arms raised. Dolls raised his pistol and Nicole shifted to the side, raising her own, just as Nedley picked a position and raised his rifle to bear on the door, each of them waiting for anything remotely like a clear shot.

Wynonna’s voice was low, hard to hear at the distance, but Nicole strained and squinted, trying to listen.

“You know who I am?” she asked the man in the fringed leather jacket.

“Oh yeah,” he mused, looking her up and down.

“Take me in exchange for the hostages, and I'll help you get what you need.”

The man frowned at her, glancing over Earp’s shoulder, then grabbed her wrist and hauled her inside.
“Dammit,” Nicole snapped, lowering her pistol.

Dolls pulled out his own phone and dialed, and she shifted a few steps closer, listening.

“All right, tell me what you want.”

The voice on the other end of the phone crackled and hissed through the speaker, but she could hear it clearly enough.

“I'll release some hostages, but if you try anything, people will die.”

Dolls paced a few steps back and forth, his voice turning icy. “The Black Badge Division has facilities outside the Ghost River Triangle, and if you harm one hair on my deputy's head, I guarantee you a fate much worse than death.”

There was a tense pause, and then more quietly, as if speaking to Earp, “Come on.”

Dolls hung up and she waited, glancing to Nedley. The sheriff took up a position behind his cruiser’s open door, and nodded at her, evidently satisfied to wait.

Minutes ticked by in agonizing tension. Nedley radioed their backup and while they were still waiting two more squad cars arrived, sirens off.

Finally three people emerged from the surplus store, their hands bound in plastic cording. The two officers who’d arrived set about releasing them, and she moved to Dolls’ side, holstering her pistol.

“What’s the plan, Deputy Marshal?” she asked, keeping her eyes on the building.

“We surround the store,” he said. Compared to how he talked to Nedley, there was a notable lack of ice in his voice. Maybe he really was as good as his word. There was something strangely comforting about the idea. “You get a clear shot, let me know.”

“Okay,” she said, her gaze tracking windows.

He offered her his phone, and she took it. “Call Waverly, let her know her sister's in a situation.”

“Okay,” she said again, letting her gaze slide sideways to the street. She paused, frowning. “Hey. Isn't that Champ's truck?”

Dolls turned to look where she was looking. “Waverly's boyfriend?”

A low noise rumbled in her chest and Dolls shot her a glance. “Unfortunately,” she said, and stepped away, sifting through his contacts list until she found Earp (younger).

“Pick up, Waverly,” she muttered, standing by her cruiser as she listened to the phone ringing.

“Hey!”

“Waverly, it’s—”

“You’ve reached Waverly Earp. Leave me a message, okay?”

Nicole groaned and ducked her head against the roof of her car with a low thump. Waverly’s light laugh finished out the recording, and then the voicemail system beeped.

“Waverly, it’s Nicole. Uh, Officer Haught. Listen, I wanted to let you know that Wynonna and—
uh, and Champ, are in a hostage situation, but Deputy Marshal Dolls and I are on it. We’ll get her back. A-all of them. I promise.”

She hung up on the recording and cursed under her breath, kicking the back tire of her cruiser so hard the body shook. “I promise?” she hissed at herself. “You idiot!”

Nicole returned the phone to Dolls, smiling stiffly. “I’ll watch the back door,” she said, and didn’t wait for his response before she drew her pistol and moved to circle the building, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

She stayed there until she heard shouting from the front of the building, checked the back door for signs of anyone on the other side. One of the other officers was at the opposite corner—she nodded at him to remain, then ran back around to the makeshift blockade she and Nedley had made.

“Can I at least shoot out the tires?” Nedley was asking Dolls, barely restrained fury in his voice.

“Yeah,” Dolls said drily, “If you want them to die now, go ahead.”

Nicole stopped beside them, pistol drawn as the van’s engine turned over and caught with an ominous roar. Wynonna was behind the wheel, her eyes wide with fear and focus.

“What, we’re just letting them go?” Nicole snapped, as the van rumbled forward.

“No,” Dolls said.

She raised her pistol. For a moment she imagined how this might play out differently. She was denser and stronger than she looked—if she set her boots and stood her ground, maybe changed a little, she could stop the van cold. She could see it perfectly in her mind’s eye—aspalh creaking under her feet as she braced her weight and shoved her palms against the front fender, her nails sharpening to claws with the effort and punching through the old steel, the tires spinning and spinning until rubber smoked and burned. She could picture it, the eyes of that asshole in the leather jacket so wide they would look almost entirely white, the sound of his racing, terrified heartbeat audible even over the old van’s tortured 8 cylinders.

The van rolled closer. She snarled, the sound lost under the van’s engine, and moved aside. Once the van was past them, she holstered her pistol.

They stood next to Dolls’ SUV as the van picked up speed, and for a moment, the three of them stood in a horrible silence.

“You two,” Dolls said, his voice hollow. “Clear the scene.”

Nedley glanced at him, then moved to do as he said, barking orders to the other two responding officers.

Nicole leveled him with a look that might have curdled milk, and she could feel her canine teeth sharpening and lengthening in her mouth.

He watched her right back, his expression softening by a degree. He dipped his head, just slightly. I’ve got this.

While Nedley’s back was still turned she bared her fangs to convey how little she liked this plan.
He flicked his gaze in the sheriff’s direction, a silent command. She cursed and turned aside, waving off bystanders and moving into step with the sheriff.

The memorial at Shorty’s was nice. Understated, elegant, simple. It seemed appropriate, somehow, as a tribute to the man himself.

And it was impossible to overstate how much this was not how Nicole had imagined meeting Waverly again.

The place wasn’t packed, but there was a fair number of folks milling about, making small talk and swapping stories, sharing memories of the dead over the dead’s stock of whiskey and beer. Also, in its own way, appropriate. The air was choked with the smell of flowers, alcohol, and grieving humans. It was a heavy scent, horrible in its own way, but somehow very real, very alive. People were simultaneously never more alive and never so close to death as when they were mourning.

Nicole mingled for a few minutes, nodding and clasping hands as she went with her best professional, yet caring smile on. She spotted Waverly and moved toward her, tucking her thumbs into her belt as she snaked through the small crowd to the end of one of the long bars. Waverly stood on the workers’ side, her hands resting on the polished old wood and her head bowed just slightly. It was a posture Nicole recognized—the silent, self-imposed seclusion of someone who’s borne too much for one life and yet borne all of it alone, until it’s impossible to imagine anyone even being able to help. The long-term, bone-deep, very real grief that cannot be explained, cannot be shared.

It was sometimes easy to forget that Waverly was only 21. But now, when she looked so small, so fragile, Nicole remembered that Waverly was still so very young, and yet had seen so very, very much.

Nicole rounded the bar and moved closer to her. “Waverly.”

She looked up, her eyes red-rimmed and shiny with tears, and Nicole’s heart stopped for an agonizing second. It was hard to describe how emotions smelled—the mix of pheromone and chemical that she’d learned to tell one from another—but grief, she thought, smelled somehow, irrationally, like iodine in an open wound.

“I’m so sorry,” she breathed. What was there to say? What else could she say?

Waverly looked aside, her breath hitching audibly in her throat. “I can’t believe he’s gone,” she said, her voice cracking, crumbling. She closed her eyes and ducked her head again.

“I’m here, I’m here if you want me, I’m here even if you don’t, I just can’t leave you to suffer alone like this. Never like this.

Nicole did the only thing she could think to do. She reached out, across the bar, and took Waverly’s hands, touching her wrist for a moment and hoping against hope that even without words, Waverly would understand.

The simple contact took her breath away. Waverly’s hands were soft, impossibly so, and so small. This close the parts of her scent that were her—the shampoo Nicole recognized from before, ink and old paper, the faint scent of lingering cigarette smoke and whiskey from working at the bar—competed with the iodine smell, drowning it out until she was aware of it only as a secondary point.

And impossibly, Waverly turned her hands just a little within Nicole’s, and gripped her fingers, the
pressure light but still very real. The animal in her wanted to throw back her head and howl in relief
and joy and hope, but she tamped that down with a vengeance, giving Waverly a weak, supportive
smile.

But as quickly as the moment had begun, it ended. Champ swooped in like a falcon, one arm
coming up to curl around Waverly and cradle her face in his hand, the other looping around her
shoulders as he layered wet, audible kisses over the entire right side of her face.

“Oh it’s okay,” he murmured, between kisses.

Waverly’s hands went stiff, releasing her, and Nicole pulled her own back. She glanced once at the
couple, but between Champ’s possessive, insensitive kisses and Waverly’s quiet disapproval and
halfhearted attempts to stop him, Nicole had to shove down the urge to growl and tear him away
from Waverly by main force. Her teeth had gone sharp again, pressing into her tongue and lower
lip, and she looked down, aside, anywhere but at them directly. Even without watching it, she
knew the sound of his lips on her face and Waverly’s quiet hey, um, okay, would haunt her dreams
for at least the next few nights.

She counted out breaths—four in, hold for seven, out for eight—until her teeth were back to normal
and she didn’t feel quite so... itchy with frustration.

“Hey, um.” Waverly’s hand hit the bar, reaching for her, and part of Nicole almost took it as what
it looked like, a plea for help. The urge to grab Champ by the shirt collar and yank him bodily over
the bar came back in a surge of useless, misdirected aggression, but Waverly’s smile distracted her.
“I got your voicemail,” she said, more softly. “About Wynonna. Thanks.”

Champ’s voice was even quieter than hers as he added, “Thank you.”

“That was really sweet,” Waverly said.

She was aware Champ had spoken, but she could only focus on Waverly. Nicole smiled, a fragile,
tenuous thing, and nodded. “Yeah,” she breathed. “Sure.” Champ was still watching her and she
 glanced at him, sobering under his gaze. He didn’t look hostile, but she could have smelled the
territorial insecurity on him from across the room. “Of course,” she said, and stepped away as
Champ encircled Waverly in a more obvious hug.

“I don’t know,” he grumbled to her, and Nicole had to work not to visibly react while she listened
to him. “Something about her rubs me the wrong way. Miss Officer... what’s-her-name. Tch.”

“It’s Haught,” Waverly said, an edge of disapproval to her voice, and Nicole’s heart threatened to
burst from her chest, even as Champ made an unimpressed noise. “She’s– she...”

What she was, Waverly never said, and Champ returned to a more protective, comforting tone.
Nicole moved further away, biting down her frustration. After her chat with Dolls and this debacle,
she wanted to change and run more than ever. She stayed, lingering by the wall, trying not to watch
them, before she finally picked Dolls out of the crowd and approached him.

What a twist her life had taken, that she would rather talk to the dry, humorless Deputy Marshal
Dolls than Waverly Earp and her ex-rodeo-clown boyfriend doing his best impression of a koala. It
made her head hurt to try to understand it.

“Hey, uh, any update on that time capsule murder?” she asked, and he turned to look at her,
smirking.

“Nedley knows I won’t tell him, huh,” he said.
She grinned, looking away. God knew that was the truth. Nedley would never buy three hooligans holding up a surplus store and kidnapping hostages for a magic spell.

“It’s unresolved,” Dolls said. Nicole turned back to him, a little surprised he’d actually answered. “We’re handing the case back over to metro.”

Nicole pursed her lips, thinking. That tracked—whatever the diary had been stolen for had already gone down, so the murder wasn’t BBD’s problem anymore.

“Any connection to the kidnapping?” Nicole asked.

“None,” Dolls said immediately, and turned to look at her. By the look in his eye and the twitch of the corner of his mouth, that was most certainly a lie. She gave him a minute nod, if only to indicate she understood the unspoken.

“Poor Shorty,” she said, to satisfy social niceties, just in case someone was listening.

“Yeah.” He frowned, thoughtful. “We have his body. We’re doing a full autopsy.” Across the room, Nicole tracked Waverly, finally minus one leech, walking to stand with Wynonna. She was listening to Dolls, mostly, but the majority of her attention was on the small, fragile young woman with the saddest smile she’d ever seen. “But our best guess is the stress of the ordeal was too much for his heart condition.”

Dolls glanced at her, though she barely noticed.

“She said she was glad I called,” she said, not really thinking.

“I bet,” Dolls mused.

She glanced at him, then looked away, clearing her throat.

“I... I should go.” He didn’t stop her, and with a nod to Nedley, she left Shorty’s. She wanted to leave town, but she knew that was liable to cause more problems than it solved. She’d go back to the station and bury herself in work.

As she sat down in her cruiser, her own words echoed through her mind.

_We’ll get her back. All of them. I promise._

With the car doors shut and the windows up, no one could hear the snarl that bubbled up in her chest or the thud of impact when she slammed her hand against the dashboard so hard she left a vaguely palm-shaped indent in the PVC.

With most of the town inside Shorty’s or off the streets, no one could see her curl her hands into fists until her nails broke skin and drew blood.

_Dammit._
Guys I usually try not to reply to every comment or leave lots of notes, in, I dunno, an effort to let the work kind of speak for itself, but I have to say, your support and feedback mean the world to me. I've never written for a fandom as warm, supportive, and talkative as the Earpers. Y'all are rad as hell. Thank you so much for coming on this goofy journey with me.

Also, shoutout to any Dresden Files fans on this chapter. It's subtle, but let me know if you caught the reference!

Premonition, as a concept and a human phenomenon, predates written history. The ancients sometimes called it the sight, or the gift, and deemed it the purview of those who were close to the divine or, sometimes, of those who had lost their physical sight, and were given the ability to see fate as compensation. Later, with no rational, scientific explanation for epileptic seizures and drug- or fumes-induced hallucinations, some chose to believe in prophecies delivered in cryptic riddles by oracles.

Even in the modern era, superstitions grant mystic, arcane weight to foresight. Like sailors saying they can feel storms coming in their bones, or the elderly and the injured feeling approaching weather in their joints and healed limbs. Sometimes even completely ordinary, normal folk experience what they might describe as a horrible, gut-deep feeling or an unnatural, strong sense that something is coming, be it good or bad.

Nicole didn’t feel the oncoming full moon as a vibe or a vague sense of approaching doom. More so she felt it the way pets sense natural disasters—a heavy, distant thrum of imminent change. She didn’t used to be aware of the moon’s cycle, of course, but now, after the bite, she tracked it compulsively on her calendar. Not that she really needed to. She’d have known it was coming with or without a reminder on her phone. The first morning of it, as soon as she woke up, she could feel it buzzing in her teeth like they’d been struck with a tuning fork. She could hear it, like a discordant tinnitus whine in her ears that was just above the level of conscious hearing, quiet but omnipresent. It made her itch, a sensation just under the skin that wouldn’t ease no matter how much she scratched. It made her inner calm bubble and boil like a pot ready to spill over.

This wasn’t her first change, but it was the most uncomfortable she’d had since she’d left Shae’s company, and it was her first in Purgatory. And now, as she sat at her desk and scratched feverishly at her left forearm where she’d rolled the sleeve up, she wondered if coming to the Ghost River Triangle had been a terrible mistake.

Maybe it was something in the water.

“Haught.”

She froze, stiff as a board. It was a miracle she didn’t audibly growl.

“Dolls.”
The deputy marshal frowned at her, eyeing her dubiously. “You okay?”

Nicole forced herself to pull her hand away from her arm and pretended not to notice she’d scratched red lines into her own skin. She thought about giving him another monosyllabic answer, but frowned and took a quick glance around. There were a few officers around, but no one nearby enough to hear, so she looked at him plainly and grumbled, “Do I look okay?”

He watched her for a moment, then handed her a post-it. “I need you to run this plate.”

She forced her eyes to focus on the note. It took a moment before she recognized what he was handing her, but she took it, reading the string of characters. “Sure.” She jogged the mouse on her desk to bring her computer screen out of its screensaver, and started tapping in numbers.

He frowned at her, and under his scrutiny she hunched her shoulders. She hadn’t braided her hair this morning—the effort and focus involved made her want to tear it all out—and she brushed it back from her face in a nervous, fitful gesture that Dolls tracked with something that was meant to look like blasé disinterest.

“Samantha Baker,” she mused, scanning her screen. She added the address to the post-it and handed it back to Dolls with a frown. “I don’t suppose you need any extra hands on this one? I think I’m getting a little cabin fever here or something.”

He pursed his lips and tucked the note into his pocket. “Yeah, ‘or something.’ We’re just talking with Baker, so how about you sit this one out, Haught. Get some lunch.”

“Lunch?” she asked, bewildered. “It’s barely eleven.”

“You need protein,” he said. His voice said casual suggestion but his eyes said do it or I’ll make you regret it.

“Fine,” she muttered, and grabbed her hat. Dolls slid away without a word and she shrugged into her coat. “Lonnie, I’m taking an early lunch.”

“Lunch?” she asked, bewildered. “It’s barely eleven.”

“You need protein,” he said. His voice said casual suggestion but his eyes said do it or I’ll make you regret it.

“Fine,” she muttered, and grabbed her hat. Dolls slid away without a word and she shrugged into her coat. “Lonnie, I’m taking an early lunch.”

“Does that mean I can take mine at 12:30?” he asked.


“Sure thing, Nicole.”

She nodded to him and swept past the counter, dodging any curious glances as she made her way outside to the street.

There were a few places in Purgatory to get a decent meal before noon, and Nicole meant to walk toward one of them, but when she checked back into her own brain, she was standing outside Shorty’s.

“Oh. Hell,” she muttered to herself, but it was what it was. She walked inside, waving to a few of the regulars lounging at booths and tables around the place. She couldn’t see anyone behind the bar, but when she walked up to it and peered back and forth, Waverly popped up from where she’d been crouched stowing bottles beneath the counter.

“Hey!” Waverly said, smiling and wiping her hands off on her shorts.

“Wh—hey,” Nicole said, her brain short-circuiting. Waverly, maybe two feet away from her,
smelling delicious like ink and paper and soft skin and beer. She was wearing the bar’s trademark shirt with the hem tied off so that a few inches of belly showed above the waistband of her shorts. Part of her brain had numerous ideas of what to do with that visual, and that outfit, but she slammed those all away and tried to look a rational human woman and not a slobbering dog with her tongue hanging out.

“You look so different with your hair down!” Waverly said, smiling, and she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “I mean good different, not bad different. You look good. I mean, it’s good to see you. In better circumstances, you know?”

Nicole’s mouth worked as she searched for something to say, a frisson of raw energy running down her spine. *Not sure the first morning of a full moon is better circumstances,* she thought, feeling a little delirious. Waverly thought it was good to see her. Her heart might have skipped once, but maybe that was just the moon.

“Yeah,” she said finally, hoping her grin looked somewhere vaguely in the vicinity of natural.

“Cappuccino to go, right?” Waverly said, smiling, seemingly unfazed by Nicole’s vacant expression.

“No,” Nicole said, a little too fast, then winced. “I mean, yes. I mean, not yet?”

Waverly tilted her head to one side, concern rapidly replacing the smile. “Officer Haught, are you okay?”

*Not remotely,* she thought, but she started to nod anyway. “Oh, yeah, I’m f—”

Waverly reached up, leaning on her toes to set the back of her hand against Nicole’s forehead like a mother checking for fever. Her eyes slipped shut and a low rumble of... affection? Pleasure, maybe? kicked up in her chest.

“Oh god,” Waverly said, without hesitation, or, for that matter, much tact. “Officer, maybe you should see a doctor. Feels like you’re burning up. And are you sure you don’t have a cough? You don’t sound so good.”

Nicole strangled the sound to a stop and forced her eyes open again, giving Waverly a clumsy, crooked grin. “Oh, uh, no. I’m alright. It’s just— uh, allergies, you know. Just need a good meal and a break from my desk.”

Waverly gave her a look of *supreme* skepticism, the sort of look mastered by younger siblings and the kind of children whose parents called them *too smart for their own good.* But she frowned, nodded in acceptance, and set her hands on the bar.

“All right,” she said. “Then what will you have?”

“I hear you guys make a mean steak sandwich?” Nicole said, hazarding a shy smile. It worked, at least a little, because Waverly’s expression softened, and she sighed.

“You’ve heard right. Goes best with beer, but it’s a bit early in the day for that. Go on and sit wherever you like, Officer. I’ll get you the sandwich, and the coffee.”

“How much do I owe you?” she asked, already reaching for her wallet, her free arm resting on the bar.

“Nothing,” Waverly said, setting a hand on Nicole’s arm. “I never really thanked you for getting
Wynonna out safely last week.” Nicole froze. Waverly’s fingers brushed over the red scratches across her skin but rather than pain, she felt... peace. For the first time all morning, she felt just a little less tense, the itching, horrible weight of the moon a little more distant. “And besides, I still owe you that coffee from the first time.”

“Oh,” Nicole said lamely, and let out a breath. “Well... thank you.”

Waverly smiled, then glanced down, as if she’d only just noticed what she was doing. “God,” she said, pulling her hand down to cover Nicole’s instead, her fingertips resting just below where the scratches ended. “What happened? Did you get into a fight with a bike chain?”

Nicole laughed. It felt good, to laugh with Waverly. Which in its own way hurt more. “No, uh, my cat.”

“Aw,” Waverly cooed. “You have a cat? Have any pictures?”

“Um,” Nicole said, “I think so. On my phone?”

“You sit, and see if you can find any,” Waverly said, with the firm, patient tone of one striking a bargain, “And I’ll get that sandwich.”

“Sure,” Nicole said. Waverly walked away to put the order in, and Nicole found herself grinning like an idiot. Her stomach was doing flips, but for once it wasn’t moon-sickness.

After she got back to the station, Dolls approached her desk again, though this time she was centered enough to hear him coming.

“I need candles,” he said, without preamble.

She looked up at him, snorted, and glanced back at her computer screen. “You know, I really didn’t take you for the type, Dolls.”

“Haught,” he snapped, and leaned forward, setting his hands on her desk so that his face was less than a foot from hers.

“Wh—” She sighed heavily and raised her hands away from her keyboard in a *you win* gesture. “Fine, okay, you have my attention. Lean back though, you’re gonna rile me up again and I only just calmed down.”

He frowned, but listened, leaning back a little out of her space. Not as much as she’d have liked, but it was an improvement. He kept his voice quiet. “I need ritual-grade candles. Blessed, ideally. Know any...” He paused, putting emphasis on the word, “Wiccans in the area?”

Nicole frowned at him, tensing a bit and narrowing her eyes at him. “Maybe. Why.”

“For a summ—” He broke off as an officer crossed the bullpen behind him, glancing to the side to watch until the man had walked out of earshot. “Summoning ritual. Lives are on the line.”

She watched him for a moment more, pressing her lips together. “This is about Earp again, isn’t it.”

“Does it matter?” he asked.

Did it? Maybe it did. She thought of Waverly’s soft hand on her arm and her voice, gentle and so grateful it made her heart hurt.
I never really thanked you for getting Wynonna out safely last week.

“I guess not, no,” she allowed grudgingly. “Though I don’t understand how she gets herself into these things all the time. All right. When do you need them? How many?”

“I need five,” he said immediately, “And I need them an hour ago.”

“Reasonable timeframe, Dolls.”

He huffed out a breath and checked his watch. “Eighty minutes.”

She eyed him. “Do you ever have like, a normal day? You know, without a ticking bomb clock?”

“Do you?”

She thought of the moon, looming closer, waiting for sunset. She thought of steel bars and the horrible pain of organs shredding and reforming.

“Fine, fine, I’m going.”

The Blacksmith lived well outside town limits, in a building that looked more rundown warehouse than homestead. It doubled as her smithy, and the exterior was a minor labyrinth of no trespassing signs and barricades adorned with bleached animal skulls. Nicole had been here once before, during a waning moon, and even then the primal, vibrant energy of the witch’s lair had made her hair stand on end and her skin crawl.

Now, on a full moon’s day, the thrumming power of the place drove her to her knees the moment her boots hit the earth. She fell forward, the snow immediately soaking through her khakis, letting in a bitter chill that sank all the way to her bones. She could hear the door-ajar warning chiming dutifully from the cabin of her cruiser, but it didn’t register. The radio crackled, something about Kyle and Peter York fighting in the street outside Shorty’s.

All of it was background noise.

She groaned, doubling over onto all fours, her gloves sinking into the snow. A sound tore out of her throat that was somewhere horribly in between human and animal, a tortured noise that was half shout, half howl.

She wasn’t sure how long she knelt there, fingers curling into the earth with audible creaking from her joints, her blood boiling, her whole body buzzing with the itch to change, to tear free from her own skin and run into the mountains, hunting and killing like the monstrous beast she really was.

Boots crunched in the snow nearby and she forced herself to look up, tracking along the Blacksmith’s heavy work apron until she saw the witch’s face. Her dark skin stood out against the cloudy sky, her black hair billowing in a breeze Nicole couldn’t feel. She ducked her head, more small, growling groans of pain ripping free. She touched a hand to her face, wincing. Her hair had turned thick and shaggy, shorter, more like fur. Her ears were pointed, and a bit too large, and almost all her teeth had turned, making it hard to close her mouth.

“Back so soon, shifter?” the Blacksmith asked, arching one elegant eyebrow. “If this is about the cage, I suggest actually trying to use it before you second-guess my work.”

“No,” Nicole said, the word coming out too heavy, too thick, slurred past her fangs. “Candles. For a ritual. For a friend.”
“Hm.” The Blacksmith considered that, then shut the car door with a slam that made Nicole yelp and duck her head, clapping her hands over her ears. The Blacksmith’s hand fell heavily on her shoulder and hauled her bodily to her feet, but under the witch’s grasp the overwhelming power of the land fell away. The pain of changing back so fast made Nicole’s whole world go blindingly white for a moment, but then she blinked away spots and found she could stand of her own power, and felt weakly at her face. She was human.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

The Blacksmith chuckled and rolled a shoulder. “Come inside. You may regret thanking me once you’ve heard my price for the candles.”

“Here,” she told Dolls, carefully setting all five of the fat tallow candles on his desk after he opened the BBD office door for her.

“What happened to your hand?” he asked, frowning.

“Her price for the candles was a werewolf’s claw,” she muttered, and left the room again without a word.

When Waverly arrived a half hour later, her hand didn’t ache quite so much. The witch had made her soak her finger in some kind of herbal concoction and bandaged it before she left, but the pain still lingered in the back of her awareness. The visit to the witch’s land, too, had brought the moon-sickness back with prejudice, and she felt absolutely electric with tension and frustration and the desire to run, to hunt, to kill, to... help Waverly with the enormous stack of files she was carrying?

“Oh, geez, here,” Nicole said, jumping to her feet to open a door for her, keeping her bandaged hand behind her hip and out of sight.

“Hey! Officer Haught, thank you,” Waverly said, grinning at her and sighing gratefully once she was through. “Actually I’m really glad I found you,” she said.

The animal in her perked up at that, and Nicole fought down the urge to grin in triumph.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and her tone shifted slightly, rising in pitch. “Um, it’s kind of a big favor though, and it might be a little bit, uh, *technically* illegal?” she said, grinning hopefully. She waggled her body back and forth, shoulders bobbing in a pleading little dance. “But it’s totally important and you know I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t a really big deal...”

Nicole hesitated, chewing on her lip. On the one hand, Waverly wanted something illegal from her. On the other, Waverly wanted her help. No, needed her help.

Dammit.

“What is it that you need from me,” Nicole said slowly.

“Um...” Waverly set the files down on Nicole’s desk and grinned at her. “The keys to John Henry’s holding cell?”
Nicole frowned. “Wait, what?”

“Well it’s just that he’s only being held on suspicion as it is but in order to prove he didn’t do it I need him to answer a question for me but I don’t think he’ll do it if I don’t offer to let him out in exchange.”

Nicole blinked. Damn, but the girl could talk fast when she wanted to. She shook her head, thinking. Waverly’s presence was doing something to her, if the itching, rising sensation of need in her chest was any indication, and she was torn between getting rid of Waverly as fast as possible or just grabbing her and pushing her against a wall and—

*Whoa, okay, pump the fucking brakes there Haught.*

“Officer Haught?” Waverly asked, more gently. “Are your allergies still bothering you?”

“What?” Nicole said, then raised her hand. “Oh! Um, yeah, a little, sorry. Uh, yeah, I can... I can give you the key, but—”

“Oh god, thank you,” Waverly breathed, and she threw her arms around Nicole, hugging her tightly. “Thank you thank you.”

Nicole froze for the space of a full breath, all of her howling to hold her in return, to grab her or kiss her or hell just fucking talk to her.

“Heh,” she said faintly, and very, very gently hugged Waverly back. “Uh, no problem. And, I mean, if I’m gonna be an accomplice, just, seriously, call me Nicole.”

Waverly laughed softly and stepped back again, grinning up at her. “Nicole. Thank you.” Nicole handed her the key, which she pocketed, and then Waverly gathered up her files again. “I’ll return it as soon as I’m done talking to him.”

“Great,” Nicole said, a bit weakly.

Waverly headed for the next hall. Nicole watched her go, then collapsed into her chair.

“That girl’s gonna lose me my job,” she muttered, and ducked her head into her hands, praying that she wasn’t getting a headache on top of everything else.

Except she was. Or rather, if she hadn’t already, she would have spontaneously developed one when Dolls returned to his offices with a crate in tow, found John Henry free and loitering in his offices, and started a goddamn shouting match while the door was still wide open. Even *without* supernatural hearing, she’d have been able to hear practically everything as the three of them—John, Dolls, and Wynonna—all shouted over each other.

“*YOU belong in jail!*”

“*How are we gonna do this without him?*”

“*Oh you know damn well I didn’t do anything. You know that!*”

“No! *What was the point of asking him, if—*”

“*Get the HELL out of my office!*”

”*How are we gonna do this without—he doesn't belong in jail, he didn't DO anything!*"
Waverly’s whistle was practically deafening, but at least it shut the other three up.

"Hey!" she shouted, and Nicole let her forehead thump against her desk in relief. Her head was throbbing, and so was her hand, and her skin still itched all over. “You should be ashamed of yourselves! The Barber is coming to slice up Wynonna,” Waverly continued, her voice strident and more commanding than Nicole had ever heard it, “And you guys are blubbery like a big bunch of bratty babies!”

There was a brief pause, in which no one else spoke.

“Thank you.”

Nicole considered what was being said, considered her ability to help, and then glanced out the window. The sky was just beginning to darken.

“Nope,” she muttered to herself, gathering up her coat and her hat. “Nope, I’m not even going to ask. This one’s on them.” She poked her head into Nedley’s open doorway. “Sheriff, mind if I leave a few minutes early?”

Nedley looked up from his computer, took one look at her, and then nodded. “Go on. You’ve looked peaked all day. Get some rest, Deputy.”

“Yes sir,” Nicole said, and left the building.

When she got home and locked the door behind her, Calamity Jane hissed at her and bolted into the bedroom. She sighed, made herself a sandwich, and then went about moving the armchair over her basement door. The rest was an unceremonious affair: she climbed down into the basement, hung the keys on the nail, shut the trapdoor, and left her clothes near the ladder. A few minutes before sunset, she stepped into her cage.

The door shut and locked with an ominous series of whirring, thudding clicks.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Oh man. The number of you talking like you expected her to shift in this chapter? I am so sorry. Hate to say it, but hey. Horror storytelling 101: don’t show the monster. Sorry, but y’all are in this for the long haul with me, and I wouldn’t drop Wolfhaught in chapter five. I promise though, it’ll be worth the wait. >:D

Nicole dreamed.

She dreamed of open fields covered in snow, of trees spaced so wide she could barrel between the trunks at top speed and never touch them. Of open skies, of mountainsides that rang when she howled, filling the air with wolfsong that set every bird, rabbit, deer, fox and weasel in five miles scrambling for their burrows or taking to the air.

She dreamed of golden eyes and dripping, bloodied fangs. She dreamed of a pain, silver-hot and piercing, in her shoulder. Of whispers in her ear, too quiet to hear and yet somehow crystalline clear.

I love you, Nicole. I’ll come back for you.

She woke up on the ground. Her whole body ached, and a knot of agony flared in her lower back when she tried to twist onto her side. She could feel scratches, already scabbing over, all over her shoulders, arms, hips, and upper back. Her jaw ached, her knuckles were bloodied, and when she cracked open one eye, there was a suspicious smear of blood on the ceiling of the cage. Maybe she’d tried for the keys. Damn. She might have to rethink that part. Still, it looked like the cage had worked. She was in one piece, the bars looked intact when she turned her head in each direction, and no one was hurt.

Though she smelled someone in the room with her. That was odd.

“Haught."

Later, she would insist that she had responded with a furious and very reasonable shout of disapproval. Like any normal person would have.

She most certainly did not scream. No matter what Dolls said.

“Don’t look at me,” Nicole growled, her voice hoarse and raw.

“I’m not.”

“What the hell are you doing here, Dolls, seriously.”

“Figured you’d be hungry.” She rolled over, a little, as he grabbed her pants and tossed them backward to her. They hit the bars and fell to the ground, and she reached through, pulling them in to her and sluggishly stuffing herself back into them.
He tossed her shirt back next, then held a brown paper bag out to his side where she could see, shaking it so she could hear something rustling inside. She pulled her t-shirt over her head and sniffed at the air, and the smell of hamburger meat and grease made her mouth water.

Well, no, actually she was outright drooling. She wiped at her mouth and chin, self-conscious.

“’M decent,” she muttered, and tested the lock. The knob turned when she reached through and pushed at it, and the door swung open, letting her step out into the room as Dolls turned around.

“Damn,” he said, taking in the lingering claw marks visible around her shirt, and handed her the bag. If he judged her for the way she grabbed it away from him, crouched down next to the bars of her cage, and tore into the bag’s contents, it didn’t show on his face.

“You can’t be here just for a social call,” she mumbled, through a mouthful of fries.

He frowned, weighing his words.

“My superiors aren’t pleased with my progress,” he said after a moment. Her blood ran cold, and he lifted a hand in a down girl sort of motion. “If I were gonna hand you over, do you think we’d be having a conversation?”

She grumbled, the sound far too similar to a displeased pet for her dignity’s sake. “You can’t pull this shit on me when I’ve only been me for like twenty minutes, Dolls. Not cool. It’s like talking before coffee.”

His mouth twisted in a wry smirk, but then he sobered.

“Thing is, Earp’s methods aren’t very good for bag and tag deals.”

“She does seem more comfortable with the direct approach,” she agreed, taking another big bite of the burger.

“Is there anyone,” he began, watching her face.

She flicked her gaze up to him, the burger still in her mouth, and slowly withdrew it. For a moment, they just stared at each other. He smelled wrong. Tense, stiff, hurting. Not sick, but something adjacent. He was sweating, shaky. He was scared, she realized suddenly, and something was wrong with him.

He was scared, and that made him weak. The part of her that was still bent to the moon’s pull, that was still all wolf and very little human, wanted to toss aside the food and take him, pin him to the ground and make him show his throat to her. She was stronger, faster, and she could be a whole lot bigger in barely the time it would take to jump at him. Her vision turned a little gold, the shadows lessening, showing her details. She could see each curve of foam along the walls, could find every bit of the outline of Dolls—the bulk of his body armor under his jacket, the blocky outline of his gun.

His weak, unprotected throat.

He narrowed his eyes, and she blinked hers a few times. The gold tint over the world faded, and the shadows deepened again. She shook her head a little, as if clearing out cobwebs, and he relaxed by a few degrees, some of the tension easing out of his shoulders.

“You’re asking me to sell out other supernaturals to Black Badge,” she said finally, when she could trust herself to speak without every word coming out as a growl.
He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to.

She settled on the floor, leaning her aching back against the bars. “Dolls,” she said, frowning at him. “Listen, if I knew any local supernaturals, civil ones, I mean, I’m not sure I’d be willing to hand them over.”

“But?” he asked, frowning.

“But it doesn’t matter,” she said, sounding tired, even to her own ears. “I don’t know any.”

His eyes turned sharp, flinty. That definitely wasn’t the answer he was looking for.

“Dolls,” she said, raising a hand to placate him and keeping her voice carefully even. “I only got here a few weeks ago. I’ve barely won over the normal folks here. Purgatory doesn’t really even have a gay bar, do you really think it’s got supernatural bars? Local freakshow book clubs, or—or Tupperware parties? We can’t exactly advertise in the local gazette. Besides which, I’m a cop. Even if I figured out where they hide and hang out, you think they’re gonna let me crash the party willingly?”

He blew out a breath and ran his hands over his head. “All right, all right.”

“I’m sorry, Dolls. I’ll keep my ear to the ground, like we talked about, but...”

He waved a hand. “Yeah. Yeah, I got it, Haught. Thanks.”

She watched him for a moment, then sighed. “No, thank you,” she said, and gestured to him with the half-eaten burger. “Seriously. It’s been a while since...” She hesitated, looking away. “Y’know.”

For just a second, the corner of his mouth quirked in a smile. “Yeah. I get it. And don’t worry. I won’t make a habit of it.”

“See that you don’t,” she said, and grinned at him. “Just. Y’know. Next time let me know you’re planning to come by. No offense, but being woken up unexpectedly by a man is not my idea of a good morning.”

He actually laughed at that, and it sounded like it surprised even him. “Yeah, all right.” He straightened, dusting off his hands, clearly intending to go. “Oh, heads-up. Something’s up with the heat at the cop shop. Furnace is running like it’s dead of winter.”

“Lovely,” she grumbled. As he stepped onto the ladder, though, she frowned, a thought crossing her mind. “Hey Dolls.”

He paused. “Yeah?”

“How’d you get into my house?”

He looked at her for a moment, then grinned, climbed up the ladder into her living room, and disappeared.

“Dammit,” she muttered, gathering up the rest of her clothes and climbing up to follow him. She had work in a couple hours, by the look of the clock on the wall. About enough time to shower and start feeling actually human again.
Dolls was as good as his word, at least about the furnace. The shop was absolutely sweltering, and after barely an hour she’d had enough and mimicked most of the other officers by shimmying out of her uniform shirt and leaving it draped over the back of her chair. Easy enough to put back on, but not trapping all her own heat inside canvas with her. The moon-sickness wasn’t quite as bad, now that she’d had one night to change, but it kept her body temperature a little too high. With the furnace running, it was rather less than ideal conditions.

Around lunchtime, though, she was regretting so much as being in the building at all. Her tank top was drenched, plastered to her skin, and she was sticky all over with sweat. Most of the other officers had found excuses to be elsewhere—several of them were cataloguing evidence from the trailer park raid in the archive, which had its own enclosed system to ensure the evidence locker was the coolest part of the building even in winter—but she stuck it out at her desk, her hair tied back into a tail high off her neck. She blinked at her screen, trying to keep the words in focus, and wiped her hand across her forehead for the fourth time.

“Officer—um. Nicole.”

She looked up. Waverly stood on the other side of the counter, in a denim jacket and high-waisted jeans that Nicole couldn’t help thinking she’d regret in about twenty minutes.

“Hey,” she said, and stood, moving to the counter and leaning her elbows on it. “Waverly. Everything okay?” Everything was not okay, and Waverly didn’t even have to say a word for that to be obvious. She was tense, shaking, and radiating fear so thick it was a physical presence in the air around her. Nicole reached her hand out, bandage-free now that she’d changed once and back, and set it on the young woman’s shoulder, tilting her head to one side, the gesture curious and distinctly canine. “You look pale.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and then frowned, shaking her head. “No. Not really. Um. I think I need another favor from you.”

“Careful,” Nicole said, pulling her hand back and letting just a bit of playfulness creep into her voice, trying to put her at ease. “Maybe I’ll start asking for favors in return soon. Pick that big brain of yours for ideas.” Waverly blinked at her, clearly surprised, and Nicole ducked her head, grinning a little. “Sorry. Forget it.”

“No,” Waverly said, and she smiled back. It was a little weak, a little fragile, but it was a smile, and Nicole’s chest felt warm, in a bright, sunny sort of way, wholly different from the oppressive heat in the room. “No, it’s fine. I um. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Hm? Oh, the allergies.” Nicole rubbed the back of her neck with one hand. “Yeah, sorry, I know I was kindof a space cadet yesterday.”

“You were fine,” Waverly said, her gaze dropping for a moment to the front of Nicole’s shirt, then skittering aside. “Listen, about that favor though...”

“No more keys,” Nicole said, grinning.

“No,” Waverly said, and laughed. “No more keys. But um. There’s someone I’d like to talk to.”

Nicole frowned, glancing aside. She only knew of one person who was being held this early in the day, and she turned, looking back toward her desk at the files she’d been reviewing before Waverly walked in. “If you mean Mister Del Rey—”

“Nicole,” Waverly said, with a gasp, and she jerked back around, startled.
“What?”

“I thought you said Calamity Jane is like 10 pounds.”

“She is, yes?”

“Does she turn into a mountain lion at night? You’re covered in scratches!”

“Oh,” Nicole said, a bit weakly. She scrambled for a lie. “Um, part of that is a rock-climbing accident. It’s fine, really.”

Waverly had ducked through to the near side of the counter before Nicole could even fully track her movement, and she twisted around to stand behind Nicole, her gentle hands tracing the worst of the damage, visible around the hem of her tank top.

“Honest, it’ll heal,” Nicole added. *By the end of the day,* she almost added. Anything else would already have been gone, but damage from her own claws tended to heal a bit slower, for reasons she hadn’t been able to get straight answers on from Shae or other shifters she’d met.

“It looks like it hurts,” Waverly said, her voice low. Her fingers still trailed lightly over Nicole’s shoulder, and something that was part desire and part satisfaction flared through her whole body in a shuddering ripple.

“Not really,” she said, matching Waverly’s tone. *Not anymore, not when you’re here.* “Uh, so, what, uh, what’s the favor?”

“Oh,” Waverly said. She withdrew her hand, and Nicole bit down a whine at the loss. “Um. I need to talk to Del Rey. Please. It’s important.”

Nicole turned, her mouth twisting in a wry smile. “Come on, do you really think this’ll work a second time?”

Waverly looked up at her, her expression... haunted, somehow. Heavy with pain and loss and fear. She looked away, and hadn’t even opened her mouth to speak again before Nicole blew out a breath and slumped her shoulders.

“Dammit. All right.”

She watched Waverly slip down the hall toward the interrogation rooms. She’d barely had time to sit back down at her desk when the radio crackled, reporting a body found outside town. Responses came back—no one available. She shrugged back into her uniform, grabbed her keys and her coat, and was still buttoning her shirt back up when Wynonna stormed through like a woman on a mission, her face dark with barely leashed fury.

“Haught,” Wynonna growled, blowing past her toward the interrogation rooms.

For a moment, Nicole hesitated, then decided that if Wynonna was already in a mood, she’d probably be angry when she found Waverly talking to Del Rey.

Nicole did not want to be close enough to be held responsible.

She did not *flee* to her cruiser. She walked at a steady, semi-urgent pace.

And got the hell out, before anything else could go wrong.
The forensics techs had arrived a little before she did. That was fine by her—even from a distance, the smell of carrion had her inner wolf pacing feverishly back and forth inside the cage of her ribs, only waylaid by the stench of formaldehyde that came off the body as well. Which was a little odd.

If it weren’t for the small mob of technicians, the body, the stench of rotting meat and preservatives, and the unearthly sense of unnatural quiet over the whole scene, it might’ve been peaceful. The forest was calm, but felt comfortably close around them, and the sky was a brilliant blue, dotted with pockets of white clouds. She breathed deep for a moment, relishing the cold crisp air and the relative silence.

A little ways from the scene, a hiker was shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Sir,” Nicole called, moving toward him.

“Yes! Um. Yes, Officer. Hi.”

The hiker was young, maybe about Waverly’s age, and he looked as skittish as a cat. His coat was covered in a smear of half-melted snow, mostly on the back and sleeves, and Nicole mused that he might’ve staggered backward to the ground, probably in surprise.

She pulled a recorder from one pocket and showed it to him, turning it on. “Sir, do I have your permission to record this conversation?”

“Sure,” he said, “Um, sure, yeah.”

“You’re the one who found the body?” she asked, a little more gently.

“Yeah, um. Yeah, I found her.”

She looked at him, a little surprised by his wording. “And what’s your name?”

“Me? John,” he said, and his voice shook. “West.”

“Mr. West,” she noted, nodding. “Do you recognize her?”

“Yeah,” he said, his gaze flicking toward the forensics techs. “Yeah, um, she was in my year in high school.” She watched him, waiting expectantly as he shook and looked back at her. “Um. Joyce. Joyce Arbour.”

“So what happened?”

“To her?” he asked, turning even more pale.

“No, Mr. West, no.” Nicole smiled, and his jitters slowed, at least a little. “How’d you come across the body?”

“Oh,” he breathed, visibly relieved. “Um, I was hiking, you know, in this area? It’s a nice spot. But um. I was coming down that slope,” he said, pointing. “From the north, and saw this, y’know, shape, in the snow? And so I went over, cuz I was worried maybe it was someone who’d gone hypothermic, and there she was, just... lying in the snow, coffin-style, with a lily in her hands. Like she was just in a funeral, y’know? Except she was totally naked, and... and there were incisions,” he said, gesturing to his own chest. “Like surgery scars or something. But... but open.”

She frowned at that, glancing toward the techs. “Thank you, Mr. West. I think that’s all we need for now. Can I get some contact information, in case we have any other questions?”
He gave a phone number into the recorder, and just as she clicked it off, something stirred in the brush. She jerked, scanning the treeline.

“What is it?” John squeaked, and she waved a hand at him for silence.

“Probably nothing,” she said slowly to him, her eyes still tracking the woods. “You can go, John. Thank you.”

“Sure,” he mumbled, and fled down in the direction of the main road. The techs were still working, unaware of her, and she crept into the woods, moving slow. Snow crunching under her boots was the only sound, and a few dozen yards out she paused, crouching, and sniffed at the air. Nothing. She let her body shift, slightly, her face changing shape with an uncomfortable creaking and crunching of cartilage. She touched her nose, satisfied with the longer, broader outline of it, and the cold, leathery end, and lifted her face again, sniffing more deeply.

Now she could pick out wolf fur and blood and she growled, her vision tinting gold as she scanned the woods again. A bit of cloth fluttered toward her on the wind, and she leapt ten feet as easily as taking a step, pinning it to the snow and sniffing at it.

Perfume. Jasmine and bergamot. She wouldn’t soon forget that scent.

“Shae,” she growled, and raised her head. “Shae!”

She scanned the trees, but saw nothing. She sniffed the air again, but the perfume-soaked scrap of cloth was overpowering, filling her nose, and she couldn’t pick out the wolf anymore. “Great,” she breathed, slamming her fist into the trunk of a nearby tree. It creaked, cracked, and dumped a wheelbarrow’s worth of snow on the ground.

And on her head.

She spluttered and shook, scattering snow, but meltwater was already dripping under her collar.

“Just great.”
Three days sleeping on the floor was hell on her back. Friday morning came all too early, and even when she’d showered, eaten, and dragged herself to the station, her whole body felt like one big all-over ache. The lingering scratches didn’t help, either, though at least the bruising was fading where she’d, apparently, been throwing herself at the bars all night.

“Anything, Haught?”

She looked up at Dolls. He was standing in front of her desk. Rather, he was looming. He was sweating, his hands trembling. With the full moon over she didn’t feel as inclined to go to his throat just for showing weakness, but she did frown at him and narrow her eyes.

“You okay?”

“Is there anything. You can give me,” he said, his voice low and intense.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, more slowly, eyeing him up and down. “Seriously. Are you coming down with something?”

*Didn’t we just do this song and dance?*

“I’m fine,” he said, and without a word, turned and stalked back to his office.

She followed him, frowning more and more deeply. He stank of tension, of something chemical. The oily smell that reminded her of lighter fluid that usually lingered around him like aftershave was stronger now, dancing around his shoulders.

“Dolls,” she said, slipping into the BBD office behind him before the door could close and block her out. “Seriously. The hell is wrong with you. I heard Wynonna slam you to the mat earlier. Off your game?”

He half-turned, still on his way back to his private office. “This is classified,” he said, though it lacked the usual bite and threat.

“I don’t think I really care right now,” she muttered, and followed him into his smaller office. There was a black case on his desk that she didn’t think she’d ever seen him carrying before.

“Get out,” he growled.

“No.”

“Get out!”

Dolls was moving too slow. His timing was all wrong, broadcasting every move before he did it. But she let him, wondering just how far gone he was, how much of a fight he was going to make this. He spun and grabbed her shirt, slamming her bodily against the wall beside the doorframe. The stud behind her creaked at the impact.

“You look like you need some protein,” she said, dripping with sarcasm, calling back to his comment only a few days prior. “Tell me, what’s *your* poison?”

He snarled, his teeth bared, impossibly white against his dark skin.
Nicole snarled back, louder, more guttural, the sound ripping and animal even in her human throat. She slammed her arms up under his, knocking his fists away. He was still reeling when she shoved both hands hard into his chest, pushing him back three stumbling paces. His hip hit the desk and he staggered, his eyes flashing with rage.

She grabbed him, her fist curling into the front of his shirt, and pulled him close, nose to nose with her as her canines grew and sharpened.

“Get yourself together, Dolls,” she growled, and he pulled at her fist without managing to get purchase on her fingers. “This isn’t you.”

He groaned, the sound raw with agony. He dropped his head forward, and she leaned away from him, watching, waiting.

“All right,” he breathed. “All right. I need to make a call.”

“Okay,” she said, frowning, but satisfied. She let go of him, stepped back a pace, and watched him tug his shirt back into place. “Just. Jesus, Dolls.”

“Go,” he groaned, and she raised her hands in surrender.

“I’m going,” she muttered, and headed back out into the hall. Behind her she heard him pick up his phone, dial, and then mutter a passcode to whoever picked up on the other end.

The door shut behind her, muffling his conversation enough that she couldn’t understand or pick out words, and she sighed, shaking her head and heading back to her desk.

“Hey, Haught,” Wynonna called, standing by Nicole’s desk as Nicole headed back into the room.

“Wynonna,” Nicole said, narrowing her eyes in thought. John Henry stood behind her, and when he saw Nicole he tugged the brim of his hat down in greeting. “Henry. Hey. Can I help y’all with something?”

“Yeah,” Wynonna said, rocking back on the heels of her boots for a moment. “Boss-man in there?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, looking over her shoulder as if she might see Dolls from here. “Yeah, he’s in there.” She shot Wynonna a wary look. “Is he... okay?”

Wynonna made a dismissive scoffing noise and spread her hands, palms up. “Honestly? Who the fuck knows.”

Nicole chuckled and moved to her desk. “Fair point.”

“Ma’am,” Henry said, nodding to her as they went by and into the hall, headed for BBD’s door.

She watched them go, noticing that there were hints of Wynonna—a distinctive gun-oil-and-leather scent—on Henry’s coat and belt, and traces of Henry, who smelled like his favorite bourbon and road-dust-coated-wool, on Wynonna’s leather jacket.

“Huh,” she muttered, grinning despite herself, and sat down at her desk. “I suppose I should’ve seen that one coming.”
There was an almost unearthly calm to be found, in the day the moon started to wane again. The wolf was pacified, at least for the moment, and she felt almost normal. Not human, exactly—she felt most human at the new moon, at the furthest point from transformation—but herself. Peaceful, but powerful. Confident, but not aggressive.

That feeling almost made the painful transformations worth it. That feeling of complete and comfortable right. The way it tugged at her, pulled her into a warm easiness like shrugging into a blanket on a cold day or cupping her hands around a warm mug of coffee. She worked late into the evening and didn’t even feel the overwhelming ennui that drove her away from work in a rush when a slow day finally ended.

And slow it had been. A few calls came in, all routed to officers already on the streets, leaving Nicole time to catch up on paperwork she had neglected in the haggard, confusing rush of the last few days. She organized her notes on the Joyce Arbour case, grouping it with a couple other similar cold cases she’d found squirrelled away in the PSD archives.

And then, in that small but terrible window between the end of the day shift and the start of the night shift, a call came in.

“Dispatch says it’s a drunk and disorderly,” Lonnie called from the counter. “Shorty’s.”

“Huh,” she said, grabbing her coat and her keys. “Did they say who?”

“Champ Hardy.”

Nicole snorted and headed out, passing Lonnie. “What, did he get overly emotional about his old glory days again?”

“Nah,” Lonnie said with a shrug as he got the last few details. “Sounds like heartbreak.”

Nicole stopped, almost to the door, and turned to look at him. “Beg pardon.”

“Oh yeah,” Lonnie said, his eyes alight with the glee of small town gossip. “Didn’t you hear? Waverly dumped him this morning.”

Her heart stopped, then double-beat for a few seconds.

“Uh, no, I hadn’t heard that. She did?”

“Yeah,” Lonnie said, excited, then frowned. “Um. But Champ’s still a problem, so...”

“Right,” she said quickly, lifting her hands. “I’ll handle it. Thanks.”

“Sure thing!” he called after her.

It took her the entire drive to Shorty’s to replace her grin with a façade of professional calm. When she got inside, the bar stank of alcohol, unwashed humans, drunken joy, sorrow, and an underlying thread of fear. She scanned the room, noting the crowded tables, but there was no sign of Champ, until her gaze tracked back to the bar. There was a small cluster of young men beside it, standing in a tight circle with the exaggerated calm of a detail of bodyguards. In the midst of them, she could hear—and smell—the shouting, sobbing, booze-soaked form of one heavily intoxicated Champ Hardy.

Gus McCready, de facto owner of Shorty’s now that the man himself was gone, was standing a few feet away, a pinched look of distaste on her face as she watched Champ.
“Officer Haught,” Gus called, raising a hand in greeting. “Thanks for coming by.”

“Not a problem,” Nicole said, flashing a smile. “All right, move aside, gentlemen.”

A few of Champ’s friends frowned at her, clearly crunching the numbers, but then they parted, giving Nicole a clear view of the man of the hour.

“Champ Hardy,” Nicole called out, voice clear, but not overly loud. No matter how badly she might want to, there was really no reason to embarrass the man more than he’d already done on his own. “How about you come down to the station with me and sit a while. Give you some time to sober up.”

“Fuck off,” Champ said, with frankly astonishing clarity. He actually sounded mostly comprehensible. He turned, glaring at her, his eyes red and puffy with drink and tears.

“I’d rather not,” she said amiably, and gestured behind her to the doors. “Let’s get out of here, Champ. There’s no need to make this a problem.”

“No need to—” He made a series of spluttering, dismissive noises, and slid off the bar stool he had been, well, not sitting on, but using to stay vaguely upright. He stumbled once, but one of the boys on his right side caught his arm and kept him on his feet. “S’already a problem,” he told her, pointing. “You come along an’ an’ Waverly—”

“Come on, man,” one of the others muttered to him. “You know she’s got nothin’ to do with that.”

“Like hell,” Champ said, and shoved one of them away. He stepped forward, and Nicole moved closer, frowning. If he was going to fall over, she’d rather he fall into her. It’d make it easier to carry him out of the building after.

But Champ, it seemed, could still surprise her, at least where rampant stupidity was concerned.

He swung at her as she closed the distance, one hand out to catch him, and his fist crashed into her face. He may have been drunk, but he was still an ex-rodeo-clown and farmhand, and the hit was clean, well-aimed, and a hell of a lot harder than she would have expected for a man with that much beer in him. She staggered, knocking over a stool as she fell, and one of the wooden legs snapped under her weight. Pain lanced through her side, between two ribs, white-hot but blessedly temporary.

She cursed under her breath and levered herself back up. Once she was upright she dusted off her hands, ready to grab Champ and ask a little less nicely this time, but two of his friends stepped back from her.

“Oh. Shit,” one of them said, his voice hoarse.

She looked down, taking stock, and found a dark wet patch soaking into her shirt. “The hell,” she muttered, feeling around with two fingers. The cloth had torn a bit, and there was a thick splinter of broken wood about the length of a ballpoint pen sticking out of her side. She pulled it out with a sigh and pocketed it.

“Sorry Gus,” she called, shaking her head. “I’ll make sure you get compensated for that.”

Gus was staring at her, her eyes very round. The bartender then looked at Champ, her mouth dropping slightly open.

Three of Champ’s friends were holding him steady. He kept jerking, as if to run, and he was staring
at Nicole as if she were a ghost. One of his friends was talking to him, low and fast, and Nicole pretended not to watch, dusting herself off as she listened.

“Stop! Stop, man, just fuckin’ stop. Run now and you’re just making it worse. You’ve already assaulted an officer, man, just fuckin’—just stop.”

“It’s fine,” she said, dusting off her hands. There was still blood on them, which she wiped on her shirt. The khakis would show too much.

“What?” Champ asked, at the same time as one of his buddies.

“I’m not gonna press charges,” she said, keeping her voice even and smooth. She could feel the torn flesh and muscle in her side knitting back together. It was a sensation that never got less weird, the feeling of blood congealing and healing at ten times the normal speed. Within a minute, there’d be no indication she’d been harmed at all. She looked around, finding a whole lot of eyes on her, but even with a room full of witnesses, “assaulting a peace officer” wasn’t going to stick if there were no injuries to show for it. “Let’s just head down to the shop and sit a spell, Hardy. Come on.”

He looked at his friends, who all looked back at him with their faces showing variations on do it, man, before she changes her mind.

“Okay,” he mumbled, and stepped closer, offering his wrists.

“You gonna come along in peace?” she asked.

He nodded, his lip trembling but his gaze relatively steady.

“Then go on and put your hands down. Come on, let’s just get to the car.”

He breathed out a heavy sigh, but nodded, and followed along beside her as she headed for the door. He stumbled once, and she steadied his shoulder with a hand.

“Sorry about the mess, Gus,” she called over her shoulder.

“No problem, Officer,” Gus said, her voice a little thin, maybe in shock. “No problem.”

“So here’s something kinda weird,” Lonnie said as Nicole sat down at her desk to file the paperwork on Champ’s stint in the drunk tank, his voice a conspiratorial whisper.

“What, Lonnie,” Nicole said, trying not to sound completely uninterested as she started typing.

“Got a call of shots fired near Tatenhill Farms’ ranch house earlier.”

“Yeah?”

“Guys on scene found a single bullet casing, but no bullets, and no sign of a struggle or blood or nothin’.”

“Probably just Herman doing target practice again, Lonnie. It’s fine.”

“That’s just the thing,” he said, staring intently at her. “No sign of any of them. It’s like they all just disappeared.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lonnie, an old woman like Mama Olive and her two adult kids don’t just
vanish into thin air.”

“I know,” he said. “Except the diner’s empty, and the house is cleaned out. But the cars are still in the garage. Weird, right?”

She looked up at him finally, frowning a little as she mulled it over.

“All right,” she said, a little grudging. “Yeah, that’s pretty weird.”

Nedley’s voice rang out just as Lonnie opened his mouth to say more. “Nicole!”

She jumped, frowned at Lonnie, and went to Nedley’s doorway. “Sir?”

He sighed and rubbed a thumb and finger against his eyes. “I’ve got two officers out tomorrow night on family emergencies. I need you on the night shift tomorrow.”

“I wasn’t supposed to switch till Sunday,” she said, frowning.

“I know,” he said, and waved a hand. “I know. But I need you on. I’ll have someone cover your afternoon.”

She nodded. “Sure thing, Sheriff. I’ll be here.”

He blew out a breath, looking relieved, as if he’d actually been worried she’d refuse.

“Thank you, Nicole. It’s good to have someone reliable around.”

She thought of bruises and scratches and night shifts she’d never be able to take, no matter the emergency.

“Yeah,” she said, and if her voice came out a little strained, he didn’t seem to notice. “Glad to help.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was nice to sleep in for once. To spend a lazy Saturday morning in bed, cuddling her cat and watching daylight slant in through the blinds over her window. There were books she’d been meaning to read, supernatural research she’d meant to look at. But she let herself put it off a little longer. She let her mind wander, thinking over the last week, the last month. Hell, the last year.

Her thoughts returned over and over to Waverly, but also to Shae. Why had she come to Purgatory? And during the full moon, specifically? Sure, there were jokes to be made about jealous wives, but she hadn’t ever expected it from Shae. And while she preferred to think of herself as the sort who wouldn’t really be all that defensive, the thought of Shae roaming, hunting, maybe *killing* in or near Purgatory set Nicole’s teeth on edge. These were her citizens, dammit. Even if Shae only hunted game in the woods, it still felt like an invasion. This was her town. Her land. She would not let some other wolf hunt on *her* territory.

Hold up.

Her “territory”? God, when had she become a walking cliché.

The hours ticked by. Eventually Calamity Jane tired of lounging with her and departed for more interesting climes—probably the kitchen, and her food bowl within—and Nicole took it as a cue to get up and start her day.

She stopped at Shorty’s for dinner on her way to work, paid Gus for the broken stool, and learned, partially by overhearing and partially from Gus making small talk, that Waverly was off for the evening to throw some shindig up at the Earp Homestead.

“I’ll tell her you said hi,” Gus said, with a wink at Nicole that left her feeling wildly out of her depth with the entire Earp extended family.

Once night had well and truly fallen, the station was ominously dark, most of the lights off except for her desk lamp and a couple of the hall lights. The place was as quiet as the grave. Other than her desk chair squeaking if she moved too much, the background noise of the fluorescent lights, the air conditioning, and the occasional creaking of pipes was almost cacophonous in the absence of other sounds.

So, as she sat, poring over the Arbour case file and rubbing a crick out of her neck that hadn’t completely gone away after only one night in a real bed, the light clicking of boots in the hall was almost comforting, just for it being some other sound.

The mild but clear scent of whiskey and leather told her it was Wynonna, though it was interesting that she hadn’t heard Dolls moving around anywhere. She didn’t look up until the boots paused, doubled back, and a fist rapped against the window of the open door.

“Saturday night,” Wynonna chided, raising an eyebrow and stepping into the doorway to chat. “I’m the town pariah with ten years of bad deeds and social suicides to make up for. What’s *your* excuse.”

“Nedley,” Nicole said, smiling and leaning her elbows on her desk.
“Say no more, bosses are the worst,” Wynonna said, her voice light in the way only buzzed—but-not-fully-roaring-drunk-yet Wynonna could be. “Also I’m scared mine might be dead,” she added, still sounding light, but the words and the double-beat of her heart made Nicole snap her gaze back to Wynonna’s face, alarmed simply for the fact that Wynonna was. “Oh,” Wynonna said blithely, waving a hand and raising the bottle to take another drink, “Kidding.”

Nicole watched her for a moment, not buying it. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Wynonna made a face as she swallowed down whiskey, gesturing to herself vaguely as if to say who, me? She gave Nicole a thumbs-up and cleared her throat of alcohol burn.

“Mm,” Nicole said, and looked down. “Well, at least I’m not the only one who wasn’t invited to the party. Makes me feel better.”

Wynonna’s face turned thoughtful and she stepped closer, setting the whiskey bottle down on the edge of Nicole’s desk with a heavy, hollow thunk.

“What party?”

Nicole shrugged a shoulder. “Something up at the Homestead. Waverly didn’t tell you? I was kidding about me, but I figured you would’ve known.”

Wynonna let her head fall back against her shoulders with a disgusted groan. ‘Ugh. She said something about having some friends over, yeah. Well, to hell with that. Here, sit with me,” she said, flopping down onto the floor next to Nicole’s chair, her back against the next desk. “Have a drink. Screw working on a Saturday night.”

Nicole looked at Wynonna, then at the case files on her desk. Better Wynonna didn’t drink alone, right?

She pushed her desk chair aside and settled down beside Wynonna.

“All right,” she said, smirking. “Hand it over then.”

For a few minutes they drank in companionable silence, swapping the bottle back and forth. Nicole tried not to think about the fact that this was the first time she’d swapped spit with a woman in months, and managed, narrowly, not to start snickering to herself over it. Definitely not something she wanted to explain to Wynonna.

“You know exactly who she invited, too,” Wynonna said a little later, with absolutely no logical segue.

“Hm?” she asked, rolling her head along the surface of the desk behind her to look at Wynonna. Nicole’s head was pleasantly fuzzy, her body warm, but not oppressively so.

“Chrissy Nedley.”

“What?” Nicole asked, stunned. “Sheriff’s daughter?”

“Mnmhm!” Wynonna chirped. “And Stephanie Jones. You know, one time,” Wynonna said, a touch of pettiness in her voice, “Stephanie told me, that I,” she rolled the word across her tongue, speaking in what Nicole presumed was an unconscious imitation of the woman, “Should think about getting a butt lift.”

“What?” Nicole barked, and screwed up her face, offended on Wynonna’s behalf. She gestured
with one hand, trying to convey anger and praise at the same time. “Your ass is like... it’s top-shelf, man. It’s top-shelf.”

“Thanks,” Wynonna said, her gaze sliding aside, her thoughts clearly elsewhere. “Have I pulled Waves too close?”

The part of Nicole that was sober and aware thought the question was remarkable in its clarity, and spoke volumes as to Wynonna’s real self. The part that was drunk thought it was adorable, but also very silly.

She thought of Champ, drinking until he practically couldn’t stand, all because Waverly had finally realized she could be so much more than Champ Hardy’s girlfriend. That she had, at least on some level, decided she could be more than just Purgatory’s town sweetheart.

“You know, I think,” Nicole said, and some part of her was aware that she sounded wobbly and entirely too cheerful for the circumstances, “That Waverly has spent her whole life tailorin’ who she is to the people she’s with.” She thought of a smile and mind brighter than the sun, thought of the sly, clever young woman who had charmed her way to a police officer’s key and answers from a con man. She was smiling, dopey and smitten, and she couldn’t do a damn thing to stop herself. “She’s only now just startin’ to figure out what she really wants.”

“Dude,” Wynonna said, disgusted. “You’re like a walking bumper sticker.” Nicole laughed, then a little harder when Wynonna slapped her arm and added, “Who’s armed! Waverly should be hanging out with you.”

“I agree,” Nicole said, taking up the whiskey bottle again with a grin.

Wynonna made a faint noise of interest, then leaned forward to reach under Nicole’s desk, bobbing woozily as she did so. “Who’s this?” she asked, as Nicole hooked a hand into the back of her belt to keep Wynonna from smashing her face into the floor. “Who’s this lady?”

Nicole laughed and hauled her back up once Wynonna had gotten hold of the photo, but as she realized what it was that had caught Wynonna’s interest, she sighed and set down the bottle. “That is victim number three.”

“Same guy killed three women?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, frowning, her voice still betraying the whiskey in her system as she spoke. Even to her own ears she could hear the resurgence of her country accent, but she couldn’t seem to wrangle it down again. “Killin’ ‘em was only the start. Joyce Arbour,” she noted, reaching up to grab the case file off her desk, flipping it open for Wynonna to look at. It had occurred to her that this might be a BBD case. She’d been waiting for Dolls to show up to talk to him about it, but, hey, his deputy was close enough, right? “She’s 22. We found her Wednesday morning, and the cause of death appears to be multiple lacerations, but of course the autopsy report is practically illegible.”

Wynonna pulled a crime scene photo of the woman’s face and neck out of the folder, staring at it for a moment. “Dolls picked a great time to go AWOL,” she muttered.

Nicole frowned at that, looking over at Wynonna again and eyeing the photo.

The scent of coppery blood filled her nose, and she blinked at the sound of liquid hitting paper. A tiny splatter of blood lay on the printout in Wynonna’s hand.

“Um,” Wynonna said, glancing nervously up at Nicole. There was another drop of blood running
down from her nose, and Wynonna’s expression had turned to something like terror, dulled only marginally by alcohol. “I... need to see the body.”

“Uh,” Nicole said, staring at the blood on Wynonna’s face. “Right, follow me, I guess.” She got up, dusted off her pants, and offered a hand up to Wynonna. “Morgue’s downstairs.”

“I thought medical examiners usually worked offsite,” Wynonna muttered, dabbing at her nose a moment longer before taking Nicole’s hand and hauling herself up.

“Town the size of Purgatory,” Nicole offered by way of explanation, trailing off absently as she gathered up the case file and headed for the stairs. “C’mon. Le’see what’s up with your face.”

“With what?” Wynonna asked, following.

“With this case,” Nicole said hastily, looking over her shoulder to wait for Wynonna to catch up. Her head was starting to clear, unnatural metabolism working faster than she would have liked. There were upsides and downsides to that, she supposed, as she headed for the stairs and listened to Wynonna weaving along behind her. Upside: clarity of mind for conducting a somewhat unconventional investigation.

Downside: all of this was a lot less fun when you looked at it sober.

She sifted through her keyring to get them into the morgue, glancing around as they entered the room. The stench of death and formaldehyde was so thick here it was like walking into a wall, and Nicole grimaced, shaking her head. Wynonna made a faint horrified noise, gagging, and Nicole glanced over her shoulder. Morgues were not, as a general rule, where one went to have a good time, but there was something very innately and endearingly human about Wynonna having such a visceral response.

“Yeah,” Nicole said, if only to break the oppressive, sepulchral silence. “They say you get used to the smell.”

Wynonna flapped a hand dismissively, but the muffled noise of her churning stomach and her too-fast heartbeat betrayed her. “I spent a summer’s probation on roadkill removal. This is nothing.”

Nicole glanced over at her as she checked toe tags, sobering in a way that had nothing to do with alcohol. Wynonna was power and strength and recklessness incarnate, but she was still, at her core, a human woman. Capable of moments of great vulnerability and tenderness, of a very human response to death, and loss, and fear. Nicole was capable of some of those things, but it hit home, not for the first time, how inhuman Nicole had become since Shae’s bite. Sometimes it felt like every time the moon waned, it took a little bit of her with it.

“And here she is,” she said, a little more softly, approaching a table. “Joyce Arbour.”

Wynonna stepped closer, setting the whiskey bottle heavily on the table with an impossibly loud thunk. Nicole frowned, muttering to herself about respect for the dead, and removed the bottle, setting it on the ground. Wynonna spared a glance back at her, shrugged one shoulder, and started folding back the sheet over the dead woman’s face, pulling it down to a few inches below her collarbone.

Joyce, she thought, might have been beautiful in life. She had, once, had an elegant face, and long, voluminous curls that hung down well past her jaw. But now, looking at the real Joyce, Nicole saw something that she had never noticed in the photos. And it made her blood run cold.

“She... she kind of looks like you, Wynonna.”
“Jesus Christ,” Wynonna whispered, scanning the incisions on the corpse’s chest, the stitches to hold the torn skin closed, the bruising. “Who did this?”

“Someone who knew what they’re doing.”

Nicole spun on her heel, hand flying to her pistol, teeth sharpening to biting-strength. Without even thinking about it she twisted, blocking Wynonna from the newcomer with her body.

A medical examiner in scrubs, all salt and pepper hair and utterly irreverent Twizzler in hand, blinked at her.

“Dude!” Wynonna snapped, leaning around Nicole’s elbow to give him an ugly look. Nicole kept her mouth very near closed, licking nervously at her lips and trying to focus on breathing until her heartrate went back to normal and her teeth shrank to human shape. “This is a morgue! Wear a bell or something, okay?”

“Sorry,” the M.E. said. “Once a ninja, always a ninja.”

“God,” Wynonna breathed, lifting a hand to check her pulse. Nicole could hear it hammering away, and, with her face back to normal, she worked on getting her fingers to unclench from around the grip of her sidearm.

“Plus I forget I'm wearing these cotton balls for shoes,” he continued. “They uh, help absorb the smell.”

Nicole gave him a wan smile, trying to look polite, but she still didn’t quite trust herself to speak.

“But you two pretty ladies don't care about that. Um, I'm Dr. Reggie. The uh, unlucky SOB who has to make sure the dead don't rise again?”

“You suck at your job,” Wynonna muttered, and turned back toward the corpse.

“Uh, excuse me?” Dr. Reggie said.

“Never mind.”

Nicole shifted so she was standing between them more, and showed the folder to Dr. Reggie, putting on her best I’d like to speak to a manager voice. “Did you do this autopsy report?”

“Uh...” He took the file, flipping through it. “If I’d done this, I wouldn’t have misspelled ‘breasts,’” he said, and she blinked, looking at the page again. How the hell had she missed that? “I can tell you something about the body,” he offered, looking at Wynonna. “Did my own examination.”

Wynonna watched him, pressing her lips into a line. “Anything unusual, or... creepy? About the wounds, or the way she died?”

“Well,” Dr. Reggie said, “She died because humans can’t survive when their organs are removed.” He took another bite of the Twizzler, and Nicole fought the urge to rip it out of his hands.

“She,” Wynonna looked vaguely queasy, “She was alive when he took them out?”

“Correct,” Dr. Reggie said, and pointed to the body with the half-eaten licorice. “The incision isn’t what killed her. Nah, he drugged her, hooked her up to an IV, a blood bag... just like any surgeon would doing open heart or intestinal surgery.”
Nicole frowned, listening to him but watching Wynonna. There was something about the way he talked that was almost... fascinated. Like he thought the killer’s actions were interesting. She tried to make eye contact with Wynonna, to gauge if she was getting the same vibe, but Wynonna was just staring at the man in blank horror.

“But,” Dr. Reggie continued, “Here is the uber-weird part.” He bent over the corpse, indicating the incisions. “The wounds? Were cauterized as they were made.”

“So he cut her open with something...” Nicole grimaced. “Hot?”

“Like lightsaber hot,” Dr. Reggie said.

“Hellfire hot,” Wynonna said, her voice barely above a whisper. Nicole stared at her, but Wynonna was no longer being forthcoming, and she turned her attention back to the M.E.

“Alright, so you remove the organs if you’re gonna sell ‘em on the black market. Why would you take ‘em out and then put ‘em back in?”

“Maybe somebody was looking for something.” Wynonna was staring down at the woman, her expression impossible to read. Her heart was still beating way too fast, and she looked vaguely ill. Nicole found herself wondering if Wynonna had been doing this job long, but then again, she knew that she hadn’t. Wynonna’s humanity was so often masked, but tonight, Nicole felt like she was seeing it on full display. It was comforting, somehow. If a woman like Wynonna, who everyone else wrote off or dismissed as a loose cannon, could be so inherently real, so alive, then maybe there was hope for everyone else. For her.

Dr. Reggie frowned, thoughtful, flicking his gaze between the corpse and Wynonna, standing beyond her. “You keep looking at her neck.”

“Hm?” Wynonna glanced up. “Yeah, there’s a welt,” she said, pointing.

“Wha–?” Dr. Reggie circled the table as Nicole blinked and leaned over to look as well.

“Dude,” Wynonna said, unimpressed. “I saw it on the photos. It’s the shape of a spade, like on a deck of cards.”

“Sweet crickets,” Dr. Reggie breathed. “I missed that entirely.”

“What woulda caused that?” Nicole asked, frowning. Leaning over the body, the smell of formaldehyde, disinfectant, and barely disguised carrion was so thick she felt like she couldn’t breathe.

“Well, she was hit by something in the shape of a spade, right?” Wynonna asked, gesturing helplessly at the body.

“I mean, sure, yeah,” Dr. Reggie said. “Um, or it could have been prolonged pressure. Did, uh, you study forensics?”

There was a distant sound, like footsteps, and Nicole stiffened, turning her head. Then, again, more loudly, enough that Wynonna flinched and started looking around too. For a moment the three of them stood there in tense, rabbit-like stillness, and then there was a mechanical beep, and a blue signal light flicked on behind them, mounted on the wall.

Nicole shot a look at Dr. Reggie, who blinked.
“Someone just went into the cooler,” he explained. “You guys come alone?”

Wynonna looked at Nicole, her expression speaking volumes. “I don’t know,” she said, voice low. “Did we?”

Nicole unsnapped the strap on her pistol and rested her hand on it.

Wynonna mumbled to herself, thinking, then looked at Dr. Reggie. “There more than one way of getting inside the cooler?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said, looking between them. “A rear exit.”

Nicole pulled her gun from its holster and held it low, close to her leg. “Alright. I got it.” She started toward the hallway door and noted Wynonna pulling her Colt .45 from its position on her thigh. “Don’t shoot me, Earp,” she muttered.

She slipped out into the hall and slid down it to the next turn, laying her feet carefully in a rolling gait that kept her upper body steady, lifting her pistol as she turned the first corner. The next hall was empty, and she prowled down that as well, turning once more before she found the cooler’s rear door. She set a hand to the knob and pushed, but it didn’t move.

“Dammit,” she snarled, jiggling it, but it didn’t give. She pressed her ear to the door, and further off she heard another door slam shut, and then Wynonna’s voice, a little high, a little panicky.

“Nicole?”

She jerked her head back, pressed her shoulder to the door, and tried the knob again. “Wynonna!” she yelled through the door, then heard the other door open and shut again. “Damn,” she muttered, jogging back around to where they’d originally entered.

She slammed through the morgue’s main door, panting. “The door was locked, I couldn’t get in—” She stopped short, spotting Joyce’s corpse from between Dr. Reggie’s and Wynonna’s shoulders. The corpse’s head was turned toward them, the eyes wide open and glassy blue, and there was a playing card, a Jack of Spades, sticking out of Joyce Arbour’s open mouth. Nicole gasped, the sound terrifyingly audible, and Wynonna spun around to look at her. Her nose was red with blood again.

“Jesus, Wynonna,” Nicole breathed, lifting a hand toward her mouth. She got it, immediately, checking her nose with one finger as she turned away again. Nicole didn’t have to see her face to know she was panicking—Wynonna’s breaths were coming in haggard, sharp gasps, and her heartbeat had picked up again.

Wynonna turned toward Nicole again and shouldered past her, heading for the hall. Dr. Reggie watched her go, spreading his hands in a shrug, and Nicole gave chase, jogging every few steps to keep up with Wynonna as she blew up two flights of stairs and headed for the Purgatory Sheriff Department’s tiny kitchen.

“No one keeps booze in here, Wynonna!” Nicole called, shoving the kitchen door open again after it shut in her face. “Except you.”

Wynonna didn’t seem to be listening, checking wall cabinets in a harried, desperate, unorganized search.

Nicole leaned on the table by the wall, watching. “You want to tell me what the hell is going on?”
“Yeah,” Wynonna said glibly. “Dry morgue air is murder on the schnoz.”


Wynonna checked another cabinet, spluttering, shocked that Nicole would ask. “I picked up this case, like, an hour ago. How could—”

“It be connected to you?” Nicole finished for her. She wanted to pace, but she kept herself where she was, trying to keep from standing over Wynonna. It would satisfy the animal to loom, to be bigger, but it would just make Wynonna close off faster. “Yeah, I would really like to know that too. People getting eaten by something? Call Wynonna!”

Wynonna went very still, evidently giving up on finding a bottle, and slowly turned to look at Nicole.

“Guy gets murdered by a man in a mirror?” Nicole snapped, gesturing widely with both hands. “Yep, Wynonna to the rescue.”

Wynonna shot Nicole a dry, excessively patient look. “Black Badge specializes in cases that are uh... too complex for rookie flatfoots. So it makes sense that you’re a bit confused.”

Nicole snarled, her vision flaring gold for a handful of heartbeats. “I’m not,” she spat.

Wynonna froze for a breath, then two, then narrowed her eyes. “Alternately,” she said, and slowly stepped closer, her hand twisting to hang near her .45 as she moved. Nicole could smell a new, very real fear, hidden under two or three layers of bravado, and for a moment, just a moment, Nicole wondered if she had gone too far, betrayed too much. Wynonna smelled and sounded like she thought Nicole might actually physically rip off her face, though the panic didn’t show in her posture. “I don’t suppose you have a deck of playing cards in this utility belt, huh?” she said, reaching to grab at her holster.

She jerked away, furious, and then she did stand, looming over Wynonna, bristling. “Excuse me?”

“How do I know you didn’t double back to mess with the body?” Wynonna said, leaning up, unfazed by Nicole’s greater height and mass. Nicole looked away, struggling to regain anything remotely like calm, and Wynonna moved even closer, leaning into her space, daring Nicole to pick a fight. “Yeah. You’re awfully interested in me and my sister. Maybe I should be grilling the shit out of you. Maybe you’re the crazy one.”

Nicole bit down a growl, but she could feel it rumbling in her chest. She knew it was audible, but she couldn’t bring herself to care, too angry to worry about it. “You of all people should know better than to try to make me question my sanity,” Nicole said. She headed for the door, fighting down the snarling, roaring wolf in her chest that wanted to stay, to fight, to throw Wynonna to the ground and make her scream.

She didn’t go back to her desk. She couldn’t bring herself to look at the case files, and instead she stalked the halls of the station until she heard Wynonna running, racing out to her truck in the parking lot. She heard the pickup’s door slam, then the rumbling of the engine, then tires crunching on slush.

Only then, when the station was quiet and no one was there but her, did she start to steam with it, her blood boiling with her anger.

She stalked down to the interrogation hall, turned off all the microphones and cameras, and ducked
inside one of the rooms, letting the rage twist her body until she could howl and roar with real, satisfying volume, her own voice echoing off the walls.

Her phone rang half an hour before dawn. Not the station line, but her direct phone.

“Haught.”

“Wynonna?”

“Somebody sent hitters to the party here last night,” she said, the words clipped and a bit stiff with something that Nicole thought sounded like an unvoiced apology. “Mind coming down to take statements? Or whatever it is real cops do when they’re not putting up with drunk asshole deputies?”

For a moment she considered telling Wynonna to fuck off.

But if someone had tried to hit the party, Waverly’s party...

“I’ll be there, Earp.”

The Homestead’s aftermath was a puzzle. Four dead, all seemingly having moved from the positions in which they had died, but not by being dragged, carried, or thrown. There were meandering furrows in the snow, as if from sluggish, dragging footsteps, and Nicole had seen enough zombie movies to have some guesses, even though all her theories sounded so utterly bonkers that even just speaking them aloud might get her institutionalized. Two of the dead she didn’t recognize. One, Wynonna identified as Stephanie Jones.

The fourth was the Blacksmith, which made Nicole’s stomach churn. Who—or what—was big and bad enough to take down a witch?

Chrissy Nedley, Nicole learned, was good at giving witness statements. Not out of practice, at least not so far as Nicole knew, but out of listening to her father’s lectures. Nicole let her go back inside as Wynonna approached, phone in hand.

“Your sister okay?” Nicole asked, trying for mild and getting something at least in the neighborhood of civil.

“Eh,” Wynonna said, a bit too casually. “She’s being Waverly.”

“Yeah, well,” Nicole said, raising an eyebrow. “Chrissy says she ‘scissored a stripper.’”

Wynonna’s mouth quirked in a grim half-smile.

“So?” Nicole asked. “Any idea why your homestead was targeted? I mean, besides the fact that it’s yours?”

Wynonna watched her, her expression back to guarded, but not openly hostile. “You know what,” she ventured, her voice falsely bright. “We should get some breakfast. I could murder a stack of pancakes.” Nicole eyed her. “And then we’ll talk. Really talk.”

“Mm, okay,” Nicole said, still a bit cool. “You gonna help me understand why some of these cases are a little too complex for local flatfoots?”
Wynonna gave her a wry smile, nodding slightly as if to say *yeah, I deserved that one*.

“Do my best,” she said.

Nicole raised an eyebrow and glanced down at the phone in Wynonna’s hand. “Your boss gonna be okay with that?”

Wynonna looked down too, then met Nicole’s gaze steadily. “Boss isn’t here.”

“Okay.”

Wynonna nodded toward the cruiser. “Guess you’re my ride.”

Nicole nodded, and as Wynonna moved around to get into the passenger side, Nicole’s gaze tracked to the house’s front porch, where Waverly was ushering Chrissy indoors. Their eyes met, and Waverly raised her hand in a tiny wave, her wrist stiff, as if it pained her. Nicole mirrored it, smiling, and kept watching as Waverly glanced aside, then back at her, her mouth curling in a very slight, very gentle smile.

Nicole turned, trying not to smile too widely as she got into the cruiser.

“Everything cool?” Wynonna muttered, eyeing her as Nicole started the engine.

“Yeah,” she said, and pulled out onto the dirt road that led away from the homestead.

Wynonna was silent all the way off Earp land, but then she sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. “Hey, uh...” Wynonna stared out the side window for a moment. “Nicole.”

Nicole glanced over at her, raising an eyebrow. “Nicole, huh.”

“For this, yeah. I guess. Nicole.”

Nicole watched the road, navigating the occasional patch of frozen slush, the cruiser rolling along at a decent clip. “Hm?”

“You hear a lot in town, right?”

She pursed her lips, choosing her words carefully. “Well, Purgatory is a small town, so, people talk, if that’s what you’re asking. I try not to listen, but.” She shrugged a shoulder. “I hear things, sure.”

Wynonna’s mouth twisted in a knowing smirk. “Yeah. Well. Did you hear about the Banditos?”

“The who?” Nicole asked, brow furrowing. She flicked her gaze over to Wynonna, then forward again.

“Guess not. So, I rolled with them for a while when I first left Purgatory. Literally, I guess, since they were a biker gang.”

“ Seems like your kind of crowd,” Nicole mused.

She laughed, a coarse, uncomfortable sound. “More than you know. They were a bunch of oddballs. Like. *Real* odd.”

There was a trembling, nervous sensation in her chest. “What, like six-toed, bearded-lady odd?”
“Like magic spells and curses odd,” Wynonna said. She was staring out the windshield, resolutely avoiding Nicole’s eyes. When Nicole didn’t say anything, Wynonna snorted. “You don’t believe me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Hm.” The corner of her mouth pricked up. “Well there was this one guy. A couple guys, actually. Real bad anger management problems.”

“Biker gang,” Nicole said, the strange, fluttering feeling getting worse. Her voice shook, just a little. “Suppose that’s not surprising.”

“Sure,” Wynonna said, and now her gaze slid left, watching Nicole for her reaction. “But I mean real bad. And I’m talking, like, it was like clockwork. Those guys had cycles more regular than I did, and I was on two kinds of birth control.”

She couldn’t possibly mean... could she?

“Nicole,” Wynonna said, and she sounded light still, but her heart rate was picking up, hammering with nerves. Her tension became a palpable thing, clouding the air in the car until it was all Nicole could smell. “If you...”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, the word coming out as a whisper. She cleared her throat, trying again. “Wynonna. Yeah.”

She was quiet for a moment, then nodded. “Okay.”

“One rule.”

“Just one? Wow, you must be off your game, Haught.”

She ignored that. “You get one PMS joke.”

“What?” Wynonna drawled, aghast. “Come on. One?”

“One,” Nicole said, nodding. “So you’d better make it a good one.”

“Your rule sucks,” Wynonna said, but shrugged. “Fine. It’s—Christ!”

Nicole glanced forward again and slammed on the brakes, twisting the wheel when the tires slid. Snow kicked up in a cloud, fogging the back window to solid white, and she stared out the windshield, grunting in disapproval. She would’ve sworn there hadn’t been anyone there a second ago, but now a tall man was standing in the middle of their lane, an arm raised to flag them down. He had an elegant black cane in one hand, resting on the ground, and his face was shadowed by the sun.

“Where the hell did he come from?” Wynonna groused.

The scent of copper hit her again, and Nicole glanced over at Wynonna. “Shit. Earp. Your nose,” she whispered.

Wynonna looked at her, then swiped her hand under her nose and pulled it away bloody.

“Oh,” Wynonna said, her voice rather small. “Yeah, that’s what I needed today.”
So now I've either directly referenced, or drawn from, *The Road to Purgatory*, the *Purgatory Case Files*, and now, with that Banditos reference, Beau Smith's new comics, *Season Zero*. My grubby authorial fingers have been all over the extended canon. Mwahaha. >:3
“If that shithead thinks he can screw with me today,” Wynonna snarled, fighting her way free of her seatbelt. Nicole growled, agreeing, ripping off her own belt and pushing the driver-side door aside.

The man in black was waiting when she opened the door. “He’s fast!” Nicole shouted, as a warning, and his walking stick hit her in the face just as something impossibly hot slashed across her palm, tearing off patches of skin and searing as it went. She twisted under the force of the pair of blows, struggling to catch her balance. Her hand fell against the clipboard on the center console and for a moment the paper stuck wetly to her, adhering to her blood where it was pulsing out and soaking her whole hand.

“Not surprising!” Wynonna shouted back as she kicked her door open and crawled out on the passenger side. “He’s a demon!”

“Wynonna!” she shouted, as the man grabbed her by one flailing leg, hauling as if to pull her entirely out of the car with a strength his narrow, lean frame simply should not have had. She scrabbled, grabbing at the steering wheel, then the frame of her door, and somewhere in the back of her mind she registered that she was leaving streaks of blood everywhere. Her head hit the edge of the door as he tossed her down to the ground and she rolled into the snow. She could feel blood smearing into her eyebrow and coating the left side of her face. Head wounds did always bleed like a bitch.

He leaned over her and sprayed something into her face, something that stank acrid and chemical. Her vision swam, turning to a blur of grey and black, and she listened to his footsteps as he peered into the cruiser’s cabin, then ducked aside, bending out of the way of a bullet from Wynonna’s .45. Nicole came up into a crouch, snarling, and just barely made out his eyes, glowing red, before the image swirled and spun into incomprehensible shapes.

A flash of insight swept through her and she laughed, giddy and unrestrained and a little manic. Wynonna knew. Wynonna knew, and now she was fighting a supernatural. All bets were off.

She shrugged out of her jacket, letting it drop behind her into the snow, and pushed her sleeves up to her elbows. She felt the blood dripping down over her eye, heard the soft sounds of it landing in the snow. Her hand ached and throbbed, and for a breath she waited for the sensation of her skin healing, sealing closed.

It never came. She’d have to worry about that later.

“Big mistake,” she snarled at the man in black, turning her head back and forth, searching for a visual. She couldn’t see, but she could hear, could smell. He was watching her, intrigued, but said nothing. Smart enough to avoid giving her a target. That was fine. She could play dirty.

For the first time in months, she let the wolf come out to play.

She roared, the sound building from a hollow imitation to a real, full-throated bellow as her throat and chest changed first. Her upper body stretched, broader, heavy with muscle and raw, primal strength. Her uniform shirt’s seams groaned under the effort and a few of them popped outright, the fabric clinging to her larger body. She didn’t have a second uniform in the car, so she stopped herself there, her face partially shifted, halfway to a muzzle, her too-large jaw full of heavy teeth.
“Good enough for government work.”

“Interesting,” the demon murmured, thoughtful.

His boots crunched in the snow again, and Wynonna’s gun barked, the sound like a small cannon to Nicole’s half-wolf ears. The next shot went wide, sending up a puff of snow in a drift twenty yards off the road.

“Nicole!” Wynonna shouted, not angry this time, not commanding, but terrified, her voice hoarse with strain.

She took it as a warning and spun halfway around, snarling, teeth bared to rip and tear. The man in black smashed the handle of his walking stick across the side of her head again. She staggered to one side, hitting the rear fender of her car and then dropping down into the snow, and he was above her in the time it took her to blink.

Casually, as if it were nothing, he slammed his foot into her ribcage. His boot was hot, impossibly so, as if the leather itself were boiling. Under the impact she heard bones crack and buckle, and she howled, high and desperate and pure animal. Wynonna screamed her name again. Nicole struggled to get her hands under her, leaving more bloodied handprints, but the pain made her head spin, made her bones feel like jelly. Even the change itself didn’t hurt so bad as this, and she suddenly felt very out of her element. Nothing she’d ever fought had dealt out raw pain like this, not even the one time someone nicked her with a silver knife.

Damn, she thought distantly. Maybe I really am a rookie flatfoot.

The Colt fired another round with no corresponding sound of impact. Wynonna had missed again—he was too damn slippery. There was a horrible thud of a human skull slamming into steel and then the heavy, dull sound of Wynonna’s body falling limply into the snow.

Dizzy, Nicole tried to keep track of what was happening. The demon gathered her up and slung her over his shoulder—she let out a hollow, agonized scream as her ribs creaked and groaned from the way he held her—and then scooped Wynonna up under his other arm, carrying them out into the woods away from the road. He smelled like rotten peaches and sugar, and for some reason she thought of the brewing station her father had once set up in their garage to make homemade beer. It had been a weirdly distinct odor—the smell of gas from the power mower mixing with the wort as he boiled it.

He walked for about ten minutes, until they were well out of sight, and then dumped them down into the snow again.

“Get away from her,” Nicole slurred, rolling her head to look around. Her vision was still hazy and unclear, but she could smell Wynonna a little further off, could hear fitful, half-conscious movements as she twitched in the snow. Words took way more effort than they had any right to, and she coughed, her whole chest flaring with pain.

“Easy, now,” the demon murmured, and she felt the end of his walking stick press to her cheek, turning her face. “You are interesting.” He let her head flop back down, then pressed the stick to her shoulder, rolling her onto her back. Agony rippled outward from her cracked ribs. “You’re an absolutely fascinating creature, you know. If I had the time, I’d love to make a study, but... well. I haven’t, and you’re not who I need.”

He kicked her in the ribs again, and this time she didn’t have the energy to scream, the blow forcing a broken, hollow sob from her chest. The pain spiraled up until she thought she would be
sick, and her awareness of him went hazy for what could have been seconds, or maybe whole minutes. Something pinched in her arm, maybe a needle, and he picked her up again, carrying her somewhere else as her vision blurred and spun even more.

“It’s a shame, dog, but there’s nothing for it. You’re the wrong kind of woman for what I need.”

He dropped her into a snowbank, and she listened, numb, as he walked away, his boots crunching through slush and ice.

She lost time. She wasn’t sure how much. When she came awake again she was looking up, but the only way she could tell was that her vision was a pale grey blur instead of a dark grey blur. Snow was drifting lazily down, touching her face in tiny frozen pinpricks. She was shivering, her teeth chattering violently. For a moment she couldn’t remember where her coat was. She took stock of herself, dimly aware that she was her normal size again, and all human—that much at least was obvious from the way her torn shirt was letting frigid air and half-melted snow touch skin instead of fur.

She struggled to take deep breaths, and her nose filled with jasmine perfume.

*Oh. Perfect.*

“Shae,” she whispered, and shut her eyes, blocking out the blur.

“Shh.” A warm, lithe body pressed against hers, impossibly soft and gentle. She was naked other than a small cloth bag hanging from her neck. It was a trick Nicole had seen her use before—the bag would be holding her phone, the cord of the necklace long enough to accommodate her wolf-form once she’d shifted up. Warm lips pressed to her unbruised cheek. It could’ve been a hallucination, but the scent, the sounds... it was all so horribly familiar. “I’m here, Nicole. I’m here.”

“Why?”

“I told you,” she whispered, pressing gentle kisses to Nicole’s cheek, her nose, her temple. “I told you I would come back for you. I’m looking out for you, sweetheart.”

“More like,” Nicole panted, trying to turn her face away. “Lingering around me like a vulture, waiting for me to be beaten down.”

Shae clicked her tongue against her teeth and rested her chin on Nicole’s shoulder. “Nicole, don’t be like that, please. I’m not here to bring you home. Not right now. I’ve called an ambulance. Someone will be here soon to take care of you.”

“They’ll ask questions.”

“To them I’m just some motorist calling in an injured pedestrian on the side of the road,” she murmured. “I’ll be gone before they get here.”

“And where will you go?” she asked.


“I told you I didn’t want to see you again,” Nicole said, gritting her teeth. “Not if you’re still associating with *them.*”
“They want to take care of you just like I do,” Shae murmured, and settled in against Nicole’s side. She wanted nothing more than to push the woman away, but Shae’s body heat was a balm against the ice and cold, so she lay still, the only motion her full-body shivers.

“Like hell.”

Shae laughed softly. “Something like that. Rest now, sweetheart. I’ll see you soon.”

More lost time, but this time there were fluorescent lights, white walls, and the overwhelming, sharp smells of disinfectant and morphine drips and physical and emotional agony. Doctors and nurses came and went, and she felt horribly exposed, lying in a hospital bed in a tank top and boxer shorts, an IV in one hand and the other swathed mummy-style in bandages. She could see where blood had soaked through the dressing and it mystified her. She kept staring at it, trying to understand.

“Nicole.”

Why was there still blood? Shouldn’t it have healed by now?

“Nicole quit touchin’ it, you’re a grown woman, you know better.”

She looked up, bleary-eyed and confused, suddenly aware there was someone else in the room with her. Damn, she really was off her game today.

“Sheriff?”

Nedley set his hand on hers, firm, but gentle. It was a father’s touch, and it made something in her soul hurt.

“Good to see you awake, Haught.”

She tried a grin, though she thought it might have averaged out at a clumsy half-smile. “Yeah. Thanks.”

In the hall she could hear Waverly and two men talking. She realized belatedly it was Dolls and Henry. She looked up right as Nedley turned around, saw her visitors, and sighed.

“Sit tight, Haught. I’ll be right back.”

“Not going anywhere,” she murmured, but smiled at him as he walked away.

Dolls hadn’t so much as opened his mouth when Nedley spoke, leaning his arm against the doorway to block the Deputy Marshal’s sightline into her room. “I know Deputy Earp is still out there, and we’ll continue the search. But we agreed. My officer—”

“Is our only witness,” Dolls finished for him, his voice level, but edged with tension. “I need to question her before her memory becomes more clouded than it is.”

“Well, I’d feel more comfortable with a greenlight from her doctor,” Nedley grumbled. The old man was soft on her. Nicole couldn’t hide a smile.

“Sheriff,” she called. The smile gave way to a frown of concentration—the effort just to raise her voice was incomprehensible, her torso still aching. Why? Surely she should have been better by now. He turned to look at her, leaning against the doorjamb, and she didn’t think she’d ever seen
the old man look so warm, so... afraid. “I’m good. Okay? I wanna help.”

“Well, I’ll...” He sighed, stepping into the room again, turning his hat in his hands to have something to do with them. “I’ll swing by and make sure that cat of yours is fed.”

She chuckled faintly. “She doesn’t really like men.”

“Well, who does?!” he countered, and the laugh she gave then made her ribs twinge.

“Oh, okay,” Dolls said, moving closer to stand beside her bed. His expression was guarded, but there was concern behind his dark eyes, and not just for Wynonna. “So what was the last thing you saw?”

Her gaze slid aside from Dolls. Waverly stood in the doorway, watching them. Her left arm was in what looked like a makeshift sling, but her gaze was gentle and so very, very sad. Nicole wanted to give Waverly reasons to look happy again. She had such a wonderful smile, it wasn’t right she spent so much time lately looking so upset. Even just that morning, she’d looked happy, just for a moment.

“Waverly Earp,” Nicole murmured, remembering that little smile and the tiniest wave. “Smilin’ at me from her front porch.”

Waverly’s expression turned soft, and Dolls gave her an impatient, unamused look.

“And, uh,” she said hastily, looking toward the blanket draped over her legs. “A man. Steppin’ out on the highway. Flaggin’ us down.”

Dolls tapped his pen against a little notebook. “Description?”

She thought of a tall, narrow skeleton of a man, a black walking stick. She thought of glowing red eyes and Wynonna’s fury, her voice ringing out like a rung bell.

He’s a demon!

She grimaced. “No,” she said. Henry and Waverly were there, and they certainly didn’t need to hear her talking like a lunatic. She glanced toward Dolls, then away again. “Just blank space after that.” She considered that, then remembered more—trees and snow and a needle pinching her arm. “Until the woods.”

Dolls frowned, but didn’t press. “So uh, what happened?”

“Somebody was carrying me,” she said, looking at him, willing him to understand how absurd that seemed. She looked lean, but she was dense and strong and heavier than she seemed like she ought to be. “I was blindfolded, I think,” she added, then frowned, thoughtful, trying to lay out the events in sequence in her mind. “Or just really drugged.”

Henry and Dolls were quiet, listening patiently, but she was dimly aware that Waverly was looking away now, her face twisted in pain and fear.

“Next thing I know,” she said, electing to skip over the few shards she recalled, if only to avoid dragging Waverly through the details, “I’m freezing cold, covered in dirt, in a ditch by the side of the road.”

No, that wasn’t true either. She remembered jasmine and bergamot, a warm body pressed to hers, and a honey-sweet voice whispering in her ear. But Dolls didn’t need to know that part. Or maybe
He did. But she didn’t want to tell him. Shae was her problem.

“What about Wynonna?” Dolls pressed, gentle but desperate. “Do you remember anything about Wynonna?”

“No,” she said, struggling not to growl out her own frustration. She’d failed to protect Wynonna. She didn’t need the reminder, not so soon after waking up. “I couldn’t see anything.”

“Sight ain’t your only sense, Miss Haught,” Henry said.

The irony in that single statement was so immense she couldn’t wrap her mind around the full breadth of it. She glanced to Dolls, who pressed his lips together in annoyance. He glanced to Henry, though, and stepped aside, letting the man step up to her bedside. He smelled like horse, Nicole thought, which made no goddamn sense at all.

“What did he smell like?” She sighed, thinking about it, and Henry continued. “Close your eyes. Take a deep breath in. Let the memories come.”

She did, tilting her head back a little, but all she smelled was the hospital. Rage, sorrow, terror. Disinfectant and bandages and metal and soap. Dolls smelled like sweat and stress and government-issue gear. Henry smelled like horse and wool and dust and whiskey, and Waverly, further off, smelled like coffee and oatmeal and painkillers in her blood and raw, horrible tension.

She thought of what she’d smelled before, during the fight, and tried to pick out the details a normal human might have noticed. Details that wouldn’t make her sound utterly crazy.

“Sour,” she said finally. “Musty.”

“Like death?” Dolls prompted.

“No,” she said, and frowned, just a little. “Spoiled fruit. And gasoline.” She paused for a moment, more memory coalescing as she thought about it. “He kicked me,” she breathed.

“What?” Dolls asked, watching her.

“Still couldn’t figure out why my chest was hurtin’,” she whispered. She almost moved to touch her side but the mere thought of moving made pain wash through her, even through a haze of morphine. “He threw me down, and he said...” She looked up at Dolls. “You’re the wrong kind.”

“‘You’re the wrong kind,’” Dolls murmured, pacing and tapping his pen on his notebook. “‘You’re the wrong kind?’ ‘You’re the wrong kind,’ uh... Serial killers. They um, often have a type of victim that they prefer.”

Nicole fought the urge to growl and looked away from him, her gaze falling instead on Waverly, whose expression of fear had turned to something deeper, something horrible and unfathomable.

“And Wynonna?” she said, her voice breaking.

Dolls slowly looked away from Nicole and faced Waverly. “Must be exactly what ‘Jack’ is lookin’ for.”

“Waverly,” Nicole said, searching for something to say. “I’m so sorry.”

“No,” she said, and her voice was trembling, her eyes red and too wet and Nicole could hear the hitch under every breath. “Just. I’m glad you’re okay.”
She turned, moving away so fast Nicole couldn’t say anything else. Henry sighed heavily, glancing at her again as Nicole let out a shuddering, furious breath, and then he left too, following Waverly into the hallway.

Dolls lingered, keeping his notebook at hand.

“Our okay?”

“I’m in a hospital bed for the first time since I was bitten,” she said, though she hastily lowered her voice halfway through. “Of course I’m not okay. What the hell is wrong with me, Dolls?”

“You’re not healing?”

“No,” she said, clenching her unbandaged hand into a fist in the blanket, the IV line creaking. “And unless that red-eyed freak was using silver weapons, that shouldn’t be happening.” His jaw worked, but he said nothing. “Dolls, please,” she said, looking him in the eye. “I ran in blind on this and now Wynonna is—”

“Going to be fine,” he said, cutting in over her. “She’s got all of us on the case, Haught. You worry about yourself.” She opened her mouth to protest and he raised a hand. “Listen. I’ll do what I can.”

“Dolls.”

“I’m not sure yet,” he said, firm. “But when I’ve got more than just some theories, I’ll do what I can to bring you in.”

Nicole heaved a sigh and leaned back into the pillows behind her. Frustration turned her voice hard. “Where were you, Dolls. We needed you.”

He blew out a slow breath. “I was buying time. With my bosses.”

She snapped her gaze to him. “Dolls, you didn’t.”

“Shh,” he said, and flashed a roguish grin. “Relax, Haught. We had a deal. I gave them something else, something that will keep them interested long enough for me to do the rest of my job. Now. Rest up. If I’m right on my guess, this’ll pass, it’ll just take longer than you’re used to.”

“Like silver.”

“More or less, yeah.”

Now, with the room otherwise empty and the hallway in organized chaos, she let herself growl, the sound reminiscent of a motorcycle’s engine turning over.

“I know,” Dolls said. He stepped closer, squeezed her shoulder, then turned toward the door.

“Dolls.”

He looked back.

“Get her back,” she said, her voice low, but deadly serious. “And rip his goddamn head off for me.”

Dolls grinned, the expression somehow both comforting and terrifying. “Haught, when we find him? He’ll wish that’s all we’d done.”
She grinned, fangs bared. He winked, and turned to go, and she let her head tip back against the pillows, more exhausted than she’d felt in a long, long time.

They released her that afternoon, mystified that she was already on the mend, for all that it was taking way longer than she would have liked. She allowed Nedley to take her home, but once he was gone she just sat, sullen and skin crawling with tension, on her sofa. She sat there for what felt like hours, but wasn’t, simmering with frustration and waiting for news.

Cats may not like shifters, but they know when their people are sick, and while no one would accuse the average cat of being big softies, they care. They just have their own ways of showing they care, and do it on their own terms. Calamity Jane didn’t come right away when Nicole got home, other than to briefly investigate, but maybe an hour after she had sat down on the couch with a glass of water and a bottle of painkillers in easy reach, the ginger beast made her way back into the living room, hopped up on Nicole’s coffee table, and stared at her, as if taking stock.

“Hey,” Nicole said, but there was enough weariness and warmth in her voice that the little ball of fluff offered a soft mew of solidarity. Calamity Jane hopped onto the sofa, walked over to sit beside Nicole, and flopped herself down into the space against her thigh, tucking her nose against her paws and settling in as if she had all the patience in the universe. Nicole stroked behind her ears, and the little cat set to purring loudly against her hip, rumbling away like a tiny motor. It was a small thing, but it was enough—the small, warm presence calmed her enough that she could think more clearly.

She unwound the bandage from her hand and frowned at the torn, blistered skin. “Cauterized as it was made,” she muttered, and a thought, a bit of memory, crossed her mind. Wynonna’s voice, low and skittish, whispered into the chilly air of the morgue. *Hellfire hot.*

“A demon,” she muttered, frowning and carefully wrapping her hand back up before she reached for her phone, dialing a familiar number.

A chilly voice answered, flavored with just a touch of a Scandinavian accent. “This had better be good, ja, it is daylight now.”

She breathed a sigh, glad he’d answered. “Mike. Hey.”

“Nicole?” The voice on the other line brightened considerably, turning suddenly warm. “Ahh, Nicole! It has been ages. I was worried about you.”

She snorted, then cringed when it made her chest hurt. “You? Worried about me?”

“You went to Purgatory,” he said, as if that explained everything. Then again, with the kind of Sunday she’d had, maybe it did. “Of course I worried.”

“I’m fine, Mike.”

“You’re lying to me. I can hear it in your voice.”

She pressed her lips together. “Mostly. Mostly, I’m fine.”

“Tell me.”
“Job’s going well. Your contact here, that witch. She was as good as her word. Full moon was fine.”

“Good, good,” he murmured. “I am glad the name of Mikael von Holstein still means something.”

“Well,” she said, drawing out the sound.

Mikael’s sigh crackled in the receiver. “What happened.”

“I’m glad you settled your debt. She uh. She’s dead. I’m not sure how.”

For a long moment he was silent. “Something in Purgatory killed an Iron Witch, and you, hjärtat, are too stupid to listen to me if I tell you that you should leave.” She said nothing, but she didn’t have to. He sighed. “All right. Tell me what it is that hurt you, then.”

“How do you know I was—”

“How do you know I was—”

“I can hear it in your voice, Nicole,” he murmured.

“Predatory instinct?”

“No,” he said, chiding, “It is because I know the sound of your voice when you are well and when you are hiding pain, like that cat of yours. You are hurting.” He was quiet for a moment. “Also yes, a little of the predator, but you are much too far away for me to bite, girl. And besides. Wolf’s blood.” He made a disgusted noise. “Only once, when I was very, very desperate.”

She chuckled, then winced, letting out an audible noise of pain.

“Nicole?” he murmured, concern leaking into his voice.

“Bastard kicked me in the ribs,” she explained, sighing as she tried to settle in and get comfortable against a throw pillow. “Also slashed my hand open. And none of it’s healing.”

Mikael hummed in thought. “Silver? Though if it were silver I imagine you would not have called me. You know how to clean silvered wounds.”

She grimaced at the implication in his tone. “You’re worse than a Jewish grandmother,” she groused, frowning at the bandages. “But no, I don’t think so. Not unless he has silver-tipped nails.”

“Mm. And while the Europeans tried to figure out silver-toed boots in the late 1700s, they didn’t ever quite manage to make it work,” he mused.

“Sometimes I forget how old you are,” she muttered. “Anyway. I actually have a more specific question.”

“Mm?”

“What if it was hellfire?”

Mikael went unnaturally quiet. She had seen him do this once before, his body going absolutely statue-still. It was damn eerie to witness. Humans are alive. They’re always moving, at least a little. Blinking, breathing. Involuntary, unconscious muscle spasms. But men like Mikael weren’t alive. Sure, they were only a couple steps removed, and usually you had to really be looking to notice that he was entirely too pale, or that he never seemed to look any older, or that when he spoke in Swedish his grammar was about three centuries too old. Now, without being able to see him, he was so still and quiet she actually pulled her phone from her ear to make sure the call
hadn’t dropped.

“Hellfire, you said?”

“Yeah,” she said, getting concerned. “Is that... does that matter?”

“Yes,” he said, then sighed. “I forget you know so little of the old myths.”

“I know, I know,” she said, rubbing her fingers over her forehead, wincing when she touched the tape holding closed the cut over her eye. “Sh– She said she’d tell me, but.”

“But you left before she taught you. I know.”

She blew out a breath. “So, tell me. Why does hellfire matter?”

He inhaled, thinking, then made a faint noise like he had decided on something. “You must understand, the oldest werewolves were not moon-cursed, slobbering creatures.”

“That’s rude. I don’t slobber.”

“Hush, hjärtat. Many of the old wolves were wisemen, like the Celtic Druids, who wore wolfskin belts or wolf-pelt cloaks to adopt the strength, ferocity, and stamina of the wolf to serve some singular purpose. Many of them took it up in order to protect their clan, their tribe.”

“Like superheroes,” Nicole mused. “Hell, or a badge. Take up the mantle and protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

“Mm,” Mikael said. “The curse came later, and of course, like with any myth, there are a hundred explanations for why. A popular theory is hubris, of course. Ambition and power-lust corrupting once good and wise men.”

“Okay, so why hellfire?”

“Because,” he said, his tone patient, even gentle. “Werewolves are, at least in some deep, core way, aligned with good.”

He said it like it was simple. Like it was obvious. But it struck her like a bullet, the words somehow profound. It curled around her throat like fingers and squeezed. She choked on it, her voice coming out strangled, pained.

“What?”

Mikael’s laugh was soft, musical. “Nicole. You are the one who calls it your curse. But it is so much more than that.”

“Then... then hellfire hurts, and stops me from healing, because...”

“Because you are not of hell. It is at direct conflict with your nature.”

She considered that for a long moment, quiet. She stared at her bandaged hand, curling her fingers absently.

“Okay. Okay, that all makes sense. But then why is silver a problem?”

He made a low, thoughtful noise. “Things are so rarely black and white. Even among our community, few can agree. But the explanation I prefer is that while there is still something
fundamentally good in the nature of werewolves, they are also cursed. The Druids knew no harm under the moon, after all. Something did change, even if no one can agree on precisely what. So, since there is also something fundamentally tainted in the nature of werewolves, silver, an alchemical purifier, burns.”

She tilted her head back against her sofa and blew out a breath. “Wow.”

“You think you were attacked with hellfire?”

She frowned at the ceiling. Dolls said he had theories, and Wynonna had known the man in black was some kind of demon. It stood to reason that if Wynonna knew, it was something Dolls would know also. If he knew any of what Mikael had just told her, he probably had much more than theories. So he was hiding things from her, probably, but that wasn’t exactly news.

“Yeah,” she said finally, thinking of red eyes and surgery incisions cauterized as they were made. “Yeah I think I was.”

“And you will not leave Purgatory.”

She frowned. It was tempting. God, was it ever tempting. To just leave, to get away from whatever hellspawn wandered this crazy town. To run where Shae couldn’t find her again. To leave Dolls and Wynonna to their insane Black Badge mission.

Black Badge. Which Waverly was helping with.

Waverly.

Did she know? Did anyone else know?

“I can’t,” she breathed. “There are people here, Mike. Good people. People who have no idea their town has honest to god demons wandering around in it cutting up co-eds and pulling out their organs.”

“You lost me, hjärtat.”

“I need to know who else is aware of this,” she said, half for his benefit and half for her own. “There are so many people here who have no idea.”

“They can’t know,” Mikael reminded her, his tone gentle.

“No,” she agreed. “No, they can’t. But that doesn’t mean they have to live their lives under a spectre of death with no one standing between them and Hell itself.”

Mikael was quiet for a moment, and then he chuckled. “Now you sound like my Nicole. Just promise me you will rest until the hellfire is turned to smoke? Once it has faded, you will heal normally.”

“No promises,” she muttered, and he sighed heavily, resigned. She grumbled to herself, wordless, and then tapped her unwounded hand on her leg, thinking aloud. “My first step is to figure out who’s in the know.”

“Be careful,” Mikael warned her. “Would not do to tip your hand. Subtlety has never been your best suit.”

“No, it hasn’t,” she said, and sighed. “Wish you were here.”
“Why, so you could lose all your salary to me at poker?”

She laughed, then groaned. “Ow.”

He chuckled, but when he spoke, he sounded concerned. “Please be careful.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“Good hunting,” he said, his voice shifting to a lethal purr.

She grinned, and Calamity Jane made a faint grumbling noise when she bared her fangs.

“You too, Mikael.”

That evening Nedley came back from happy hour at Shorty’s and frowned so deeply Nicole could feel it even before she looked up from her computer screen.

“Haught. The hell are you doing back here already.”

She gave him a tired smile. “I’m feeling better, Sheriff, really.”

“You cracked ribs, Haught. I saw the x-rays.”

She blinked, then waved a hand, though she sat back gingerly, to show him she was being careful. “No, uh, no, it was just some minor fracturing. It’s fine. Listen, Sheriff, I’ll stay on desk duty, I just couldn’t sit in a bed for one more hour.”

She watched her, still frowning, his eyes narrowed to slits. “Fine, fine. Just tell me you’re not workin’ on that case.”

“No, sir, just writing up a report on the abduction.”

“You left hospital-ordered bed rest for paperwork?” he asked, then shook his head. “All right, all right, fine. You aren’t gonna listen to me. But if I hear so much as a peep from you about the pain, I’m taking you back to your damn house and barring the door.”

She grinned. “Understood, sir.”

He heaved a sigh and shook his head, but headed for his office. “Good.”
Chapter 9

Nicole went home when Nedley forced her out the front door. She slept on the couch, where she wouldn’t have room to roll around, and in the morning she took her time, very gingerly putting some breakfast together and taking a shower. She still felt heavy and foggy with the effects of the hellfire, but her ribs were considerably better, and when she unwrapped her hand, it was healed enough to wrap it in some gauze and call it good. Even the scratch over her eye was nearly invisible, when she squinted at herself in the mirror. Very slowly, very carefully, she set herself to the task of braiding her hair.

When she got back to work in the morning, she printed out a draft of her report and settled into her chair, moving like a woman four times her age. Nedley wasn’t in yet, and the room was fairly empty, until Wynonna and Dolls’ voices filled the space. She wouldn’t have been able to ignore it even if she’d tried, though to be fair she wasn’t really trying.

“All you did was watch,” Wynonna snapped at him.

“I couldn’t burst in. It would’ve made you look even worse.”

Wynonna’s voice trembled, sounding more vulnerable and small than Nicole had ever heard her.

“You’re supposed to be my goddamned friend.”

“Yeah?” Dolls said, pivoting to look at her. “I’m your boss.”

“You– You know what I mean!”

“We need to be careful, all right? B–” Dolls sighed and headed into the BBD’s office. They left the door open, and Nicole could still hear them as clearly as if they were standing in the room. “You’re not even a real deputy, Earp, come on!”

Nicole frowned, staring at her computer screen without seeing anything on it.

“No!” Wynonna countered, seething, “I’m just the one with the big-ass gun who sends the fiends of Hell to their deaths.”

Nicole dropped the paper in her hands and the pages scattered. She stared in the direction of Dolls’ offices, her eyes gone very big and very round. Wynonna is what?

“Well technically it’s not the gun that kills them, it’s—”

“Oh my god,” she said, her voice shaking. “You stupid government lackey. You left me in there with a bureaucratic sadist, and I was alone, and scared.”

Something protective and furious coiled tight in Nicole’s chest. That Wynonna was capable of feeling either of those things was terrifying. That she was admitting to it was heart-wrenching. She carefully lowered herself to the floor on one knee and started gathering up the pages of her report, wrangling down the wolf’s instincts. Wynonna is like us, she thought at it, as loudly as she could. She’s a hunter and she doesn’t need a pack. Not until she asks for one.

Their conversation dropped to a softer level, and she couldn’t make out the words for a minute or two, until Wynonna paused in BBD’s doorway.
“Perfect,” she snapped. “Have fun with your girlfriend.”

Nicole flinched at the venom in her voice and banged her head against the underside of her desk, cursing. There was a jangle of leather and metal and then footsteps prowling closer.

“Jesus,” Wynonna snapped, as Nicole emerged from under her desk with her hands raised, papers in one of them. She was holding her gun, her hand shaking. “I could’ve shot you, you idiot.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Nicole said, and dropped the papers on her chair, setting both hands on her desk to stand.

“You–!” She seethed. “You are ruining my dramatic exit,” she whispered, furious, but she moved closer and grabbed Nicole under the shoulders, lifting her to her feet.

“I’ll wingman you, Earp. Next time, I promise.”

“Whatever. I suppose you heard that too.”

Nicole set a hand to her side, wincing, and kept her voice low, full of a secondary message. A promise.

“Heard what?”

Wynonna frowned at her for a moment, doubt and suspicion chasing each other across her expression before she saw whatever she was looking for in Nicole’s eyes, and softened, just slightly. She blew out a breath. “Right. Okay.”

“It’s good to see you in one piece.”

Wynonna snorted. “Save the social play-nice, Haught.”

“I am,” Nicole said, meeting Wynonna eye for eye. “I mean it.”

Wynonna mirrored her gaze, scanning again, looking for anything less than real. “I...” She holstered her gun and moved toward the door. “I can’t deal with this right now. Just. Glad you’re not dead.”

She stalked out the front door, nearly bumping into Nedley as he arrived, and the sheriff turned to watch Wynonna go.

“Haught!” he said, frowning when he turned around again and saw her. “I swear.”

“About done with the report,” she explained, showing him the papers. “I’ll drop it off in an hour or so?”

He sighed, but waved a hand and headed for his office. “Fine.”

She did, and after maybe another half hour, while other officers milled about, Nedley got up and stalked to his door.

“Haught!”

She flinched. Moment of truth.

The report was a gamble, and as Mikael had pointed out, subtlety really wasn’t her game.
She got up, and when she walked up to him he pointed at the chair across from his desk, holding the report in one hand. She sat. She moved almost normally as she did it, her body only a little sore now, and Nedley’s gaze tracked her before falling back to the page in front of him.

“Unnatural, otherworldly, potential Jack the Ripper,” he read off, walking toward his chair, his voice low and irritated. He looked at her, frowning. “Really, Nicole? I like a joke as much as the next guy, but.” He wrung the report in his hands and she flinched at the sound, watching the paper crumple and crease. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Look, it– it wasn’t easy to write any of that down,” she said, eyeing him, playing the part of a beleaguered officer. That part, at least, was easy, solely for being based so much in truth. “But it is what I experienced. I swear.”

He heaved a sigh and leaned his hands on the desk, lowering his voice. “Look. I know you’ve had a hell of a time. You wanna take a day or two, I understand.”

“This isn’t about getting kidnapped,” she said, immediately. “Okay? It’s not just that. I mean Sheriff, come on.” She steeled her nerves and readied her trump card. Whatever came next, it would tell her a lot about Sheriff Randy Nedley and what part he had to play in all this. “You gotta admit, this– this place is... weird.”

“It’s a small town, Nicole,” he murmured. “It’s quirky. It’s called Purgatory, for chrissakes. Look.” He sat down again, and a knot of anxiety grew and tightened in her chest. Was he that deep in denial about his town? Or worse, was he in on it, and covering it up? She thought she might have been able to tell, if he was from her side of the street, but if she couldn’t... Or worse, maybe he wasn’t, but was being paid off? “If you think it’s anything more than that, you might as well put in your resignation.”

“I don’t want to resign! I... I like it here.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she found that the answer was more true than she’d even realized. She liked this weird town—she liked its streets, its shops, its suburbs, its farms. She liked the regulars at Shorty’s and the staff at the diner and her fellow police officers. She liked Nedley and his family, she liked the Earps, hell, even Henry and Dolls.

And when it came down to it, it was the fact that she liked Purgatory so much that made the idea that Nedley was keeping something this big in his pocket so scary.

He watched her steadily, his face unreadable. She didn’t smell fear, or anger, and his heartbeat was normal, calm. Or as calm as anyone can be when chastising one of their best employees for trying to explain an abduction as an under-the-bed monster.

“Good,” he said.

She looked away, seething. She pushed down the nagging fear that he knew far, far more than he was letting on until she could trust her voice. “I’ll redo the report,” she said, and got up from her chair.

He let her get all the way to the doorway before he slapped a folder down on his desk, clearly moving on, and called out, “Door.”

Nicole turned back, almost growling, and shut the door behind her.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” she snapped, mostly in the direction of Sarah, an older woman sitting at the counter for the morning.
“We’ll miss you,” Sarah said, with a warm, gentle frown. “But you rest up, Nicole.”

The sincerity of it made her pause. She sighed, offering Sarah a more genuine smile as she gathered up her coat and her hat. “Thanks.”

“You be good,” she said, as Nicole headed for the door.

It was a little after noon, the air cold and biting. She barely noticed it, fully prepared to stalk all the way home and leave her cruiser in the parking lot, just to be contrary, but when she hit the sidewalk and turned, she nearly bumped into Waverly.

“Whoa!” she said, with a wide grin. “Whoa, where’s the holdup?” Nicole stared at her. Why was she here? Now? Waverly held her hands up in a robber’s victim’s pose. “Yeah, ‘cause... you’re a cop?”

Nicole blinked. “Right,” she said, and set a hand on Waverly’s elbow, tugging her away from the door. “Sorry. Um. Can we talk?”

She thought of Wynonna shouting that morning about sending fiends back to Hell and wondered, for the second time, if Waverly knew anything about what her sister was really doing in Dolls’ company.

“Y-yeah,” Waverly said, walking along beside her. Nicole slowed her steps to match Waverly’s. “Yeah, god. We’re totally overdue.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, and stopped when they’d reached the corner of the station building. She looked around for witnesses. “I’m not... I’m not crazy, right?” She wrung her hands together, trying to think of how to say what she meant without saying what she meant. “There’s something going on here.”

“No,” Waverly said, her tone gentle. “No. You’re not crazy.”

“Oh my god, I hope not!” Waverly protested, horrified. Her heartrate jumped again. “No, uh... I kind of only just discovered it.”

Nicole frowned. Was Wynonna keeping that many secrets, even from Waverly?

“For a moment Nicole just frowned at her. “Why.”

“Because,” she said, her gaze flicking down for a moment. “It’s different for me, right? And, y’know, it’s... it’s really personal.”

“Uh,” Nicole said, glancing around and leading Waverly across the street. There wasn’t anyone coming, but she felt antsy just standing in one spot. “But it’s personal for everybody, right? I mean, they must know? People must...” She trailed off, gesturing and then tucking her thumbs into her belt to keep her hands from visibly shaking. “Whisper about it?”

“Oh my god, I hope not!” Waverly protested, horrified. Her heart rate jumped again. “No, uh... I kind of only just discovered it.”

Nicole frowned. Was Wynonna keeping that many secrets, even from Waverly?

“When I met you,” she added, looking away.
Scratch that. Panic snarled through Nicole’s chest like a living thing. She’d only learned of it when Nicole arrived? How? Nicole frantically thought through the conversation in the bar. She didn’t remember any partial shifting or audible growling, but maybe she’d forgotten?

“Me?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and Nicole caught her looking over at her, then away.

“Uh,” she muttered, searching for something to say.

“You’re kinda special.”

“Oh, okay, uh...” God she wished she were a better liar. “Maybe I’m a bit more open-minded, but it’s not like I have some mystical gift or something.”

Well, if Mikael was to be believed, maybe that was debatable. But that wasn’t the issue here.

“Oh! No, I get it.” Waverly turned to face her on the sidewalk, beaming. “You’re a lesbian, not a unicorn, right?”

Hold on. A unicorn?

“What?”

Waverly blinked. “What?”

She stared, too stunned to really make sense of any of it. “You’re making fun of me.” And riling up my wolf in the process, too, she thought, trying to slow her pulse down by sheer force of will.

“No!” Waverly said, aghast. “Sorry, don’t you... want to talk?”

“I want the truth.” None of this made any goddamn sense. She shouldered past Waverly and headed down the sidewalk. Somewhere behind her, she heard Waverly’s voice, soft and confused.

“Huh! I think I’d do better with the unicorn.”

She headed down the road to the parking lot and threw herself into her cruiser without really being aware of what she was doing.

You’re not in a city anymore, Haught, Dolls had said. What you do safely isn’t really my concern.

She wanted to go for a run. And by god, this time, she was going to do it.

The Pine Barrens was a bit of a drive, but for what she wanted, that was just fine. It was dusk when she arrived, and she stuck to the edges of the woods, but parked her car out of sight from the main roads. It was horrendously cold, what with it being the tail end of November, and there was part of her that was all too aware of how crazy she looked, standing in the snow beside her car at sunset, stripping out of her uniform. She pushed her clothes and boots and hat into the passenger seat and hid the ignition key under a floor mat.

For a moment, she just stood there, ankle-deep in snow, feeling the biting wind chewing at her bare skin, closing her eyes against the drifts and icy gusts. She closed the car door and stepped back, her body twisting and bending under the immense pressure of transformation as she let it spread through her. It was exhilarating and terrifying, like holding your fingers too close to a flame, aware
that a slight change of wind would make it burn, that you were on the knife’s edge. In danger, yet safe. A contradiction incarnate.

Her body rippled, limbs contorting and stretching as she grew, doubling in mass. She slammed her hands down into the snow just as they crossed the line from *hands* to *paws*, her nails dragging furrows into the frozen ground.

She threw back her head and *howled*, the sound primal and ancient. Birds took to the air in small clouds of wings and drifting feathers and in the distance she could hear deer, or maybe elk, starting from their dens, bolting for better cover.

God, it felt so good.

She inhaled and every breath filled her with clear, cold forest air. She could smell everything. The gasoline and oil in her cruiser’s engine. The faint afterthought of snow melting under hot rubber. Every rabbit, deer, and bird in a quarter mile. A hiker’s campsite, now abandoned but still carrying scents from this morning.

With a roar of joy and challenge she threw herself forward into the woods away from her car, moving at a loping, easy pace. After maybe half a mile she put on more speed, racing through the trees, dodging trunks and leaping fallen logs in jumps that would’ve made steeplechasers jealous. She felt *alive* in a way that she hadn’t in months. Years, maybe. She was fast, and powerful, and nothing in this forest could stop her.

She ran, and let the wolf guide her feet. With it watching for danger, she let her mind, her human mind, wander. Even thinking of the conversation with Waverly couldn’t dampen her spirits now, not when she felt so *free*, and she went back over it in her mind as she raced against the very wind itself. She knew what *she* had been talking about, and everything Waverly had said *seemed* to fit. But what if she looked at it again, different. What if Waverly hadn’t been talking about the supernatural? Nicole had never brought it up, now that she thought about it more closely. She’d never said anything specific. By design, but if Waverly hadn’t been expecting it, maybe she wouldn’t have guessed it on her own.

*I’m not crazy, right? There’s something going on here.*

No, you’re not crazy. Well, I’m not sure I’m really ready to... get into it.

Even the wolf got interested then, and she almost hit a tree. As it was, she tripped over her own paws, tumbling into a disorganized, cacophonous somersault that scattered snow and fallen, now broken branches in every direction. She came up sitting vaguely like a dog, shaking snow from her head and flicking her ears to get snowmelt out of them.

Jesus, had Waverly been talking about... about *them*? That changed *everything*.

A bark of challenge cut through her thoughts and she spun, growling, looking for the intruder.

A wolf stood in the snow a few dozen yards away, under the shadow of a tree. Its hackles were up, its fangs bared, ears pinned in open defiance.

Nicole growled back, but then paused and looked around. It hadn’t occurred to her that she might be on someone else’s territory. She stood up in a loose crouch, tilting her head to the side.

The wolf stiffened, clearly startled that *conversation* was on the table, but advanced a pace, ears pricked forward.
Nicole was not exactly fluent with speaking to wolves, but there was something intelligent in its eyes, something almost human. She frowned, looking around at the woods, asking questions with her mouth, her ears, her tail. The wolf approached to within a dozen paces, then stopped, watching her.

The creature’s form shimmered, sliding, somehow reminding Nicole of soup pushed around a bowl with a spoon. In the span of a few breaths, the wolf was gone, and where it had been standing was an enormous brown bear, its eyes shrewd and its body of an equal size with Nicole.

She did not go so far as to bare her throat to the creature, but she dipped her head, pressing her chin to the snow and looking up at the other shifter.

The bear grunted, seemingly satisfied, and sat back on its haunches, eyeing Nicole with wary interest. She backed up a few steps, and the bear sat, patient, watching.

She thought that maybe she had heard of this before. Shae had spoken of the old Native shapechangers in reverent, whispered tones. If she had learned anything about them, it was that one did not speak of them, and especially not their names, without reprisal. But if that was what the creature before her was... it was very, very far from home.

Nicole huffed out a breath and withdrew, watching the shifter until she was well out of sight. A crow followed her out of the woods, but she went further, away from the Pine Barrens and her cruiser. At the edge of the woods, the crow stopped following her, and she found a good spot to hunker down for the night, sheltered beneath some boulders and a handful of fallen trees that kept the worst of the winds off her.

It wasn’t the first time she’d slept out in the wild as a wolf, and she figured it wouldn’t be the last. But, it was certainly more comfortable than the last time.

It had been raining then. Mikael had complained that she smelled like wet dog for days.

In the morning she sulked back to her car. She changed back with her eyes on the woods and slipped into her cold clothes, shivering a little in them until she could get the heat running. She didn’t stop watching the woods until she was on her way back to the road, and even then, she checked her rear-view mirror for crows a few dozen times.
Posting this a bit earlier than usual cuz I’ve got a D&D game to run tonight. BUT~ enjoy, y’all. I cannot tell you how amped I’ve been to get to this part of season 1.

The drive back to town was almost uneventful.

Keyword: almost.

Nicole was at the town limits when she noticed a small form, a pedestrian, walking with purpose away from town. There was something almost familiar about them, but she cut across an embankment and turned around to catch up.

And found one Waverly Earp, bundled up in a thick coat and positively sulking as she walked.

Excitement coiled in her chest. Maybe they could talk. Make things right. She still felt good, incredibly good, full of the forest and the freedom of the wolf. Even with the new moon coming, she felt positively alive with it.

She rolled up slowly alongside Waverly and rolled her window down.

“Waverly?” she called, trying not to smile. “Waverly, what are you doin’.”

“Being alone,” Waverly called back, her expression sour, even petulant. “I wanna be alone!”

“All right,” Nicole allowed, and looked around. “Well, you’ve reached the edge of town, so, any further out and you’re gonna freeze to death.” She looked out again, watching Waverly’s face as best she could. “Just get in the car.”

“No thank you,” Waverly said. Her voice was almost musical as she said it, and Nicole felt warm, even despite it being a rejection. She watched the girl walk, considering her options. Waverly was talking big, but she had her arms crossed tight across her chest to keep the warmth in, and was shivering.

“I’ve got a Taser,” Nicole advised her, all bright optimism and good humor. “Don’t you make me use it.”

Waverly slowed to a stop and turned, leveling her with a flat, utterly frustrated frown.

Nicole smiled up at her, impish and unrepentant.

Waverly rolled her eyes, but moved around to the passenger side, muttering to herself about the nerve and I cannot believe. Nicole pretended she couldn’t hear and unlocked the doors so that Waverly could get in, leaning over to turn up the heat toward the passenger side. Once Waverly had gotten in, closed the door, and spitefully fastened her seatbelt, Nicole turned the car around. She drove a little ways, thoughtful, then slowed, pulling over to the side of the road.

Waverly shot her a dubious look.
“I’d like to talk,” Nicole explained, and leaned back in her seat, turning off the engine. “But if you decide you’re done, you can get out and walk, any time, no questions. I’m not trying to trap you.”

Waverly let out a slow, forcedly even breath. She unbuckled her belt again, which Nicole tried not to take as a threat. “All right.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, inhaling slowly and gathering her nerves. “So, I’ll start: I’m sorry, for being such an asshole before.”

“First you wanna talk,” Waverly noted, frowning at the windshield. “Then you don’t wanna talk, then you tell me to talk, so I talk—”

“Okay, well,” Nicole grinned a little, high on the feeling of having been right. “Maybe we should figure out what exactly it is we’re talking about.”

“Gus is selling Shorty’s,” Waverly blurted out next. “She acts like she won’t, but she is. And everything’s changing around me, but it’s all too fast, you know?” She turned slightly, looking at Nicole. She almost spoke, but Waverly was still going, and she bit her lip, waiting. “And it’s like, nobody ever asks me if I’m okay with it! It’s like, could everybody just stand still for one frickin’ minute?”

She sighed, her heart audibly pounding, and Nicole found herself face to face with the deep, impossible well of things that Waverly had on her plate. And she hadn’t even mentioned the supernatural stuff. God, no wonder she was upset.

“Hey,” she said, gentle, and after a moment of hesitation, reached out and set her hand on Waverly’s arm. “It’s gonna be okay.” Waverly stared at her, then looked away, and Nicole reluctantly pulled her hand back.

“I just screamed at you,” Waverly reminded her. “You shouldn’t be nice to me.”

Nicole scoffed. If she ever figured out who made Waverly feel like being upset and overwhelmed meant she didn’t deserve to be treated with respect or with care, she’d personally throttle them. “You know, I think you’ve just been dating too many shithheads.”

Waverly’s voice was like a whipcrack, sudden and absolute.

“We’re not dating.”

“I know,” she said, startled by the sharpness of it. “God, Waverly, I would never ask you to be someone you’re not.”

“Good. Just don’t ask me to be anyone at all.”

Nicole frowned. “Fine.”

“Fine.”

Nicole glanced at her, then sighed and looked forward again. Maybe she’d been wrong after all. Or maybe she’d messed things up irreparably the day before. The wolf whined somewhere in her chest and she tried not to think about it. If she did, she might actually whine aloud, and that would just be embarrassing.

“Well,” Waverly said a moment later, cautious. “Maybe just friends.”
Nicole glanced at her. “Yeah,” she said, feeling heavy again, shackled under the weight of three words. “Sure, Waverly. Whatever you want.” She leaned forward and started the car again, heading back toward town. She had given Waverly the freedom to leave the car, but there was a certain irony in the idea that in the end she was the one who was trapped.

She dropped Waverly off at Shorty’s for her shift, then headed for the station. She heard Dolls rustling around in the kitchen, but elected to ignore him, focusing on her work.

Sort of.

“You’re sulking, honey.”

Nicole looked up, frowning at Sarah. She was sitting at the counter in her uniform and a knit sweater, and was watching Nicole with a patient, knowing look on her face.

“No ma’am, I’m fine.”

Sarah pressed her lips together. “Are you?”

Nicole considered pressing the lie, then sighed. “Physically? Yes.”

“I wasn’t asking about physically, hon.” Sarah smiled. “What’s on your mind.”

Nicole sighed and leaned her chin in one hand. “Relationship trouble, I guess.”

“I didn’t realize you were dating,” Sarah said, eyebrows rising.

“Yeah,” Nicole said, sour. “That’s sort of the trouble part.”

Sarah laughed, but it was honest, without malice, and Nicole couldn’t help chuckling a little too.

“Oh Nicole,” Sarah said, shaking her head. “It’ll work out. You’ll see.”

Nicole sighed. “I dunno. Sh— this. Um. This person I’m interested in. They’re sort of going through a lot. They’ve got family in town and work is sorta crazy and...”

Sarah gave her a cryptically knowing smile and nodded. “I see.”

She felt heat crawling up her neck. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh hon,” Sarah said, and laughed again. “Love always, always is.”

After Nedley and Dolls left—together, which made Nicole sit up and watch, bewildered, because she thought they didn’t really get along—she took over at the counter for Sarah, going over department vehicle reports. Sarah leaned her elbows on the other edge, going over some notes with her for a minute on her way off shift.

Nicole smelled Waverly coming maybe ten seconds before the younger Earp rounded the corner, back in her outfit from this morning, a thick wool sweater and scarf and a big blue down coat. She lingered behind Sarah for a moment, waiting. Sarah glanced over her shoulder, noted the new arrival, gave Nicole an absolutely triumphant smile, and promptly left, pulling her keys from her pocket as she went.

That was odd, Nicole thought, but she looked up when Waverly leaned against the front of the
counter, her eyes skittering between Nicole and the door of Nedley’s office.

“Hey,” she said. “Nedley out for dinner?”

Nicole smirked and rolled her eyes. “You mean happy hour at Shorty’s?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, her gaze flicking to the sheriff’s door and back again. Her heart was pounding, and Nicole frowned at her, trying to work out why she was so jumpy.

“Same time every day,” she said, “Kinda like clockwork.” She opened her mouth to ask how Waverly could possibly not know that, since she worked there, but just then Waverly pushed through the swinging door and strode into Nedley’s office, and Nicole turned, startled. “Hey—” She heard Waverly set her purse on the sheriff’s desk, and started to get up. “Wave’!”

Waverly shrugged off her coat and tucked it into a corner, closing the blinds one by one as Nicole moved to the doorway, watching in confusion. “Hey!” she protested.

Waverly got to the third set of blinds, closed them, and then pushed Nicole over to the side, out of the doorway, with a soft “Excuse me.”

“What is your problem?” Nicole demanded, though she moved where Waverly put her, not really interested in a shoving match. “I don’t understand why you—”

The door clicked shut and with barely a breath between one moment and the next, Waverly threw herself at Nicole, one warm hand around the back of her neck, the other grasping at the collar of her shirt. Her aim was good, though who the hell practiced for this sort of thing, and her lips hit Nicole’s mid-word.

Nicole’s attention narrowed to a fraction of its normal breadth and scale. All she could think about was that Waverly was here, was kissing her, was grabbing at her like she were a life vest and all the ocean surrounded them. She curled a hand around Waverly’s wrist but she didn’t have the focus or strength of will to actually push her off. She wasn’t even aware of the wolf anymore, beyond the joy and animalistic hunger of how desperately she wanted, how much she longed to just accept this and take without question, without wondering why or how or how long. Waverly’s kiss was hard, uncoordinated. She kissed like she expected Nicole to return it in kind, and she almost wanted to laugh with the clarity of it. Waverly kissed her like she would a man.

Waverly pressed herself against Nicole and she stumbled back under the force of it. It was a primal thing, tidal in its inevitability and strength, and Nicole kept moving until she hit the couch cushion and collapsed onto it, with Waverly riding her all the way down. Nicole slid her hands down to a relatively safe spot, Waverly’s ribs, and while she wanted nothing more than to let Waverly keep kissing her, let her work out the differences between men and women with a lot more practice, she pressed up against her, pushing gently until she could lever Waverly off her. “Hold on,” she mumbled, almost laughing against Waverly’s mouth, and she tried to be careful, searching for the balance of how much strength she needed to push Waverly away without hurting her in the process.

Nicole pushed until Waverly pulled away, hurt and fear of rejection flashing across her face. Nicole panted for breath, fighting down the whine of want that was curling in her mouth. “What happened to friends?” she breathed.

Waverly pulled back entirely, until she was sitting over one of Nicole’s knees.

“You know what I’ve always wanted?” she asked, her gaze intense, her body trembling with a
tangible, physical need that just made Nicole want her even more.

“What?” Nicole asked, a little wary, but she pushed herself up to rest on her elbows.

“To parachute out of a plane at fifteen thousand feet,” she said, and Nicole blinked at her. “Yeah. To swim, far, far out into the ocean so that I can’t see the bottom anymore. To eat geoduck.”

Nicole frowned, thinking. “Isn’t that the one that kinda looks like a p—”

“Yeah it is,” Waverly said, immediately. Nicole nodded, bewildered, trying to piece together how this was relevant to why they were lying on the couch in her boss’ office with all the blinds closed. “Point is,” Waverly said, as if she had also realized how scattered she sounded, “I’ve always wanted to do things that scared me. But. Well. It’s not so easy to be brazen, when...” She looked down, noticing that her hand was resting on Nicole’s thigh. She pulled it back, skittish, and Nicole twitched at the loss of it, letting out a breath. “When the thing that you want, that— that scares you to death, is sitting. Right in front of you.”

She blinked, understanding dawning finally, and she smiled, almost a little sad.

“I scare you?”

“Yes,” Waverly said, and smiled, so soft and aching that Nicole wanted to reach out and touch her, just for the sake of it. “Yes, you do. Because... I don’t wanna be friends.”

Waverly swallowed, hard, and now her own heartbeat was the one going way too fast.

“When I think about what I wanna do most in this world,” Waverly said, and her lips twisted in a wry, almost sardonic smile. “It’s you.”

Nicole grinned, and for the first time since Waverly had gotten into her car she felt light, like she could walk on clouds if only someone gave her a ladder.

“Oh god,” Waverly said, and closed her eyes. “That sounded so much more romantic in my head.” Nicole bit down a chuckle, forced herself to stay quiet and patient, even though the last thing she wanted to do was be patient. Waverly shook her head and rubbed her thumb over her fingers. She was tense, shaking, an exposed nerve waiting for pain. “Just uh. Jump in, any time, Nicole. Because I really, really don’t know how to do this.”

“Oh sure you do,” Nicole said, and in any other circumstance, she might have been embarrassed by how low and gravelly her voice had gone.

“Maybe I should just... stop talking,” Waverly said.

“See?” she murmured. She took up the ends of Waverly’s scarf, slowly winding it around her hands to pull her closer. “You’re gettin’ better at this already.”

Waverly braced a hand against the sofa’s arm behind Nicole’s head, pulling up short. Nicole leaned forward, trying to close the last few inches, but Waverly licked her lips and watched Nicole’s face. She smelled like the bar, she smelled like soft wool, she smelled like Waverly.

“Maybe you should stop talking too.”

Well with a line like that, how could she fail to deliver?

“Well maybe you should make me,” Nicole said, and grinned, bright and so happy she felt like
she’d explode, and maybe just a little smug.

Waverly’s gaze flicked down, to Nicole’s lips, then up again, and she surged forward, pressing her mouth to Nicole’s. It was gentler this time, softer. Before had been a frantic, harried wartime effort, a planned but chaotic assault, backed by timing and coordination and maybe even an exit strategy. This, though. This wasn’t Waverly the planner. This was just Waverly, meeting her on an even field with an unknown result.

Nicole sat up, pushing toward Waverly with a hand braced behind her. Waverly moved with her, more than ready to let Nicole take over, let her lead, and Nicole was all too happy to oblige her. She lay Waverly down against the sofa, pressing quick, fluttering kisses to her mouth as she shifted, settled, found a position that worked. She slid a hand down a strong, lean thigh to hitch Waverly’s leg over her hip, giving them a little more room on the narrow sofa, and Waverly inhaled sharply, immediately tucking herself around Nicole like she was made to fit there, her knee pressed against Nicole’s waist.

It was overwhelming, kissing Waverly, and utterly intoxicating. She wanted—wanted so much and so desperately and with such a heat it was almost scary to face it head-on—but she kept her kisses quick, soft. She couldn’t catch her breath but she focused on the feeling of Waverly’s mouth under hers. She never wanted to forget this. Waverly tasted like mint, and Nicole had the distant, endearing thought that she really had come prepared for this. She could feel Waverly’s hand at the back of her head, then touching, fever-hot and impossibly soft, against the back of Nicole’s neck, nails tracing along her skin under the collar of her uniform.

She slid a hand up Waverly’s thigh again, over her hip to her lower back, her fingers curling into wool and pressing Waverly closer to her, holding her tight against her body. By the soft, warm sound Waverly made, she didn’t mind, and Nicole reached up, touching her jaw, her chin, wanting, maybe needing, to confirm that this was real, that Waverly was actually here.

Waverly broke from her for a moment, as Nicole touched her, and she could feel Waverly’s gaze like a physical weight as she set a finger under Waverly’s chin and turned her face up again for another kiss.

Light fingers rested against the back of her head, curling into her braid, and she huffed out a sigh. She wanted Waverly’s fingers combing through her hair, wanted to let her touch and explore with all the time in the world.

But she was still at work, and they were still on the sheriff’s couch. She stayed where she was as long as she could, until a clock chimed somewhere in the building, and she sighed, resting her forehead against Waverly’s.

“I uh,” Waverly said, breathless and flushed and so alive with energy it made Nicole want to kiss her again. Not to mention the fact that by the look of her, eyes wide and dark and smelling of... well. Nicole was reasonably sure she would’ve been all too happy to stay right where she was for another hour. “I guess I should go, huh.”

Nicole made a soft, disgruntled noise that rumbled in her chest. “Don’t want you to.” Waverly smiled as bright as the sun and ran a finger down Nicole’s cheek to her jaw. “But... yeah. Guess I should uh. Get back to work, too.”

“Oh, yeah,” Waverly said, and now the flush of pink across her face darkened, from embarrassment rather than desire. “I guess this um. Wasn’t really appropriate for work hours.”

Nicole laughed, feeling more at ease than she had since she’d arrived in Purgatory. “No, not
really,” she said, and leaned in to kiss Waverly again, just once. She dragged herself up, standing and offering Waverly her hand. “But that definitely doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t do it again. And soon.”

“Is that so?” Waverly murmured. “Shame on you, Officer Haught. I thought you were a by-the-books sort of woman.”

Nicole grinned, wolfish and just a little hungry. She set a hand at the small of Waverly’s back and pulled her in tight. She traced her nose across Waverly’s cheek until she was speaking into her ear and let her voice drop until she sounded like smoke and raw heat.

“You might be surprised, Wave. There’s a lot more to me than just some straight-laced cop.”

“Oh.” A visible shiver ran through Waverly’s body, and her voice was a little small, a little hoarse with barely restrained desire. “Well then.”

Nicole kissed her cheek just next to her ear, and then pulled back, heading for the door. “Just a sec,” she whispered, grinning, and opened the door enough to stick her head out, peering around. The room was still empty, though the clock on the wall showed her that wouldn’t last much longer. Waverly grabbed her coat and her purse and followed, tiptoeing out into the bullpen with her as if she expected someone to leap out and photograph her.

“Hey, Wave,” she said, once Waverly was on the civilian side of the counter again.

Waverly turned, a soft “Hm?” escaping her before Nicole leaned over the swinging door and kissed her lightly.

“I’d really like to take you to dinner sometime,” she said, and reached up to stroke a bit of Waverly’s hair back behind her ear. “How’s your Friday look?”

Waverly beamed up at her. “Friday sounds perfect.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to Ladyhart21 for pointing out a bit of a plot hole with how Nicole responded to what she witnessed. This chapter's been revised to account for that (and lay a bit more foreshadowing in, even, so that worked out very nicely!)

It was Tuesday, when they’d argued in her car and kissed in Nedley’s office. Three days to Friday.

It came too fast, but also not fast enough.

When Nicole pulled into the Earp’s makeshift driveway, Waverly’s Jeep was parked near the barn, but the blue pickup truck Wynonna seemed to be semi-permanently borrowing from Gus was nowhere to be found.

Thank god. She really didn’t feel like having that conversation just yet.

She made her way to the front door, nerves jangling, and smoothed invisible wrinkles out of her shirt. It was one of her nicer ones, a soft blue that, Shae had always said, set off her hair like a halo of fire. It was time to make nicer memories in it. She fussed at her sleeves, the wide cuffs rolled up once so that they framed her elbows, and wondered for the third time if she should have worn a necklace, running her fingers over the hollow of her throat where the top buttons were undone.

Nope, no more time to waste. She knocked.

She heard Waverly’s shoes first, along with a nervous, soft noise that was hard to put a word to. The door snapped open, and Waverly’s face lit up when she met Nicole’s gaze. Then her eyes tracked down, taking in the shirt and the black slacks.

“Oh, wow.”

Nicole grinned and ducked her head. It was hard not to feel good about yourself when you got a response like that.

“Oh wow yourself,” she murmured, looking over Waverly’s outfit in turn. Most of her was covered in a black wool coat, for the weather, but beneath was a silver top and a dark grey skirt. A gold belt caught the light, drawing her eye down for a moment, and when she looked up again Waverly was biting her lip. “You look incredible.”

Waverly’s face went a little pink, and she beamed. “Thank you.”

Nicole offered her hand and Waverly took it, closing the door behind her as Nicole drew her across the porch and down the front steps. She brought Waverly around to the passenger side of her cruiser and helped her in, and the whole time she thought her chest might burst from joy.

She’d only just closed the door and started around to the other side when she heard, just dimly, Waverly mutter “Wow.” She didn’t look directly at Waverly, but she kept an eye on her periphery, and noted that as she circled the hood of her car she had a pair of eyes locked on her like a homing beacon.
It was a struggle not to grin as she settled into the driver’s side and started up the car. “I’ve been told I dress up nice.”

“That’s a bit of an understatement,” Waverly said, chewing on her lip. “Aren’t you cold, though?”

Nicole grinned, heading for the road off Earp land. “I’ve got a coat in the back.”

“What if I’d taken longer to answer the door?” Waverly mused, raising her eyebrow with a faint smirk. “Then you’d have been suffering.”

For values of ‘suffering,’ with her wolf’s internal temperature. Still, she laughed. “Maybe. Still, worth the risk,” she mused, and winked at her. “To get that smile when I opened the door.”

Waverly flushed again and hid her face in her hands, laughing. “Honestly. You are too much.”

Nicole chuckled and offered her hand across the center console. Waverly slid her fingers into Nicole’s without hesitation, and warmth spread through Nicole’s belly.

“So?” Waverly asked as Nicole pulled onto the highway. “Where are we headed? You’ve been awfully secretive about our plans tonight.”

“Was that okay?” Nicole asked, glancing over at her once, though she didn’t release the small hand in hers. “I know you’re—”

“If you say ‘a planner’ I think I might die,” Waverly said with a groan, tilting her head back, and Nicole couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “How did you not just laugh in my face right then? I can’t believe I actually said that.”

“Do you want the real answer or the teasing one?” Nicole asked, still chuckling.

Waverly mulled it over, tapping thoughtfully on her chin as if she were really considering it. “Let’s hear both.”

Nicole grinned. “Fair enough. Well, the real reason I didn’t laugh at you was context. I mean, I’d just met you. It’d be rude to laugh in your face, regardless of how funny what you said might’ve been. Which, I’ll add, it wasn’t.”

Waverly was watching her—she could feel the younger woman’s gaze on the side of her face as she drove. Headlights from passing cars occasionally lit up slices of her cheek and shoulder, and Waverly was staring as if entranced.

“Okay, well what’s the teasing answer?”

“The teasing answer is: trust me, I have definitely been in your shoes before, saying something that I think sounds dumb in front of a girl I thought was pretty.”

“Pretty?” Waverly echoed, and looked away for a moment, her voice soft. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

“What was that?” Nicole murmured, grinning.

“You heard me,” she muttered, huffing out a breath. Nicole laughed and gently squeezed her hand, and Waverly blushed more deeply. “You walked in and changed everything, Nicole.”

She smiled and let her gaze slide right for a moment. Waverly was watching the road, her face lit up by the dashboard lights. She looked ethereal that way, a technological angel in human form.
“So did you,” she murmured. “Change everything, I mean.”

Waverly’s gaze turned toward her again, quizzical and beautiful in her curiosity. “Surely you knew...”

“That I—?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I did. I mean, I knew that part.” She grinned. “But even so.”

Waverly smiled at her and squeezed her hand, imitating Nicole’s gesture.

“Flatterer.”

Nicole flashed her a bright grin. “Yeah, sorry. I’m insufferable that way.”

Waverly grinned at her, and the rest of the way to the restaurant, they held hands over the console, only letting go when Nicole needed both hands on the wheel. Each time they reconnected as soon as it was safe for her to let go, drawing together like magnets.

It was hard to put into words what Waverly made her feel. Some pieces of it were easy—warm, comfortable, like she didn’t have to be anything but herself—but some were harder. How did one explain how it felt to feel safe, but also powerful, protective? The two points should’ve been opposed, but all the same, she felt them both all at once. She felt strong, felt alive, in a way that she usually only associated with her wolf-form. Waverly looked at her like she were made of magic, like Nicole was an angel sent personally for her, and that attention was both immensely flattering and somehow mind-boggling.

The restaurant she’d chosen bore an exterior façade of rustic charm and hospitality. Peaked wooden roof, half-stone walls, and big, clean windows that showed glimpses of a warm, private interior. Still, as soon as she got out of the car, she remembered why she avoided cities—the night was full of sounds and scents. Hundreds of people. Urban foxes. Pigeons. A dumpster a block away. A takeout restaurant a few doors down, where three of the kitchen staff were conducting a furious argument in at least one, possibly two languages that Nicole didn’t understand.

“LeVilla?” Waverly murmured to her, as Nicole opened her door and helped her out. She focused on Waverly, and let the rest fade into the background. “Really?”

“Is that a good ‘really’ or a bad ‘really’?” Nicole asked, and grinned. “Cuz if it’s a bad ‘really’ then, uh, no, of course not!”

Waverly slapped a hand lightly against Nicole’s shoulder. “Don’t be silly. No, it’s definitely good. I always wanted to come here but...”

She trailed off, and Nicole thought she could guess what had crossed her mind. Champ.

“Well then,” she said, pulling Waverly’s focus. “Guess I owe Nedley a beer. He was the one who recommended it to me.”

“Guess I do too,” Waverly said, and looped her arm into Nicole’s when she offered it. “Well aren’t you gallant.”

Nicole winked and led her to the front door. The interior really did match the exterior, complete with lighting that reviews probably called romantically dimmed and candlelit tables. The polished
wooden floors gleamed in the low light, and a fireplace flickered in a stone column, warming the air even beyond what the heating vents could provide.

When they’d ordered, Nicole rested her hand on the table, close enough that it was an invitation but far enough that it wasn’t an obligation. Waverly watched her, then looked at her hand, and Nicole could see the debate raging behind her eyes, could hear the staccato beat of her pulse.

“You don’t have to,” she whispered, just to be sure that was clear.

“I know,” Waverly murmured, but then she frowned, brow furrowing in thought. “But this isn’t Purgatory, and...”

Nicole smiled, encouraging but patient.

Waverly’s voice dropped even lower, thoughtful, speaking with the rhythm of a mantra. “Now you can do whatever it is you want.”

She reached out across the table and Nicole slid her hand a little closer, letting Waverly tangle their fingers together. When Waverly looked up at her, she was beaming, and Nicole smiled right back, and didn’t even hear the conversations happening at other tables, no matter how loud they were.

Pretty much everyone has first date stories. They’re awkward, they’re easy, they’re perfect, they’re a disaster. There’s social contracts to consider and motions to go through but at the same time, the only rule about dating is that there are no rules. Every person, every couple, every date is different. And that’s what makes them fun.

There was something perfectly imperfect about Nicole’s first date with Waverly. Doubly so since this wasn’t about testing the waters anymore, it wasn’t about learning their compatibility. They knew the waters, or at least the shallows, and they knew they would be making a proper go of it.

So it was a first date, but really, this dinner was about them. Spending time together, eating together, getting away from town and into the city for an evening, together. Without Wynonna, without Dolls, without work and without fiends from hell.

And Nicole loved every damn second of it. She loved the way Waverly looked at her, like she still couldn’t quite believe this was happening. She loved the way Waverly read the menu in English, ordered in French, and thanked the waitstaff in Latin, not to show off, but because she was distracted, or so engrossed in something she’d been saying right before that it just came out without thought. She loved the way Waverly made vaguely offended noises about Nicole covering the check before finally lifting her hands in defeat, then pointing and murmuring next time like a villain you’d see in a Saturday morning cartoon. She loved how the light glittered on Waverly’s jewelry and turned her hazel eyes green and fire-warm.

She loved looking at Waverly. It was the one downside to heading back outside—once she was driving, she’d have to look away.

“Up for coffee?” she asked, as she helped Waverly into the car.

“Absolutely,” Waverly said, smiling.

Nicole grinned and shut the door, heading around the hood again.

A sound caught her attention then, distant, but unmistakable. It was a hunting cry, but of no animal
Nicole had ever heard. She froze, listening. Another sound: a half-scream, the sound suddenly breaking off into a low, wet gurgling sound. Nicole took a few steps, peering around the front corner of the restaurant. Almost a block away a person, a man based on size, was shoving something that looked suspiciously like a dead human woman into the back of an SUV. He shoved a few limbs inside, then slammed the door.

She took another step and let her vision shift, her sight tinting gold, turning the shadows lighter so she could see further in the dark. The man turned away from the trunk, and she made out the outline of his face. He was too gaunt, too sharp to be human, and when he took a cursory glance around, his eyes flashed silver in the night. Definitely her side of the street.

She growled. Warning. Furious.

He turned, and his silver eyes met hers. He winked. She took one step, but he pulled something out of his coat—a handgun, glinting under a streetlamp.

She could try to rush him, but he’d get a shot off well before she could get near him, and there was certainly no way to get shot and not get dragged to a hospital, not in the middle of a street like this.

He opened his mouth in a wide, toothy grin, and she could almost imagine the words he would say if he were in earshot. If she called the police, he’d just eat them. She needed BBD, but Dolls and Wynonna would never come fast enough even if they believed her the second she got on the phone.

He turned to loop around to the driver-side door and she focused on the car. A gunmetal grey Ford Expedition. She committed the plate to memory, then spun around as the door of her cruiser opened.

“Nicole?” Waverly asked, poking her head out over the roof of the cruiser. Nicole hastily shifted her vision back to normal, the gold filter over the world fading with it. Waverly blinked, then shook her head slightly, as if clearing a bit of dust from her vision.

That was close.

“Everything okay?”

Nicole smiled and stepped back toward the car. “Yeah, Wave, I’m sorry.” She climbed into the driver’s seat as Waverly slid back inside and shut her door, and watched as Nicole wrote down the plate number on a post-it.

“What’s that?”

“Something weird,” she said with forced calm, tucking the post-it into her pocket. “I’ll look into it later.” She pressed her hands together, looking at Waverly directly, over the console. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to go all work-mode on you when we’re supposed to be out here for us.”

Waverly smiled and leaned across the console, resting her elbow on it so she could lean up and press a kiss to Nicole’s mouth. It was short, but sweet, and so warm Nicole shivered a little when Waverly pulled back.

“You don’t need to apologize, Nicole.”

“Well sure, but—”

Waverly set her hand over Nicole’s and she shut her mouth with a snap.

“Listen, I went into this, whatever this is exactly, with my eyes open. I know your job, and I know that means you’ll work crazy hours and maybe get hurt on the job sometimes.” Like before was written on her face but she didn’t say it aloud. “I know all that, and I still want to. Don’t ever apologize for being a good cop.”
For a moment, the urge to tell Waverly everything was overwhelming. To just come clean, right then, tell her about the bite, the curse, the moon. To tell her she knew some of whatever was going on with the Earps, that she knew Wynonna’s gun was special, or that Wynonna herself was, or whatever the exact specifics were. To tell her that this wasn’t just about being a good cop, not really.

But if Waverly didn’t know the truth, this was not the time, nor the place, nor the way to fill her in.

“Well,” Nicole said after a moment, and bit her lip, trying not to just look at Waverly’s mouth. “How about that coffee, then?”

The little coffeeshop was small, only a couple blocks away, and when they walked inside, the heat was cranked to a dull roar that overlaid the rest of the background noise in Nicole’s awareness. For a Friday night in December the place was surprisingly empty, and within only a few minutes they were tucked into a little booth in the corner, sitting side by side with heavy, artistically mismatched ceramic mugs of steaming coffee on the table in front of them and their coats piled on the opposite bench. Waverly had her hands around her mug to warm them, and Nicole idly twisted the handle of hers back and forth before she, with maybe a little more caution than required, looped an arm around Waverly’s shoulder to hold her close.

Waverly turned into her, cheek pressed against her chest, the chilly tip of her nose finding the open collar of her shirt, and Nicole felt so warm at the ease of it she half-expected the contrast of cold skin to hers to bring up steam of its own.

“So,” Nicole said, as Waverly took a sip of her coffee.

“So?”

“Mind if I break date etiquette a little bit and ask about the elephant in the room?”

Waverly set her mug down and looked up at her, her eyes warm, curious, and unconcerned. “All right, shoot.”

“Walk me through Monday and Tuesday?” she asked, smiling and gently rubbing Waverly’s shoulder with her hand. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m beyond happy to give this a go, to... to be more than just friends,” she said, looking for the words Waverly used, “But that brilliant brain of yours did some loops around me I think.”

It seemed to land all right, if Waverly’s soft laugh and shy smile was any indicator, and Nicole grinned, a bit relieved.

“No, no, that’s fair,” she said, tapping her nails on her mug. “And I did kinda throw a fit in your car.”

“Hey,” Nicole interrupted. “Lemme say something right up front if you’re gonna be on that one again.”

Waverly looked up at her, brow furrowing in concentration. “Hm?”

“You’re allowed to be upset,” Nicole said, letting her voice drop to a lower, more intense tone, hoping Waverly would listen, would understand. “You’re allowed to be overwhelmed. I know there’s a lot going on but if nothing else, I want to be a safe place for you.”
Waverly’s mouth quirked in a smile. “Like playing tag.”

“Exactly,” Nicole said, and grinned at her. “I’m home base. You can always come back to me and sit and catch your breath. Always.”

Waverly was quiet for a moment, absorbing her words, and looked back at her mug, twisting it a bit on the table. “God, you’re more right than you know,” she whispered. “But. Right. Well, it’s like you said, honestly. With Curtis, and then Wynonna coming back all of a sudden, and all this stuff with Dolls...” She sighed and leaned her head back against Nicole’s arm. “And then what happened to Shorty, and Gus selling the bar? There was just so much. And it never seemed to stop. Every day something new was happening, or someone else was in danger. Someone new was was shooting at me, or at Wynonna, or.” Nicole frowned at that, concerned, but didn’t interrupt. “Or you. When I saw you in the hospital.” She shook her head, steadying herself. “But when I was around you,” she said, and trailed off, making a thoughtful noise, like she didn’t know what to say.

Nicole picked up her mug and sipped, hoping the gesture came off as unhurried.

“You were just there. You came in, and, I mean, it was obvious you were interested,” Nicole blushed a little at that, and hid in her mug. Yes, she had been, and no, she really hadn’t been making any attempt to hide the fact. “But you never pushed, you never... you never asked anything of me. Even after I broke up with Champ.” She snorted, a derisive, dismissive noise that made Nicole glance at her again. “You know Stephanie told me that nobody would want to date an Earp? Complete with ‘no offense.’ She thought I should’ve stayed with Champ because he was reliable. As if that’s justification for a relationship.”

Nicole bit back a grumbling noise in her chest and sipped again to drown out the wolf with hot coffee. It was easier than she expected, really. With Waverly sitting next to her, pressed into her side, it was almost possible to forget that she wasn’t just a woman on a date, with a beautiful girl alongside her. She could forget the rest. Here, like this, she could just be herself. She wasn’t a supernatural monster, she wasn’t from Dolls’ side of the street. Here, tonight, she was just... Nicole Haught. It had been a long, long time. It felt good.

“Never mind the fact that that wasn’t true,” Waverly added, pursing her lips. “Even not counting you. Pete York tried to ask me out the morning I met you outside the station.” Nicole choked on her coffee and Waverly glanced up at her. “Oh god, sorry.”

“No,” Nicole said, shaking her head and hastily pressing a napkin to her mouth. “Nope, that’s on me. Keep going.”

Waverly smirked a little and kissed the corner of her mouth, then sighed, settling back down beside her. “What was I saying. Oh, Steph.” She waved a hand vaguely. “Just... I d’know. I liked you. Like, the moment I saw you. I just didn’t know how to...” She trailed off again, looking for words, and Nicole squeezed her shoulder gently.

“Reconcile it?”

“I guess, yeah.” She frowned, still looking for words. “I mean I’d always thought...”

Nicole smiled, waiting. This part at least, was all too familiar to her. She remembered that, the fear, the doubt. She’d always thought that it had been the worst to be 15 and kissing a boy and wondering why she hated it, to be so young while she was figuring out she wasn’t like the girls she saw in TV shows, but at least she’d gone through college and the academy knowing, basically, who she was and what she wanted. Maybe it was worse to be 21 and comfortable before someone strode into your life and shook up everything you thought you knew.
“You’re doing it again.”

“Hm? Doing what?”

Waverly chuckled and looked up at her. “You’re so patient. I don’t understand how.”

The answer, the real answer, hit her like a shot, powerful for its abruptness, for its complete clarity.

“Well, Waverly Earp, you’re worth waiting for.”

Waverly stared up at her, her lips parted on a soft, stunned little breath. “How could you know that?”

“Hm. I didn’t,” she said, then pursed her lips, thoughtful. “I mean, not at first.” Waverly watched her, quiet. “But I see a lot more than people think I do.”

“You are a cop,” Waverly noted.

She chuckled. “True. But... I see that you see, too. I see that you try, that you always put others before yourself, even when it hurts you to do so.” Waverly went very still beside her, her breath coming a little faster, a little shallower. Nicole didn’t look directly at her, allowing her the illusion of invisibility. “I see that you hurt. A lot. But you still give so much. And I think maybe something you need is someone who lets you hurt, who lets you cry, who lets you need things. Someone who can give when you can’t anymore, and who doesn’t ask for more than you can give.” She turned and faced her, and smiled, just a little. “And I think that maybe I can be that. If, that is, that’s actually what you want. Don’t let me put words in your mouth.”

Waverly met her gaze and scanned her face, reading, and it struck Nicole how similar the two Earps were—they looked for lies the same way.

“Wow,” she said finally, on a low exhale. “I. Wow. Was that just, uh, off-the-cuff?”

Nicole laughed softly and pressed her nose to Waverly’s cheek, nuzzling. “I might’ve practiced it a little in my car.”

“It paid off,” Waverly muttered, and she leaned her head so their foreheads were resting together.

“So what’ll it be?” she murmured, and Waverly tilted back just enough to look up at her. “I know you said in the car that me being a cop doesn’t scare you, but...”

Waverly smiled. “If me being an Earp doesn’t scare you,” she countered, and Nicole shook her head no, “Then I think we’ll be pretty darn okay together, Nicole Haught.”

Nicole grinned, a fluttering, bright sensation filling up her chest, warm and airy.

“Good,” she said, and pressed a kiss to Waverly’s mouth. She tasted like coffee and a joy so intense it was a tangible sense against her lips.

Somewhere behind them two hands slammed down on a counter and a man growled, his voice raw with frustration, “Oh what the fuck.”

Waverly spooked like a horse beset by a snake and broke from her with a gasp, the sound almost inaudible. Nicole gripped her tighter, turning around, fury burning through her chest. Only no one was looking at them. The proprietor of the shop, a harried, middle-aged gentleman, was standing
behind the bar. He looked exhausted, and was raising his hands from where he’d hit the counter, rubbing over his face and thinning brown hair, all his attention on a customer sitting on the other side of the bar, on a stool. The customer was a younger man in jeans and a hoodie, maybe in his mid-20s, and sat in a loose slouch, both hands hugging a mug on the counter. His dark hair stuck out around a blue knit cap, and he sighed in response to the outburst.

“Come on, Barry, chill out.”

“I just!” Barry rubbed at his eyes with his fingers. “She disappeared. Just, fucked off mid-shift.”

Waverly was trembling, relaxing only by degrees, but she ducked her head against Nicole’s chest with a shaky, self-deprecating laugh. Nicole rubbed her shoulder and held her tight, letting Waverly calm down at her own pace, but she also kept part of her attention on the conversation at the bar.

“Another one?” the customer asked.

“Yeah.” Barry sighed and leaned his hands on the counter again. “Mark, I don’t know what I’m gonna do. That’s the third one. Asked her to take out the garbage and she just vanished.”

“You went to the police?”

“Yeah, but the first two times they said they can’t accept a missing persons report for 24 hours. Told me it should come from family or friends, too.”

Mark sighed, leaning his chin in one hand. “S’pose they figured you were being paranoid.”

“Yeah. ‘Relax, Mister Harper, this is common when you hire teenagers. They probably just couldn’t keep up with the job and wanted out.’ Bullshit. Jess, Kara, and Allison, none of them gave any sign they wanted out.”

“It’s hard to tell with girls sometimes,” Mark said, but he didn’t really sound like he believed it.

Waverly shifted inside the circle of her arm and Nicole glanced down, keeping her voice low.

“Hey. Did you wanna go?”

Waverly shook her head slightly, not taking her gaze away from the two men at the bar. She was listening too, Nicole noted, and couldn’t quite help a wolfish grin as she looked up again. Waverly’s hand fell to rest on her thigh, idly tracing her fingers over the fabric, and for a breath Nicole almost stopped listening, distracted.

“Like hell,” Barry said. “That morning Kara’d come in an hour early. Said she wanted to get some writing done before her shift started. Said it felt safer here than at home.”

Mark grunted and drank from his mug.

“And Allison, she was talking two hours ago about how she was actually excited to switch to mornings. Give her reason to get up before noon, she said.”

“Hm.”

“I don’t buy it as them wanting to quit. Not for a damn second.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t hire so many strays, Barry.”

Barry sighed. “Maybe. But I like these kids, Mark. They just need someone to take ‘em seriously so they can get their feet under them. And if it turned out to be a bad fit, okay, fine. Once, I’d
understand. Hell, from how she talked about her friends, Jess might’ve been mixed up in some shit. But *three* of ‘em? I dunno what to do.”

“Me neither, Barry.”

Nicole frowned, and, perhaps sensing her unease, Waverly looked up at her.

“Wanna get his number on our way out?”

“Hm?” Nicole looked down at her, then chuckled. “Yeah, if that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay,” Waverly said, and squeezed gently with the hand still on Nicole’s leg. “I told you. Don’t apologize for being a good cop.”

Nicole smiled and pressed a kiss to her temple as she eased out of the booth, offering Waverly a hand and gathering up their coats. Nicole offered Waverly’s to her and folded hers over her arm as she approached the bar, Waverly following a step behind.

“Mister Harper?”

“Yes ma’am? Did you need a refill?”

“No, thank you though. Actually I’m with the Purgatory Sheriff’s Department.” She fished a business card from her wallet and handed it to him. “I overheard some of your conversation. Would you mind if I took down a phone number so I can get in touch with you tomorrow to discuss your missing employees?”
“Miss Haught.”

Nicole glanced up from her studious notetaking and blinked tiredly.

“Henry!” she said, trying to inject lively energy into her voice, and not doing a very good job. “Hey. Can I help you with something?”

“No ma’am,” he said, with one of his trademark sly, easy grins. “But you might wanna do something for yourself.”

She squinted at him, trying to figure out what he meant.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you leave this fine constabulary longer’n four hours at a time since Saturday mornin’. What, may I ask, has got your nose so very, very close to the grindstone? By all accounts, it is not somethin’ that quite falls under the eye of our esteemed local sheriff.”

She shot him a frown, and he spread his hands in a peaceable, placating gesture. “Surprised you’ve been here this much.”

“Well,” he drawled, “With everyone’s favorite bar under...” He clicked his tongue against his teeth, looking for the politic way to put it. “New management, I find myself rather less welcome there, and slightly more welcome here.”

“Huh,” she said, then looked at her notes. “It’s a personal project,” she said. Then frowned, considering it. “For now.”

“Fair enough,” he murmured, and tugged on the brim of his hat as he headed toward the main door. “Remember, you have friends in this buildin’, Miss Haught. On both sides of that door.”

He left, whistling, and she returned her attention to her computer screen and her notes. She’d spent the better part of the last five days following up on Harper’s employees and chasing the Ford’s license plate through three different shipping companies. She’d spoken at length with Harper, the coffeeshop owner, and had even canvassed every tenement building, shop, and restaurant in about a three block radius around his place, trying to catch wind of any other missing persons, reported or otherwise.

She’d found four. Three young men and another young woman. Cross-referencing dates against camera footage, she’d never seen the grey Expedition she’d been looking for, but she’d caught a couple other vans parked in discreet positions.

“Fine,” she grumbled, and gathered up her notes.

When she knocked on BBD’s office door, Dolls answered, and actually smiled at her.

“Haught,” he said, warm. “What can I do for you.”

“Uh,” she said, eyeing him dubiously. “You can tell me who you are and what you’ve done with Deputy Marshal Dolls, to start with.”
He rolled his eyes, but the gesture was good-natured.

“Seriously. What’s up.”

“I think I have something for you,” she said, keeping her voice low. His eyebrows rose slightly. “From our side.”

“I see.” He glanced over his shoulder, then nodded, satisfied, and opened the door. “We’ll talk in my office.”

She stepped in and glanced around as he closed the door. It was instinct, rather than nosiness—one did not become a good cop by indulging in a lot of tunnel vision after all—and found that Wynonna was lounging in an armchair across the room, cleaning her Colt, while Waverly sat at the conference table surrounded by no less than four open books, each of which looked like they belonged on a set for a performance of *The Crucible*, or perhaps *Macbeth*.

“Hey,” she said, very softly. Waverly looked up, surprised, and then grinned at her.

“Hey! What brings you into Dolls’ domain?”

Nicole grinned and lifted her file. “Business, unfortunately.”

Waverly clicked her tongue disapprovingly, but she was smiling through it.

“Hey Haughtstuff!” Wynonna called, gesturing with the big revolver. “Don’t see you in here much.”

“Nah, most of PSD’s work has been pretty normal lately,” she said, and Wynonna lifted an eyebrow in a silent question.

Dolls cleared his throat and Nicole glanced at him, feeling a little bit like a child called on the carpet.

“Right, sorry. Duty calls,” she said, smiling at Waverly as she headed into Dolls’ office. Waverly smiled back, and Nicole thought maybe there was a glint of appreciation in her eyes when Nicole turned around.

Just before the door clicked shut she heard Waverly say, with a tone of exhausted amusement, “Haughtstuff? Really?”

“Even my own sister! Everyone’s a critic.”

Dolls shut the door and she handed him the file without hesitation. He flipped through it and unconsciously she found herself standing at attention, her hands behind her back, speaking with the dry, military efficiency of a war council briefing.

“Seven missing persons in the city. All within the Triangle, each one taken on a Friday night over the course of the last couple months. Four women, three men, ranging from 19 to 24 years old. No one heard a disturbance or a struggle. One of the guys’ friends said the victim heard his mom calling and went outside and never came back. One of the vehicles involved is a grey Ford Expedition, but I’m having trouble pinning down who might be using it—it’s registered as a fleet vehicle that’s swapped between two shipping companies that have a sort of...” She frowned, looking for the word. “Rideshare program, I guess, for their light cargo vehicles.”

He frowned at the pages of her notes and looked up at her. “What do you think is doing it?”
“That’s what I can’t work out. I’ve only managed to visually clock this guy once. Male, I think, possibly 6 foot 3, 110.”

“Is that in—”

“Sorry,” she said, and ducked her head to hide a laugh. “Kilograms.”

He thought for a moment, running the conversion. “Got it.”

“For being a big guy though, he’s narrow. Pointed face. Predatory. Silver eyes.”

“Silver?” he said, glancing up at her. “Hm. Doesn’t do much for our list of suspects.”

“No, it doesn’t. But I’m running into walls, so I figured—”

“Pool our resources,” he finished, nodding. “Good call. I’ll get Waverly to start digging and I’ll check the BBD archives. See if I can’t find any similar hunting patterns.”

“I want in,” she said.

He paused, looking at her. “I told you before. I can’t deputize you, Haught. Not without my bosses and your boss, for that matter, getting involved. And I’ve already got a consultant.”

“I don’t need a star,” she said, and her voice turned to gravel, not shifting but something close. “And I won’t do it in uniform. But I watched this guy shove a girl into a car and couldn’t—” She stopped, took a breath, and looked him in the eye. “I had to let him go. I don’t want him pulling this shit again.”

Dolls frowned, but tapped the file against his hand. “If,” he said, and pointed at her. “If I can even use you on this, you’d be dealing with my team.”

“You and Wynonna?”

“Yes. That’s gonna be a problem.”

“Uh,” she said, and cleared her throat. “Actually, no, it won’t.”

He watched her for a moment, then tilted his head back, almost laughing. “She didn’t tell me.”

“You didn’t tell her,” she pointed out, and he sighed, waving a hand.

“No, it’s cool. Fine. Well, it sounds like we’ll need as many eyes as we can get on this, with his hunting grounds this wide,” he said, tapping the map in her file. “And with this Friday pattern he’s got, he’ll move tomorrow night. We don’t have much time.”

She blew out a breath and nodded.

“Does Waverly know?”

Guilt flashed through her when he asked. “Uh, no, she doesn’t.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll tell her. Just.” She sighed. “We don’t have time right now.”

“Then I’ll bring you in after she’s gone.”
She sighed, but nodded, and left his office.

Wynonna watched her go, eyes narrowed. Waverly, similarly, shot her a curious look, then surreptitiously picked up her phone as Nicole smiled and left the room.

As soon as she got to her desk, her phone buzzed, and she flipped it over, reading the display.

*What was that about?*

She chewed on her lip, weighing her words.

*Remember Friday? The weird thing I thought I saw outside LeVilla?*

She set down her phone, but she might as well not have done so, because it buzzed again immediately.

*Yeah. It was Dolls-level weird? Is it connected to those missing coffeeshop people?*

Guilt curled up in her stomach again like a coiled snake.

*I think so. Maybe? Handed it off to BBD for now. Figure you guys might be able to get further than I did.*

There was a longer pause, probably because Dolls was catching them up to speed, but as she got back to work, her phone buzzed once more.

*We just might. Thanks. <3*

Nicole grinned, feeling impossibly lighter for that simple message.

*Come over after work?*

Immediately, one more message.

*Definitely.*

“Did you know,” Waverly said, sitting cross-legged at Nicole’s kitchen table with a ball of ginger fluff in her lap, “There’s a myth that started in India and Ethiopia—it spread *everywhere* though—about this monster that’s a cross between a wolf and a dog. Or, in the African version, a lion and a hyena.”

Nicole looked up from her stove, where she was mixing up a stir-fry. “Lion and hyena? Those would never mate though.”

“Well sure,” Waverly said, and laughed, petting Calamity Jane absently with one hand. “But I mean, that’s where most myths come from, right. Things that shouldn’t have happened, as an explanation for things that do.”

Nicole wondered idly if Dolls had expected Waverly to report their findings in the guise of a folklore show-and-tell. For that matter, she wondered if this thing was what they were dealing with, or just something Waverly had learned of during the search, but which wasn’t actually related. Without asking directly, it would be hard to guess, and for now she felt like she and Waverly were in a strange, tenuous balancing act where there was some kind of silent understanding that they each had at least an inkling of BBD’s real mission, but they weren’t sure how much the other
knew, and so were reluctant to be the first one to say something that broke BBD’s nondisclosure rules.

“Okay,” Nicole said, checking on a pot of rice. “So what’s this weird hybrid creature? What’s it do?”

“It’s called a crocotta,” she explained, gesturing with her free hand as the other stroked the purring cat in her lap, her voice growing more animated as she spoke. “Or a leucrocotta, depending on who you talk to, I guess. That’s what you get for having a myth go global. Anyway, they’re mimics. They can imitate sounds and voices and they do it to lure in victims.”

“Wow, that’s pretty messed up,” she said, meeting Waverly’s gaze, in part to confirm she was actually listening. “So it calls to people, and they just follow the voice?”

“What!?” Waverly said, beaming. She looked like she’d never had someone engage with her before, and it broke Nicole’s heart as much as it made her happy to make Waverly look that excited. “The legends describe them being able to perfectly imitate the voices of loved ones, and it uses that to lure people out of their homes to rip them apart and eat them. Some legends say they can imitate sick or injured humans, too, to lure out actual dogs and eat those.”

“I’ll get you my pretty, and your little dog, too,” Nicole rasped, raising her hands into crooked witch claws, and Waverly laughed. “Seriously though. Eugh. Man, but ancient cultures sure had some imagination.”

“Right?” Waverly said. “Some of the myths out there are crazy. And that’s without even getting into the infinite variations.”

“What d’you mean?” Nicole asked, looking over at her as she pushed a spoon through the pan to move sizzling meat and vegetables around.

“Well, okay, take vampires, right. If you look up vampire myths, you can find like four different eras worth of lore. There’s the really old myths, where supposedly you could distract a vampire by spilling, say, beans in front of them because they’d have to stop and count them. That was the best way to stop one, in that iteration of the myth, because if you could make them count till sunrise, the sun would turn them to dust. And then there’s the more modern versions, of course, like the Dracula-style ones that are bested with garlic and wooden stakes and crosses.”

“Counting,” Nicole said, desperately struggling not to laugh as she imagined Mikael bested by a spilled bucket of peanuts. Then again, maybe that explained his skills at poker.

“Oh yeah,” Waverly said, not seeming to have noticed Nicole’s difficulties. “Actually, stopping monsters by making them count things was a pretty common tactic, up until the 15, maybe 1600s. There’s some evidence that this one Greek demon, which may be the origins of some werewolf mythology, could be stopped just by putting a colander out on your porch so he’d stop and count all the holes.”

Suddenly this was a bit less funny. Nicole glanced nervously at Waverly. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” she said, chuckling. “Weird to think of modern-style werewolves being stopped by kitchenware, huh?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, uncomfortable. She felt like a teenager in the middle of an I have a friend lie. “Especially, I mean, werewolves are still monsters, right? The worst of mankind’s animal side, distilled into a mythos?”
Waverly was quiet for a moment, considering it. “I guess it depends on how you see werewolves.” Nicole realized belatedly that she was holding her breath. “I mean, the myth,” Waverly added, a little too quickly.

There it was again, the balancing act.

“Right, of course,” Nicole said. “We’re just talking myth.”

“Right,” Waverly said, and relaxed slightly. “I mean, okay, so zombies are a metaphor for mindless obedience and the sort of... collective hivemind of a mob, right. Angry villagers during a witch hunt. Or, in modern times, it can kind of be a way to talk about, like, the nationalist ‘us-versus-them’ mentality of the Red Scares, especially the one in the 50s.” She paused, thoughtful, then added brightly, “Or, if you ask a Marxist, it’s consumerism!”

Nicole blinked. She’d never thought of it that way, but suddenly she wanted to watch *Night of the Living Dead* again with a new perspective. “Sure, okay, that tracks.”

“Right! So then, vampires, I think, are a metaphor for how people can kill without violence,” she said. “Sucking the life out of someone by being a weight on them, financially, or domestically, or emotionally. I think that’s why a lot of vampires are portrayed, now at least, as sort of dark and decadent. I mean the old myths of vampires were basically just walking corpses, but now we sort of paint them as seductive and taboo. You could also take them as a metaphor for drug addiction, really. Eternal life and youth and vitality, but with a cost: you have to keep hurting people, have to keep killing, to keep the high.”

Nicole watched her, belatedly realizing her mouth was hanging slightly open, staggered by the breadth of Waverly’s mind.

“And in the same vein,” she said, unfazed by or perhaps simply unaware of Nicole’s awe, “I think werewolves are a metaphor for the duality of mankind. Sure, there’s violence, aggression, territorial urges. We as people seek to control our world, to rationalize, but we also tend to destroy it in the process. In that sense I think you can see werewolves as a metaphor for physical abusers, sometimes, because werewolves can kind of tap into that ‘he’s only like this when he’s been drinking’ mentality. They can sort of...” For the first time she hesitated, and Nicole wasn’t sure she wanted to know why. “In stories, werewolves can kind of expose that phenomenon in abusers where they feel out of control, like it’s inevitable they’ll hurt someone again no matter how much they might want to be better.”

Nicole felt a little sick, and focused her attention on the food.

“But,” Waverly said, and her voice brightened a little, like a cloud passing from in front of the sun. “A lot of werewolf myths weren’t about people who were cursed or had, I dunno, forsaken god or something. Some of the old myths were about guardians. The Norse actually drew parallels from their bear-hide-wearing berserkers to warriors that wore wolf-pelts to become faster, more agile. I mean, sure, people can be inherently violent. But there’s also a nurturing side to humanity. We grow things, build things. And both those things are true, at the same time. I mean, you have to cut down trees to build a house, right?”

“Sure,” she said, and turned off the stove, watching Waverly’s face as she spoke. She wasn’t looking at Nicole—her gaze was distant, lost in thought.

“I think werewolves are meant to stand in for that contradiction. They’re a symbol of that core truth: that people can be monsters, but they’re still also people. People have forced that idea onto modern vampires, especially in the last twenty years or so, but I think werewolves have always had
that quality. People just overlook it, because, I dunno. They think vampires are sexier or something.’

Nicole knew, in that moment, what she should do. She should speak up, she should own up, she should let her kitchen be a tiny safe haven for the truth. But there was also fear, because all of this was still so new, so fragile, and if she did it wrong, said it wrong, it would be all too easy to watch this whole fledgling thing fall apart before it’d even begun to fly.

Plus, Nicole knew that tomorrow night she would be hunting something in the dark with Dolls and Wynonna. If the confession with Waverly went poorly, she’d be distracted, and in a fight like the one coming, distractions could be very literally deadly.

It was a thin excuse, but for now she was gonna take it.

So she said nothing. Instead she gave into a warm, terrible feeling in her chest—deep, ancient, animal—a part of her that was overcome, laid waste by Waverly’s insight, her knowledge, her heart.

Nicole closed the distance between them in two long steps, leaned down with one hand on the back of Waverly’s chair and one on the table, and kissed her. For a moment Waverly jumped, startled, but then she chuckled softly against Nicole’s mouth and raised her free hand to rest against her cheek, her lips soft and warm.

“Well,” she murmured, when Nicole pulled back. “If I knew waxing poetic about supernatural monsters was going to get that response, I’d have done it a lot sooner.”

Nicole ducked her head, laughing, and ran a hand through her hair. “Sorry, just... you’re really amazing, you know that?”

Waverly’s expression changed slightly, somehow sharp and fragile and gentle all at once, like glass shards covered in satin. “People said that to me a lot,” she said, “But I didn’t really know how to believe them. You say it different, somehow.”

“Well then I’ll keep saying it,” Nicole said, low, reverent, with the instinctive hush of standing in a museum or a chapel. “Until you believe it a hundred percent of the time. Because you really, really are.”

Waverly chewed on her lip and leaned up to kiss Nicole again, laughing softly when Calamity Jane took her cue to leave and hopped down from her lap. “Oops.”

“I think that was the feline equivalent of ‘get a room,’” Nicole said, laughing. “Here, dinner’s just about done.”

Chapter End Notes

Ran a bit late with posting this cuz my day at work was *nicole haught voice* The Worst. Hope y’all enjoy!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Early this time cuz I'm about to head out to what might turn out to be one of the most awkward evenings of my adult life. Wish me luck. And hey, hit me up on Twitter (@lexraevision) if you want to!

Friday afternoon was cold, but she didn’t really feel it. It was a passing thing, something in her awareness but distant, far away, like the sound of a train miles away in the night. She was in a sensible outfit, dark but heavy enough for the weather, and occasionally when pedestrians wandered by, like Moira out walking her dog, she waved and nodded and pretended she wasn’t sweating under the down coat.

Dolls pulled up along the curb once pedestrians were out of sight again. Wynonna rolled her window down, a donut in one hand, and she looked up and down at Nicole, taking in the coat, the blue jeans, the heavy workboots, and the duffel bag Nicole had over one shoulder.

“'Sup, Haughtdog,” she said, chewing.

“Wynonna.”

“Hey,” Wynonna protested, pointing at her with the donut, one powdered finger extended. “Your rule was extremely specific. One PMS joke. Which, I will remind you, I have not yet cashed in. You said nothing about dog puns.”

Nicole groaned, shaking her head.

“Get in, Haught,” Dolls said. She obeyed, climbing into the back seat behind Wynonna and stashing her bag beside her.

“What’s with the bugout bag?” Wynonna asked, looking over her shoulder to peer at it as she rolled her window back up, her hair flicking about in the breeze until it shut.

Dolls answered before Nicole could as he turned down a side road and headed for the highway. “We’re gonna need some muscle.”

Wynonna’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh shit, we’re going full K9 for this?”

“Earp,” Dolls said, but he sounded like maybe, maybe, he was trying not to laugh.

“I’m just sayin’, if I’d have known we were gonna go all bomb-sniffer on this I’d have brought Scooby snacks. Or Beggin’ Strips. Ooh, or one of those little training clickers.”

“I can feed myself, Wynonna,” Nicole said, but she leaned forward so she could stick her head between the seats, giving Wynonna a sly little smile. “Besides. I have a discerning palate. You wanna impress me, bring cubed steak. Raw, too, none of that partially-seared stuff they teach you in the obedience schools.”

Wynonna narrowed her eyes, humming thoughtfully. “I’m genuinely not sure if you’re joking, but
now I’m really tempted to find out.”

“Try it,” Nicole said, and grinned, toothy and wolfish. “Just make sure you throw high. I jump.”

“Jesus, Haught,” she said, but she laughed. “I’m glad you’re on our side.”

Nicole waited until they were on the road out of town before she stripped out of her coat and boots, wriggling around in her seat to do it.

Wynonna glanced back, confused by all the rustling, and caught an eyeful of Nicole pulling off her t-shirt. She cursed and hastily looked forward, and Nicole smirked at the sound of her heartbeat jumping. “You could’ve said something.”

“Well it’s a bit hard to change shape in a bra, Wynonna,” she noted, pretending she hadn’t noticed that Wynonna was now resolutely looking out the windshield—as was Dolls. “Or rather, it’s very easy, but you won’t have one afterward.”

“Right,” Wynonna said with a falsely casual tone. “Yeah, of course.”

She shoved her shirt and bra into the duffel, replacing it with a grey sweatshirt that was about two sizes too large for her. With a quick glance at the front seat to make sure they were still avoiding looking at her, she wiggled out of her jeans and underwear into a pair of old dark sweats.

“Done,” she announced, put all her clothes into the duffel, then pulled out a long leather cord with a bag at one end and slid it over her head.

“Kit’s in there,” Dolls said, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder to indicate a black plastic case in the backseat.

Nicole grunted in acknowledgement and leaned over the back of the middle row to open the case. She pulled out a small receiver and as she settled back into her seat she slipped it into her ear, setting it and fiddling until the chatter coming through was just barely above human hearing. Then she removed it and slid it into the bag.

“All right, I’ll bite,” Wynonna said, watching as Nicole tucked the bag under her collar. “What’s that for.”

“To stay in radio contact,” she said, and Dolls nodded. “Won’t stay in my ear if I need to change in a hurry, so, this way it’s close by. If I’m in a position to change completely, I’ll ditch the clothes, but the bag stays.”

“And if you’re not in a position to change completely,” Dolls said, with the air of a warning. “Then —”

“Then the bad guys get to tangle with an angry chick in workout clothes with more fur than a bears-drink-free night in San Francisco,” Wynonna interrupted. “That about right?”

Dolls sighed heavily, but Nicole didn’t even try to hide a bark of laughter.

“My favorite way to spend a Friday night,” she said, and Wynonna grinned.

They’d been on the road for maybe half an hour when Dolls pulled into a parking lot for a shopping center that was near the edge of the creature’s hunting grounds. The engine whined and started to cool as he turned to look at Nicole.
“What did Waverly tell you. Anything?”

Wynonna glanced at him. “Did you send my sister to do mission briefings?”

“She came over for dinner last night,” Nicole told her, shrugging. “Hung out, watched some TV. Shared some wacky ‘myths’ she’d been researching.”

“Oh,” Wynonna said, nodding, and Nicole presumed they’d been cleanly categorized in the gal pals column. “I was wondering what that text meant.”

Nicole looked at Dolls again, satisfied Wynonna wasn’t going to press the issue. “A uh, a crocotta? Voice-mimic, lures out their prey with familiar voices. And then eats them. Hybrid creature. That’s all she said.”

Dolls nodded. “There’s no record of them being shapeshangers. Just that composite beast form. However, BBD had a couple crocotta sightings about 30 years ago. Files said they have wide mouths and multi-colored eyes.”

“But the guy I saw, I just saw silver,” she countered, frowning.

“Exactly,” he said. “But it’s common for tapetum lucidum to start reflecting silver when it’s under a glamour.”

“A tap-uh-what-now?” Wynonna interrupted, glancing at Nicole, who shrugged.

“It’s the reflective surface behind animal eyes,” Dolls explained, pinning Wynonna with an exasperated frown. “Helps them see in the dark. Can I continue?”

“Oh shit,” Wynonna said, and jerked a thumb at Nicole. “So that gold thing?”

Nicole blinked. “What gold thing?”

“No, that’s—” He sighed. “Basically.”

“Rock on,” Wynonna said, and offered a hand to Nicole for a high-five.

She frowned, confused, but clapped her hand, and Wynonna immediately returned her attention to Dolls.

“The glamour is what matters here,” Dolls said. “That’s how this crocotta is pretending to be human. But that’s not something it should be able to access easily. Glamours like that, especially one powerful enough that it doesn’t block its innate powers? We’re probably looking at this thing being in league with a sorcerer. Maybe a witch.”

“Shit,” Wynonna said, voicing Nicole’s thoughts perfectly.

She frowned. Something about this all felt familiar, but she couldn’t decide why.

“Haught?” Dolls prompted. “You listening?”

“Yeah,” she said absently, then frowned and looked up. “Sorry, just thinking. Don’t think it’s relevant. So what do we need to know?”

“You remember the codewords?” Wynonna asked for the third time, her voice tinny and a little
distorted where the receiver was partially muffled by the bag.

“Yes,” Nicole said with a sigh. She was perched at the edge of a rooftop, looking down at four city blocks, the sidewalks, walls, lamps, signs, and parked cars all tinted golden under her wolfsight. Her bare feet rested on the gravel lining the rooftop, and a scattering of half-hearted snowfall was clinging to her hair. She’d been there for a few hours. Her legs were starting to cramp.

“Oh,” Wynonna said. “Good. I don’t want you hurt, Haught.”

“You won’t,” Nicole said. “Not unless you’re packing silver bullets.”

There was an uncomfortably long pause, and Nicole started to frown.

“I mean, you aren’t, right?”

“No,” Wynonna said, but there was caution to it. “But uh, Peacemaker’s sort of. Special?”

“Well, fine,” Nicole said, and scanned the road. “Then it’s better I don’t find out the hard way that you’re the exception to the rule.”

“Good plan,” Wynonna said.

“No unnecessary radio chatter,” Dolls hissed, the radio turning his voice husky and commanding, even more than usual. “Shut up, Earp.”

“Come on, she keeps answering, this isn’t all me.”

Nicole growled. “Hey!”

“Shut up, both of you!”

Nicole sighed, then frowned, leaning forward on the low wall bordering the roof. “Hold up. I’ve got movement.”

A grey SUV pulled slowly up to the light from across the intersection, moving slow, like the driver was looking for a turn.

“Ballsy,” she said. “He’s re-using the Expedition.”

“Hold position, Haught. We need to know where he’s taking them.” She growled and his voice cut in again, sharper. “Haught, you agreed to work with my team. That means you follow orders.”

Wynonna sighed. “It sucks, but this time I agree with him, Rover.”

“Rover,” she said, her voice all gravel and smoke, but she kept her eyes on the car.

“Growl at me again and I swear to god I’ll start calling you Wishbone.”

The crocotta left the engine running as he got out of the car and peered in through the window of a ground-floor apartment. She watched him lurk away from the wall to stand behind the Expedition, and then the trunk opened, the door standing open. A soft sound, a man’s voice, came to Nicole on the wind, and she narrowed her eyes, tracking the sound. A young man came to the window, scanning the sidewalk, then vanished. Less than a minute had passed when he stepped out the front door, bundled up in a coat and fluffy slippers.

“Victim in sight.”
“Shit,” Wynonna said.

“Hold position,” Dolls said again.

Nicole growled low in her chest but did as she was told, waiting and watching, her nails sharpening to claws and digging into the stone under her hands.

The crocotta called again, and the young man went around to the other side of the car, out of sight. There was a soft yelp, then a distant thump. She spotted a flailing limb, then the trunk door slammed.

“He’s got the victim in the trunk,” she reported, watching the crocotta move swiftly to the driver’s side door and climb back inside. “He’s moving. Dolls?”

“Follow him. Do not engage.”

She snarled, waiting to stand up until the car had started to turn down the next block. She tracked its trajectory, then let her body partially shift. The change burned through her, prickling and boiling her blood as fur sprouted from her arms, her face, her shoulders, filling out the sweatshirt a little better. Her body grew beneath the fur, stronger and denser with muscle.

“In pursuit,” she reported, her voice huskier with the change settled in her throat and chest. She took a few steps back from the edge, blew out a breath, steadied her nerves, and then bolted toward the edge of the roof. She planted both feet on the low wall and leapt, flinging herself across the street.

She hit the next rooftop in a roll and came up running, leaping ten feet straight up to the next rooftop and jogging along the edge facing the street, keeping an eye on the Expedition as she ran. She grasped pipes with clawed hands the size of catcher’s mitts and threw herself over alleyways, and snarled in triumph when she saw she was keeping pace.

Until she realized she was running out of rooftop.

“Dolls,” she said, and it came out as a thick growl. “He’s heading into the shipping district. I have to go to the street.”

He made a faint, furious noise, quiet for half a second.

“Do it.”

She snarled, viciously excited, and when she reached the last rooftop she threw herself forward, rolling into the shadows under a storefront’s awning. The streets were empty, and she hopped a low fence to run along the sidewalk, keeping out of the sight of streetlamps as best she could. The Expedition’s engine coughed and she closed a little more, growling.

A voice called out to her then, high and thin with terror.

“Nicole! Nicole, help!”

Waverly.

Wynonna’s voice crackled through first. “Holy shit, was that my sister?”

For a moment, her vision turned red.

“Haught!” Dolls was shouting, but she couldn’t focus. “Haught don’t! He’s a mimic!”
There was a part of her that knew he was right. A part that knew how implausible it was. Waverly was at home. Kilometers away, in Purgatory. Probably doing some research, safe at home in her room at the Homestead.

*But what if,* she thought.

Waverly’s voice rose even higher. “*Nicole!*”

“*Haught!*” Dolls roared.

“I have to be sure!” she shouted back, and threw herself forward, leaping up onto the roof of the Expedition with a heavy *thud* of impact. The car swerved under her weight, tires squealing, but she dug her claws into the fiberglass and plastic, stabbing straight through like it was made of cloth. The car kept moving, even picked up speed, and she dragged herself forward hand over hand until she was roughly over the driver.

She heard a gun’s hammer cock back somewhere below her but she held her ground. Bullets punched through the roof of the car, some of them whizzing past her into the sky. One hit dead-to-rights in her shoulder, another grazing the outside of her thigh, and she *howled,* part from rage and part from the sharp physical pain of it. They weren’t silver, at least—she was reasonably certain the bullets were solid steel, and while she had never *felt* an armor-piercing round such that she’d be able to tell one from a standard lead bullet, she was pretty sure she’d just found out the difference. She could feel the open, horrible gore of the exit wound as it stitched shut again.

“*Haught!*” Dolls yelled, right as Wynonna shouted, “You *stupid* animal!” Very dimly over the receiver she heard a car engine starting.

She crawled closer to the driver’s side door and reached over the edge, lifting one hand free and slamming it down into the driver’s window. It shattered into a rain of safety glass, some hitting the pavement while most cascaded into the cabin. The driver, the crocotta, ducked out of the range of her swipes, then threw the wheel to the left, careening down a side street. The car turned so hard she slid halfway to the other side, only hanging on by one hand. Which, since it was the one attached to her wounded shoulder, hurt like a *bitch.*

She hauled herself back up, half-crouched on the roof of the car, and was readying another blow when the car swerved again and slammed into the wall of a warehouse. Already loosened so she could move, her claws came completely free this time. She flew off the car and into the wall, falling to the ground in a heap of disorganized limbs and blood and fur.

Her head was spinning like a carnival ride and she struggled to get all her paws under her. She heard the car door open, then slam shut, and then woozy footsteps weaving back and forth as the crocotta dizzily ran for the warehouse door, flinging himself inside. She scrambled to her feet and gave chase, lurching around the corner of the building and dragging herself into the big open storage space.

The crocotta was maybe thirty feet off, pistol raised.

“What, don’t you know how to knock?” he said, and grinned, and his mouth opened, and opened, and opened, until his smile went very literally from ear to ear. The gun barked and another round ripped through her, around the level of her ribs. She hit the ground on one knee and heard her own blood splatter across the pavement behind her, felt the sweatshirt sag under the weight of gore and soaked cloth. It burned, but the wound started closing almost immediately. He hadn’t expected her to just take it, evidently, because he cursed and
skittered back a few more steps as she dragged herself back up to her feet again and ran at him.

He pulled the trigger again but the hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

“Don’t you know how to count rounds?” she snarled, rolling her injured shoulder.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but she leapt at him, hitting him full in the chest with both hands. He hit the floor beneath her with a sickeningly wet sound, and she dug her claws into his body, flesh squelching and tearing under her grip.

The crocotta screamed.

Somewhere in the distance she heard the roar of a car engine.

The crocotta laughed, labored and bloody-mouthed. “They send their regards,” he said.

“Who?” she demanded, then growled, curling her claws into him and shaking his whole torso like a doll. “Who?”

“They needed... humans,” he wheezed, and laughed. “Let me eat a couple. If I sent them... sacrifices.”

A chill went through her body. Them.

“Why did you come here?” she snarled. “They could’ve had bodies from anywhere. Why did you come to the Ghost River Triangle?”

He laughed again, blood welling up and soaking his clothes. “Why else?” he said, and lifted his head, leering at her. “They wanted you to know. They know you know where it is. They’re coming for you.”

He moved too fast for a creature so badly hurt. He pulled a knife from his coat and the presence of silver sang along her senses like a discordant clatter half a second before the blade dug in deep, a little below her ribs. She thrashed, ripping away from him, howling in rage and terror as pain flared through her belly, furiously cold. The stench of burning fur and hair hit her nose and she staggered back a step, tripping on something. Maybe nothing. She hit the concrete floor shoulders first and writhed, clawing at the ground around her. She reached for the knife, to pull it out, but it seared across her palm and she yelped, a string of horrible, choking whines and yowls tearing out of her throat.

The crocotta laughed, the sound wet and choked with blood. “They send their regards, bitch! You can’t stop them!”

“Oh yeah? Well maybe I can,” Wynonna said, and Nicole had never been so grateful to hear that voice. “Make your peace, asshole!” It was loud and echoing, bearing a weight of authority that belonged to a forgotten time.

That was it—that was the codeword. She had to drop, she had to get out of the way. Or, no, she was already on the ground? Maybe that was fine then. It was getting a little hard to think.

There was a strange, whining hum, like electricity gathering to strike, and then the Colt’s hammer struck like a bell. The boom of the gun going off echoed through the warehouse and made her ears ring. She heard the sickening impact of a bullet striking flesh and then there was a horrible roaring sound and a wash of heat that Nicole felt even from ten feet away. She wanted to look, to figure out what that horrible yowling cry of despair was, but she just lay there on the frigid floor, whining and
“Dolls!” Wynonna hollered, and there was an answering clatter of footsteps from outside. Wynonna ran closer and hit the ground beside her and she felt hands on her face. “Nicole. Nicole! You stupid mangy mutt, wake up!” Wynonna slapped her and turned her face the other way but Nicole’s vision was blurry and gold and too bright.

She had to warn them. Words formed in her mind, but somewhere between her brain and her mouth it came out jumbled, disorganized. “Watchers in the dark,” she mumbled, frantic, grabbing at Wynonna and ending up with her claws tangled into the shoulder of Wynonna’s jacket. “Watching. Hunting, they’re coming, they’re looking for him.” Agony crawled into her chest and squeezed around her lungs and she thrashed, groaning. “Followed me here. Eyes in the shadows. Wynonna!”

“Dolls!” Wynonna snapped, and cursed under her breath. “What the hell is she talking about?”

“She’s delirious,” Dolls said. He flashed a penlight in her eyes but it all blurred together into the golden brightness. “Pull that knife out.”

“Moonwater, Shae said,” Nicole mumbled, but they either weren’t listening or wrote it off as nonsense. “Clean it with moonwater.”

“Is it dangerous?” she asked, but Nicole felt three hands on her stomach and another curling around the handle of the knife, making the blade shift inside her. She screamed.

“Only to her, it’s silver. Earp, pull it out, now.”

Wynonna yanked and Nicole’s whole body jerked with it, pushing against the weight of Dolls’ hands, howling until the sound turned into hollow sobs. The searing pain flared and then subsided, just a little. Her gut burned and she could smell the gore but she couldn’t think about it, couldn’t process it.

They worked in relative silence for a moment and she lost track of what was happening. Dolls was holding her down, keeping the wound closed with his hands while Wynonna tore off a leg of Nicole’s sweats and used it to hold it shut for the short-term. Wynonna was cursing and grunting as she tried to get Nicole mobile enough to get the makeshift bandage around her gut and tie it off. Dolls was checking in her eyes, nose, maybe her mouth with his penlight.

The gold in her vision finally started to fade, leaving a lingering, growing blackness in its place.

“We can’t take her to a hospital, Dolls.”

“I know,” he said, sharp. He sighed. “We’ll take her back to BBD for now.” He gestured with something Nicole couldn’t make out, then Nicole felt the prick of a needle in the side of her neck. “Under sedation.”

“You brought tranquilizers?” Wynonna asked, then added, with a smirk audible in her voice, “You must be a hoot at parties.”

She felt hands under her, lifting her.

“Dolls. What do we tell Waverly?”

There was a low, dull roar in her ears and Nicole’s vision went all the way black.
Waverly’s phone beeped and she jerked up from the book she’d fallen asleep on, blinking blearily and trying to get her bearings. She was in the kitchen at the homestead, that was familiar enough. A book of lore was open beneath her face, and she wiped at her cheek with one hand, confused by the texture of wrinkles left by soft vellum on her skin. She looked at the pages, frowning, trying to remember why she was looking at a page full of illustrations of monsters’ eyes.

Her phone beeped again and she took a look at the screen, her attention falling on the time first. Almost four in the morning, Saturday December 10th.

Rather than beeping again with another text, it started to ring in her hand. Wynonna was calling, and she swiped her thumb to answer it, yawning.

“Wy? What’s the matter? Did you pass out in an alley again?”

Her sister’s voice was too calm, too even, too sober.

Waverly shot up from her chair, her vision blanking out for a moment, blind with something like fear.

“What do you mean Nicole’s been poisoned?”
There was something awful about being in the police station in the middle of the night. Regular people weren’t supposed to be here after dark, and like when you were anywhere you weren’t supposed to be, after business hours, there was a charge in the air, a pulse, as if the building itself was trying to say *Go away. Come back in daylight when you’re actually allowed to be here.*

Waverly’s footsteps echoed as she slipped in through the front door. She knew Wynonna had left it unlocked for her, that she was allowed to walk inside, but the sound of it shutting behind her had the finality of a coffin lid slamming closed; the click of her heels the nails to seal it shut forever.

“Wynonna?” Waverly called, keeping her voice hushed, as if raising her voice would disturb the place more than was safe. From further off she could hear low, tense voices, and she crept closer, peering around corners and over counters. Nicole’s desk was empty, the door to the sheriff’s office closed. Of course they were, it wasn’t even dawn, but the sight of it made her heart beat faster, harder. It had been what, a *week* since she’d hauled Nicole into Nedley’s office to kiss her? Too soon to have so many memories turning bittersweet, too soon to feel a pang of physical pain in her chest at the sight of Nicole’s empty chair and the folders organized neatly on her workspace.

A fear that was arguably illogical curled around her throat and she hurried past and into the hallway.

BBD’s office door was open and the lights were on.

Wynonna turned to look at her when she walked in. Her face was drawn, but she smiled. It was her worst smile: the awful, fake smile that she used whenever she wanted something she didn’t think she’d be given.

“Hey baby girl,” Wynonna said, with a cheer that didn’t meet her eyes.

“Wynonna,” Waverly said, and her voice shook. She cursed the sound of it, ducking her head.

“Where is she?”

Wynonna pressed her lips together and looked over her shoulder.

“Can I see her?” Waverly said, and she wished she didn’t sound so desperate.

“Dolls?” Wynonna called.

“Yeah?”

“Waverly’s here.”

One of the smaller offices on the far wall had a light on in it, the door half-open. Dolls leaned into view. Behind him Waverly could see that two desks had been cleared off and shoved together and a thin mat, like a futon maybe, had been laid out across them. On top of that lay Nicole, most of her body blocked by the wall, but Waverly could see part of her, hip to calf.

Dolls waved her over and Waverly slid past Wynonna with a tense half-smile that she hoped looked grateful.

When she stepped into the doorway Dolls leaned out of her way and let her enter. Nicole lay there, limp, with the boneless, effortless grace of the deeply asleep. Part of her body was covered with a
blanket, but it was more of a formality and it didn’t quite hide the bandages wrapped around her belly. There was an IV linked to her hand—why the hell did Dolls have one of those here, she wondered in the back of her mind—and Nicole was only mostly dressed. She was in a pair of dark jeans and a t-shirt that one of them had folded up away from the bandaging for decency’s sake, leaving stripes of bare, clean skin around the white gauze. Her long hair was sprawled around her head in a curtain of red gold, her face slack, pale. She looked somehow ethereal, untouchable. 

*Untouchable,* Waverly thought, *Like hell.* Waverly stepped forward, spitting in the face of god, and ran her fingers across Nicole’s forehead, tucking strands of fire back behind her ear. Nicole didn’t so much as twitch at the touch.

This was all wrong. They’d only just started, they’d only just had their first date and their first deep scary conversation over coffee. She wanted... maybe that was the relevant point. She wanted, full stop. She wanted to learn more about Nicole. She wanted to know what her favorite color was, what movies she’d fallen in love with as a kid. She wanted to memorize the sound of her laugh, the startled, unexpected genuine one that always made Waverly’s chest ache. She wanted to see what Nicole looked like when she slept, but not like this. Never like this.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asked, her voice hollow, hoarse with a dozen unvoiced screams.

“We’re working on that,” Dolls said. Gentle, warm, and so unlike the Dolls she knew. “But she will be fine, Waverly.”

Waverly looked up, blinking the burning sensation out of her eyes. Dolls smiled at her, calm, assured, and something in it made her think he knew everything. All of it, even the parts Wynonna didn’t know—maybe even the parts she herself didn’t know.

“How can you be sure?”

His jaw worked and he looked at Nicole again.

“It’s not mine to say,” he said, “But she will, Waverly. She’s tougher than she looks.”

Anger came next and it was almost a comfort. Anger was easier to deal with than fear. Fear for a woman she barely knew but who had crawled into her chest and made herself a home in her heart when Waverly wasn’t looking. Fear for a woman who was all swagger and confidence in her boots and her uniform, but never made demands, never used her badge or her strength to take something she could just ask for with a smile and a soft “please.” Fear for a woman whose hands were strong, and capable, but so very, very gentle. Fear was choking, creeping, crawling up her throat until she couldn’t breathe.

But anger. Anger was hot and alive and vicious and she could twist it, turn it, point it at the cold creeping fear until it burned away.

“Not yours to say?” she spat, frustrated, and she didn’t realize her fingers had curled into the blanket lying over Nicole’s body until she felt the rough fabric rasping over her skin. “You can’t seriously stand there and hide behind your stupid black badge to keep secrets from me right now.”

Wynonna stepped into the doorway and her voice was patient, but firm. “Baby girl, please.”

“Wynonna,” she protested, turning to look at her. “What is this? You— you what, you took Nicole on a BBD job? Without me even knowing. And she got hurt.”

Wynonna shifted guiltily on her feet.
“And now,” she said, looking from Wynonna to Dolls and back, “You’re expecting me to take your word, just— just take on faith, that she’s actually going to be okay. Do you even understand what you’re asking me?”

Wynonna frowned. Opened her mouth. “Not r—”

“Earp,” Dolls said, shooting her a look.

Wynonna pursed her lips, glaring right back, but then she moved into the room, softening a little, and stood in front of her. “I understand you’re upset, baby girl,” Wynonna said, tilting her head to look Waverly in the eye. “But she came with us voluntarily. She helped, too. A lot. She knew the risks. She got hurt, yes, but she will be fine. I promise. We’re not gonna let you lose another friend.”

Friend. She almost laughed, caustic and sharp and humorless. She almost blurted out the truth, all of it, just for the vindictive pleasure of winning, of getting the last word, of making Wynonna understand why this was different, why this was so much worse than watching a zombie snap Steph’s neck in the driveway.

But winning wouldn’t make Nicole better. Winning wouldn’t make it hurt less.

“Did you at least stop the crocotta?” she asked.

Wynonna set her hands on Waverly’s shoulders, rubbing gently. “Damn right we did. Followed it straight to its lair. Nicole gave him a hell of a beating and then I sent him downstairs for an encore.”

Waverly shook her head, trying to push fear and anger to the side long enough to think. “Um. Okay, well, what was it doing?”

“What?” Waverly said. “What do you mean, shipping?”

“We found evidence of containment, food stores, sedatives.”

Wynonna nodded. “And I think that little weasel said something to Nicole. Before she went under she was talking about someone coming. Watchers in the dark, eyes in the shadows. Cryptic bullshit.”

Dolls looked at Waverly, intent. “Which is the exact kind of half-delirious nonsense that usually has portent written all over it. I want you to look into it for us.”

Something to do. Something concrete. Oh thank god.

“Okay,” she said, and wiped at her face. “Okay, yeah. I’ll see what I can find. What are you gonna do?”

“Work out what this poison is,” Dolls told her, gentle. “It’s not gonna kill her, but she is in pain. So we’re gonna figure out how to get it out. If we can’t, we’ll keep her under until it’s out of her system.”

She’s in pain, she thought, the knowledge somehow acrid and bitter on her tongue. Waverly looked down at Nicole again and smoothed her fingers over pale skin beaded with sweat. This time Nicole did move, twitching, brow furrowing just slightly. Waverly took her hand and Nicole’s fingers,
those long, clever fingers, curled around hers, blind, but taking comfort in the contact. She took a deep breath, steadying herself, and nodded. “Okay. I’ll hit the books.”

Wynonna watched her go and then stepped closer to Dolls. The last thing they needed was Waverly overhearing.

“I hate this,” she said.

“I know you do.”

“If we got her looking into silver poisoning, you know she’d be able to find something.”

“Sure,” he said, but he kept his voice low and even. “But I made a deal to keep this secret, and if we tell Waverly what to look for, we’ve as good as told her.”

“Hell of a time to stick to the letter rather than the spirit,” Wynonna groused, though she kept her eyes on Waverly. “Shit. I don’t want to keep her in the dark but Haught isn’t even conscious.”

“So we wait. The only way to kill a lycanthrope is silver through the heart, Earp. This won’t kill her. It’s just a waiting game now. We’ll keep an eye on her, keep her under as long as we can, but she’ll be fine.”

“Full moon’s in like three days, Dolls.”

He sighed. “If she’s not better by then, we’ll just have to take her to her place and let her burn off the rest of it in her cage.”

“She has a cage?” Wynonna said, incredulous. “Did you make her—?”

“She did it on her own.” Dolls frowned at her, pressing his lips into a line. “She is a werewolf, Earp. One who doesn’t want a body count. I’m surprised you care.”

“It’s just.” Wynonna turned, looking at Nicole’s face, her expression hard as she turned away again. “It’s just bullshit that someone that incessantly decent should know how it feels to be behind bars, that’s all.”

Waverly Earp was pretty much the nicest person in Purgatory, probably in all of Ghost River County. Everyone in Purgatory knew that. Waverly was also pretty much the best thing to come out of the Earp family in two generations. Everyone in Purgatory knew that too, and there was even the occasional joke (never made where an Earp might hear, of course, for fear of injury and/or death) that she couldn’t possibly be a real Earp: she was far too sweet to be Ward and Michelle’s daughter.

But that did give her an advantage. Sure, usually Waverly relied on honey rather than vinegar—sweet, honest smiles that made her eyes sparkle and soft words put in the right ears and occasionally the appropriately placed gentle hand on someone’s shoulder or wrist—but she was still an Earp. She was still fire and gunpowder in a human shell casing. She could burn hot and turn water to ice with her words when she needed to. She just didn’t need to as much as Wynonna did, as much as Willa and her father had.

But that was what everyone in Purgatory didn’t know. Which meant no one was ever expecting it. So when Dolls leaned into the doorway of the makeshift infirmary at 2 in the morning on Monday
and said, with what was supposed to be authority in his voice, “Waverly, go home. I’ll text you if something changes,” he wasn’t expecting her to turn in her chair to face him, her eyes hard and her voice sharp enough to cut glass.

“No, Deputy Marshal. I’m staying. And you damn well know why.”

He blinked, and for a moment she had the bizarre pleasure of having stunned Deputy Marshal Xavier Dolls to actual speechlessness.

“All right,” he said finally. “Just don’t burn yourself out. That won’t help her.”

As fast as it had come, the fury guttered out. She sighed. “I know. Just. Please.”

He showed her where the tranquilizers were, made sure she had his phone number (she did, she’d had it ever since Nicole had called her using his phone), and then left, leaving her alone with her sleeping... girlfriend?

What were they? God, they hadn’t even talked about it yet.

“Dolls had better be right about you,” she muttered to the unconscious woman in front of her. “You better bounce back. And then you’re gonna tell me what the hell is going on with you.”

She settled in to wait, flipping through a little notebook that she’d already partially filled with thoughts, dates, and cross-references. It would have looked like gibberish to anyone else looking at it, but she knew the truth:

Most of it actually was gibberish.

Not for lack of trying, of course. But without having heard Nicole’s alleged cryptic bullshit in person and having effectively no context, it was hard to link the words to anything. Watchers in the dark could’ve been any of maybe a thousand different things. Ancient gods, demons, cults, witches, earthbound monsters like the crocotta itself, who was to say?

There was a low, desperate whining sound, like a puppy stuck on a set of stairs, and Waverly snapped her book shut, sitting up straighter. If she hadn’t known there were four closed—and locked—doors between her and the outside of the building, she’d have thought an actual dog had wandered into the station. Nicole shifted, a small, fitful gesture that made Waverly stand so fast she almost tripped over her own feet.

“Hey,” she whispered, leaning over Nicole. The woman’s face twisted, tortured and exhausted. She groaned, and Waverly stroked her fingers across Nicole’s forehead, her thumb tracing the line between her eyebrows.

Nicole turned her face toward Waverly’s hand, searching out that small physical comfort, and Waverly set her other hand gently on Nicole’s cheek, fingers dancing across smooth, too-pale skin. Her eyes fluttered once, almost opening before they shut again, fast, like she’d looked into a lightbulb.

“Hey,” Waverly said again, and kissed Nicole’s forehead. “It’s me.”

“Wave?” Nicole mumbled.

“Yeah,” Waverly said. “Do you feel okay? Does it still hurt?”

“Wave,” she said again, and god, she sounded relieved. “You’re okay.”
“Me?” Waverly said, and she had to laugh or she’d cry. “What about you?”

“Thought he had you,” Nicole said, though the words slurred together.

“Who, the—” Waverly hesitated. No, she’d gone on the mission. She knew. Right? “The crocotta?”

Nicole nodded, loose and woozy. “Mmhm.”

“Nicole,” Waverly said, and it came out almost scolding, like an exhausted parent. “They’re mimics, I told you. They use the voices of—”

Loved ones.

Waverly swallowed, her throat suddenly very dry. Nicole raised a hand, the one with the IV plugged into her skin, and gently curled her fingers around Waverly’s hand, not tugging, just holding, like she needed to know it was real, that Waverly was really there.

“You idiot,” Waverly whispered.

“Mmhm.”

Waverly leaned down and pressed her lips to Nicole’s. As kisses went it wasn’t fireworks and a rising strings section as the credits rolled, but that didn’t much matter to her. Nicole’s lips were cool, a little dry from being functionally asleep for almost a day.

Waverly pulled away and looked into Nicole’s eyes, brown and so warm that looking at her felt like holding a cup of warm cocoa by a window in a snowstorm. It was hard to believe she’d once seen Nicole’s eyes flash gold in the dark, not when she looked like this, sleepy and soft and drawn with pain.

“Does it still hurt?” she asked, stroking a hand along Nicole’s hair.

She half-expected bravado, or a lie that was supposed to keep her from worrying. But Nicole never stopped surprising her.

Nicole’s voice came out soft, fragile, and it broke Waverly’s heart.

“Yes.” She sighed, shaky. “And the drugs are— are wearing off. It’s going to get worse.”

“What can I do,” she asked, and found Nicole’s hands with hers, squeezing gently.

Nicole inhaled, slow, like the effort of speech was too much, or like she knew she was crossing a line. “Water. Gathered outside, when the moon is reflected in it.”

Waverly thought she could feel her heart dropping into her stomach like a physical weight.

“Nicole,” she whispered.

“I know it sounds—” Nicole hissed, her fingers suddenly curling tight around Waverly’s, gripping hard as a spasm of pain wracked through her. “I know it sounds crazy, but—”

“That’s not— it doesn’t sound crazy,” Waverly said, and closed her eyes, willing her voice not to shake. “But it’s. It’s like -10 out there. If there’s any groundwater it’ll be frozen by now.”

Nicole groaned, the sound too guttural, too grinding to be human.
“Do you... do you want me to put you under again?” she asked, trembling, raising her voice slightly to make sure Nicole could hear her over the low wavering sound she was making.

Nicole twisted, turning her head to face Waverly and for a moment she thought she was going to say no, but Nicole’s hand curled tight into her wrist, her nails sharper than usual, and she panted, looking up at her. “Please,” she whispered, then released her arm with a sound that was so inhuman and in so much agony it made Waverly’s heart skip painfully.

She fumbled with the clasp on Dolls’ case, pulling out another dose.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Nicole’s gaze fell on her again, wet with tears and something like relief.

“Don’t be. Much rather fall asleep with you.”

“Hush,” Waverly said, sniffling and setting the used syringe aside. “You don’t get to say sappy shit like that till you’re better, okay?”

“‘Kay.” Nicole grinned at her, and kept grinning, even after she’d fallen back under.
Chapter 15

It was the dream again. Or... no. It was something similar, but it wasn’t the same one.

It was a couple days after their wedding. She was sprawled out on a sofa in their hotel after a long, satisfying day of climbing, her head in Shae’s lap. Shae was roughly her match in height, which made normal furniture a challenge. Nicole’s feet were propped up on the far end of the sofa, one arm sprawled up over her head, against Shae’s thigh, the other running idle tracks up and down Shae’s forearm.

“I keep weird hours,” she’d said, her voice soft and her fingers carding through Nicole’s hair—it was shorter then, had fallen just to her shoulders. “I’m busy a lot, I’m gone for days or nights on end sometimes... not everyone is okay with that.”

“Well, I’m not everyone I guess,” Nicole had said, grinning up at her. There had been a teasing lilt to it, an ignorance. She’d still thought Shae was just a doctor then.

“No,” Shae had said, and smiled so wide her teeth shone with it. “No you really aren’t. But I just... I wanted you to know I appreciate it. When you find someone who accepts your crazy, you shouldn’t let go. You don’t find that just anywhere.”

Nicole woke to the sound of a hushed argument taking place maybe 10 feet off, with a mostly shut door in the way, likely meant to act as a barrier, or at least an illusion of one.

“It’s Tuesday, Dolls. We can’t keep her here for another day. People are getting twitchy out there.”

“That’s why we talked it out with Nedley,” Dolls said. “He’ll keep them from asking any real questions.”

“You trust him?” Wynonna asked, incredulous.

There was a pause, as Dolls considered it. “On this? Yeah. He’s not stupid, and Haught is too important to him.”

“He seemed really damn pissed at us,” Wynonna countered.

“Well, I would be livid if he’d taken you on a stakeout without telling me and let you get mysteriously injured in a way that took you out of commission for four days.”

Wynonna grumbled, but didn’t immediately answer.

“Fine. All right. So what do we do now.”

“Guys,” Nicole said, her voice a meager croak. She coughed and tried again. “Guys.”

The door suddenly snapped open, and Wynonna stood in the center of it, her eyes wide. “Shit, she’s awake. Hey, Kibbles’n’bits. If you’re gonna start screamin’, speak up, it’s kinda business hours and the less attention we draw the better.”

“Kibbles’n—” Nicole sighed and inched herself up onto her elbows. She felt stiff, and her whole body ached, but the burning pain of silver in her gut was gone, and when she gently worked a finger under the bandages, she couldn’t find torn skin. That said, her teeth were vibrating. Of course. The moon. “I’m fine, Wynonna.”
Wynonna visibly slumped, sighing. “Jesus. Finally.”

Dolls leaned into view and nodded at her. “Glad to see you among the living, Haught.”

She snorted and carefully sat up, groaning at the effort on tired muscles and stiff joints. “Come on, I wasn’t gonna die that easy.” She twisted her head back and forth, her neck crackling. “What does Nedley know?”

“That you were poisoned with something BBD had an antidote for, but that it was a long recovery time. I’ll tell him you can be back to work today.”

She grunted and set a hand to her lower back. God, she felt so old, like a 25-year-old trapped in a 60-year-old body. “Tell him tomorrow. Between this and the moon I’m gonna be useless today.”

He nodded and left. She could hear his footsteps tapping out a rolling drumbeat as he headed for the door.

She took stock of herself—she was still wearing the clothes she’d been wearing when she got into Dolls’ car, though she could tell they’d been removed at times, maybe even rinsed once. Fair, she doubted she smelled like a breath of fresh air just now. She rolled down the t-shirt. The bandages were unnecessary now, but they’d sell the story as she left, if anyone saw her on her way out.

“So,” Wynonna said, drawing out the word till it sounded like it had about eight o’s.

Nicole looked up, winced once, then nodded. “Hm?”

Wynonna clasped her hands together, considering her words and then evidently thinking better of them. “Waverly’s unofficially quit at Shorty’s so she’s back at the Homestead now, resting, finally, but she said something about a spare key? She took care of your cat the last few days.”

That knowledge came with an almost bizarrely strong sense of relief. “Oh, good,” she said. “Good.”

“We need to talk,” Wynonna said, forcing herself to just say it.

“About what?” Nicole asked, nerves playing the xylophone up and down her spine.

“About you and my sister.”

Nicole wasn’t sure her face could get much paler, but she swallowed and nodded. “Right. I... meant to tell you, or, I mean—”

“No, wait,” Wynonna said, and cut her off. “Listen, I just, there’s something I wanna say first.”

“Uh, sure, yeah.”

Wynonna inhaled, looking for how to start. “I haven’t... Listen, I know I’m not exactly gonna win any sister of the year awards.” Nicole frowned, but listened. “She needs more people who care about her. Not the way people in town care,” she said, waving a hand vaguely. “I mean, they care, but they don’t care. Not in a I’d-fight-a-creepy-mimic-monster-from-the-top-of-a-moving-car-for-you kind of way. I mean, you sure wouldn’t see Champ-asshole-Hardy pulling the shit you did.”

“No, no you wouldn’t,” Nicole said, a little slowly. She turned, so that her legs hung over the edge of her makeshift infirmary bed. She tilted her head just slightly to one side, still not sure where this was going.
“So, thank you,” Wynonna said, clumsy. “For giving a shit about my sister. I’m really glad she has a friend like you.”

A friend. Oh. Then Waverly hadn’t said anything yet. Nicole blew out a breath, a little relieved. This was not how she would have wanted to have that conversation with her... girlfriend’s? sister.

“Me too, Earp.”

Wynonna nodded, quick and jerky. “Well. Anyway. Normally I’d be pissed about my baby sister being friends with a werewolf, but I guess I don’t have much room to judge and... well, you’re a good person. If a bit slobbery.”

“I do not—why does everyone think I slobber,” Nicole protested.

Wynonna laughed, the sound a little frantic, a little surprised, but genuine. “All right. Well. One more thing.”

“Hm.”

The laughter vanished like a leaf blown away by a stiff wind. Wynonna leveled her with a sharp, piercing look, her gaze suddenly glacial cold. “Know that if you ever hurt her, we’re gonna find out if Peacemaker can kill werewolves.”

Nicole inhaled, sharp, but found no snarling wolf, no answering growls in her chest.

“Wynonna,” she said, and met the Earp’s cool gaze without flinching.

“What.”

“If I ever hurt Waverly,” Nicole said, and she wished her voice hadn’t shaken on the words, “Then I’ll want you to.”

Nedley had taken one look at her limping out into the bullpen, rolled his eyes, and waved her away. Dolls drove her home, but, to his credit, did not baby her or walk her inside, just waited patiently as she gingerly gathered up her duffel bag, fished out her keys, and carefully made her way up the front walk. It had been salted and shoveled, which she assumed was Waverly’s doing. She waved at Dolls from the doorway once she got it open, to give him the okay to go. He lifted a hand in acknowledgement, then started his car, and was leaving her driveway when she closed the door and locked it.

Calamity Jane rubbed against her ankles, mewing plaintively.

“No fooling me,” she muttered, smiling at her cat. “I know Waverly fed you.”

The little cat persisted for a few more minutes before, begrudgingly, abandoning the charade, and instead leapt up to sit on the back of a chair, watching Nicole move slowly around her living room. She left the duffel on the couch, after confirming that her bloodstained clothes were not inside it—those had probably been burned, which was fine, they were meant to be discarded anyway—and sat down only long enough to pull off her workboots, leaving them in the middle of the room. Normally she might’ve cared about keeping them near the door, but right now she just didn’t have the energy.

Her skin sang with the itching, brooding song of the moon, and she stripped off her t-shirt, pulling
off the bandages and shoving them into a trash can.

Nicole navigated her small home in a bit of a daze. She was awake, aware, but everything felt a little cloudy with lingering painkillers and the moon’s pull, and she felt vaguely like she were walking through a dream, moving slowly even though time was ticking along at its normal pace. She ate some leftovers cold from the fridge, but she wasn’t very hungry. She examined the thin silvery-white scar on her belly where the knife had gone in, trying to figure out by sight if the strike had actually perforated any organs. She surmised that it had not, or if it had, Dolls knew a lot more than just basic first aid. Either way, she was damn lucky. A silvered gut wound would be hard-pressed to kill a wolf, but it wasn’t impossible, not if the wound was bad enough that sepsis set in while the silver kept you from healing.

It was all about time tables at that point—if the infection was mild enough when the wolf’s healing was restored, it could be burned out pretty quick, but if there was enough damage and the silver took long enough to burn out... she’d heard of it happening. Not often, but it had. Or at least, so Shae had told her. It occurred to her now that maybe Shae only said it to scare her, like boogeyman stories told to children to make them take safety rules more seriously.

She was stiffly starting to peel off her jeans when her phone buzzed, the sound so strange and surprising she didn’t realize what it was at first. Only when it happened a second time did she head back out to the living room, her jeans undone and clinging to her hips, to dig her phone out of her bag.

_Hope you’re doing okay. <3_

_Dolls said he took you home?_

She smiled, taking her phone with her as she headed back to her room.

_YES, just got some food. was about to take a shower._

It wasn’t meant to be anything special, just informational, but she choked when Waverly’s answer came a moment later.

_Oho. ;) Shame I can’t watch._

Heat raced through her, the moon’s low pulse just adding to the effect.

_Sorry, that one was too easy. You feeling ok?_

Nicole ran a hand through her hair and tried to rein in her pounding heart.

_YES. Stiff from sleeping on a desk for 3 days tho. Thanks for taking care of cj._

She sat down on the bed to pull her jeans off, resisting the urge to just crawl into bed and sleep the rest of the day away. On the one hand, the moon was making her whole body itch; on the other, she’d been sleeping for days. The appeal of a midday nap was a bit mitigated when you’d been unconscious for something like three and a half days.

_Of course. Taking the day off?_

It was just a text, she shouldn’t read into it, right? But somehow she felt like Waverly wasn’t just asking.

_YES, Nedley said I can come back in tomorrow. Was thinking I’d just take it easy and go to bed_
early. She chewed on her lip, then sent, *Want to come over?*

The reply was immediate. *I’d love to.*

Regret slithered across her mind a second later. Maybe this was a mistake. It was a full moon, and it was *Waverly.* She thought of Wynonna’s threat.

Well, shit.

But it was too late now.

Waverly knocked just as Nicole was rubbing a towel through her hair, dressed in a tank top and jeans. When she answered the door, a blast of cold air filtered in first, enough to make her shiver once.

“Hey,” she said, and stepped out of the way so Waverly could step inside. She closed the door behind her, and Waverly looked her up and down, her eyes narrowed skeptically. “I’m okay,” she said, grinning. “Promise.”

“Hm,” Waverly allowed, and looked up at her face. “I just—”

It was ill-advised, it was bad timing, it wasn’t exactly polite, but Nicole took Waverly’s face in her hands and leaned down, pressing her mouth to Waverly’s, the last few words of whatever she was going to say muffled.

Waverly’s fingers curled into the ends of her towel where it was resting across her shoulders, pulling Nicole a little closer, and she obliged, stepping forward into the languid arc of Waverly’s body, her clothes chilled from the wind and snow. She looped her arms around Waverly, holding her tight against her, and for a moment, an impossible, calm moment, it was just them, in her house. There was nothing else, no BBD, no injuries, no poison, no moon, just Waverly, in her home, smelling of paper and ink and the crisp, clean wetness of country snow. Just *her,* just soft lips under her own.

Nicole curled her fingers into the back of Waverly’s coat and earned a soft, pleased noise for the effort, felt Waverly’s lips part a little against hers, felt the tip of Waverly’s tongue tracing the curve of her lower lip, an invitation if she’d ever felt one.

God, she wanted to take it. All of her howled for more, to take, to taste her, to press herself against every inch of Waverly’s body, to know her, to *love* her in every way. To make Waverly *hers* in all the ways that mattered.

*Whoa.* Hold up.

She pulled back, making a faint noise of dismay at the effort it took. She was not the wolf. She was *not.*

“Well,” Waverly said, catching her breath and licking idly over her lower lip, kiss-bruised and beautiful. “Now I don’t remember what I was going to say. You jerk.”

Nicole laughed, ducking her head against Waverly’s shoulder. “Sorry. I just...”

Soft hands framed Nicole’s neck above the towel, Waverly’s fingers cold but so very gentle. A shiver ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

“You don’t have to explain, Nicole. That was uh. A very nice greeting. But. I guess I should take
my coat off. And my boots.”

“Probably,” Nicole said. She leaned forward a few inches, nuzzling her nose to Waverly’s. She hesitated, recognizing the gesture as being blatantly canine, but Waverly beamed, pleased, and nuzzled back, her eyes squinted shut in amused joy.

“That’s really cute,” she said as she pulled back. “I like when you do that.”

“You do?” Nicole asked, and found herself smiling as Waverly nodded. “Well then, I guess I’ll have to do it more.”

“Oh,” Waverly said, with exaggerated despair. “What a burden.”

Nicole had forgotten how nice it could be to just spend time in idleness with someone. They didn’t really do anything all day—just sat on her couch, watching TV and holding each other. And other than the occasional prickle of hunger and desire, the animal of her was fairly well behaved. That said, she struck a compromise with that part of herself early on in the afternoon when, after a quick do you mind if in Waverly’s ear, she allowed herself to tuck a hand up under the hem of Waverly’s shirt, her fingers warm against Waverly’s ribs.

(Waverly had been more than happy with the compromise, if the soft breath she let out and the way she leaned her head back into Nicole’s shoulder was any indication.)

They sat that way for hours, with no pressure, no tasks to do, and Nicole couldn’t remember the last time she’d spent a full moon’s day so at peace.

Until it was getting deeper into the afternoon and evening started crawling across the sky in visible gradations of purple and red. Calamity Jane, who had been curled up in a little loop on the arm of the sofa, flicked her ears back and forth, as if sensing a distant sound, and then hopped down, vacating the living room without so much as a backward glance. Waverly noticed, but said nothing.

Nicole yawned, the gesture slightly exaggerated for effect. “All right, I think I gotta kick you out.”

Waverly sighed and leaned her head back into Nicole’s shoulder, pouting magnificently. “Really?”

“Yeah,” she said, pressing her lips to Waverly’s forehead. “I wanted to wait to keep from messing up my sleep schedule, but I’m definitely fading.”

“Oh boo,” Waverly said, but leaned up, kissing Nicole briefly. “Well, I can’t really argue with that.”

Nicole smiled, cupping Waverly’s cheek in one hand, holding her a moment longer and kissing her again.

“Got plans tomorrow?” she asked, her eyes flicking across Nicole’s face.

“Mm,” Nicole said, frowning. “Work will probably be real busy, especially since I’ve been gone for the last few days.”

“You don’t believe in those superstitions, do you?”

“Hm?”

“About more bad things happening under the full moon. You know, they always say that about
emergency rooms being super busy.”

Nicole sucked in a breath and tried to play it as thoughtful. “I dunno. It does seem to get pretty crazy with the moon out, but I wouldn’t say I believe it’s true to the extent of it being inevitable.”

Waverly nodded absently and watched Nicole’s face. “Right, yeah, that makes sense,” she said, and kissed Nicole once more before she got up and stretched. Her shirt rode up in the process, and Nicole had the sudden, strong urge to press her lips to the sliver of tanned skin in front of her. She wrestled that down, got up, and circled the table.

“Here, I’ll get your coat,” she said.

“Thanks,” Waverly said, smiling. She didn’t take more time than Nicole would have expected to get her boots on and slide into her coat, but Nicole could’ve sworn there was a low thrum of tension between them, like a lie threatening to spill. It put her on edge, but she tried to push it down. She was just being paranoid.

Right?

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Waverly said, smiling and leaning up on her toes to kiss Nicole goodbye. “Around the station.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, nuzzling their noses together one more time. “I’ll miss you, ‘til then.”

Waverly grinned. “You big sap.”

“That’s me,” Nicole agreed, grinning down at her.

“Sleep well,” Waverly murmured, leaning up for one more kiss before she slipped outside and down to her car. Nicole lingered by the window, watching, until Waverly was in the Jeep, waving and pulling out of the driveway.

Nicole couldn’t shake the sense that Waverly knew something and wasn’t sharing, but it wasn’t anything concrete, just a strange, quiet feeling that something had been weird between them. She frowned, but went about locking up her doors and checking all the windows, left food out for the cat. She pushed the armchair aside, opened the trapdoor, and climbed down into her basement, leaving her clothes by the ladder.

Without Waverly present, the moon itched its way under her skin, her blood too hot, or maybe too cold. She ground her teeth and stepped into the cage, only letting the change overtake her once the door had clanged shut and the bolt slid home, the display beeping over to engaged.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Come Nicky. Let me teach you the pentacle.

What is this, Daddy?

Five points. Fire, water, earth, air, and spirit. Bound within a circle of human will, of the magician’s mind.

Behold, humanity: the seal upon the stuff of creation.

Dad’s basement. She’s 18. About to leave for university.

He tells her to come downstairs, like she used to when she was little.

Musty air, choking, cloying. Incense forming a thin grey haze over everything, too thick to breathe. Buckets of paint. Brushes soaked in something that looks like paint, but isn’t. The quiet moaning of the suffering. The hissing, crackling-fire voices of the damned. A circle the size of a car, inscribed on the bare concrete floor in red. Hope it’s paint, but can’t quite be sure. Runes, ancient lettering, marking the outside, the inside.

A star, five-pointed. But this star is too big. It breaks the circle. The elements breach the binding.

You did it wrong, Dad.

No Nicky. Look, it’s exactly right.

There’s something lying on the floor within the circle, at the center. A body. Arms and legs sprawled so that it fits along the lines of the pentagram. The head, for spirit. The arms, for fire and air. The legs, for earth and water. Blood leaks out from each point: slit throat, slit wrists, slit Achilles tendons. The body’s face is slack, relaxed, eyes closed, lips just slightly parted. Composed like a painting.

Nude in repose, mixed media (2010).

A figure floats in the air above the body. A ghostly silhouette, indistinct, wavering. The binding isn’t enough to contain it, maybe because the star is too large—the binding isn’t precise, isn’t perfect. The figure flickers and gutters like a candle flame in a breeze. Not enough to destroy it, not enough to unleash it.

Dad? Dad! What is that thing?

That’s the creature that will tell us how to find Him, Nicky. Do you want to watch?

As awful Purgatory moon-dreams went, recollections of her father might’ve been her least favorite to date.
Nicole woke by degrees, aware of a very distant thumping noise. It was soft enough that, after considering it for a moment, she decided it wasn’t important. Somewhere her phone was ringing—that probably mattered more, but she was still too groggy and in pain to want to try to figure out where she’d left it the prior evening. Her whole body ached, her shoulders and back stiff with dried blood and muscle fatigue.

Her stomach growled. Hunger. It was always sharpest the morning after the first change. She’d been in the cage all night, so she hadn’t hunted, she hadn’t killed, she hadn’t devoured something. And the wolf, the animal side that prowled inside the cage of her body, that sat quiet, waiting, patient, for the rest of the month, that part of her wanted it. Wanted blood and death, wanted to win, wanted to prove it was better, stronger. It wanted to be nothing except itself: an animal, created solely to fuck and to kill and to survive. And it was under the moon that it clawed its way out of the cage. The moon was its compensation for the prison: sit quiet during the day, during the night, but under the light of the full moon, that was its time. Except she denied it even that, inside a cage of steel. And it chafed.

She heard meowing next, which was a bit more concerning, but if Calamity Jane was yowling for food before she’d gotten out of the basement, it wouldn’t be the first time.

The noise that did worry her was a distant creak of hinges, then footsteps on her floorboards, then a soft, familiar voice.

“Hey Calamity Jane. Where’s Nicole?”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Even the wolf knew this was wrong: it had stopped scratching at her thoughts, stopped trying to win over her rational side. It whined and paced and talked in musical strings of anxious sound.

“Nicole?” Waverly called, and Nicole listened to Waverly’s footsteps as she moved around the living room, peering down hallways and through open doors. She pitched her voice to carry as she moved around the main floor of the house. “Listen, Nicole, I’m really sorry for just, y’know, barging in, I just. I need to talk to you. And I meant to say it yesterday, but I got distracted, and then it was never the right time...” She heaved a sigh. “And I figured you’d be awake by now but you weren’t answering your phone, so then I started to get worried...”

Nicole lay on the floor, paralyzed. She couldn’t possibly crawl out of the basement in her current state and not have Waverly ask a million questions. But if she pretended she wasn’t home, would Waverly actually leave? She’d come all this way, she’d even dug the spare key from the planter on her front window, or maybe just kept it from the last few days. Enough weird shit happened in Purgatory that if Waverly was that worried, she wasn’t going to just leave. Not with Nicole’s shoes in the entryway and her car outside.

There was a faint, unmistakable scratching noise at the trapdoor, and Nicole cursed under her breath. That stupid cat.

“C.J.?” Waverly called, and then the footsteps tapped overhead again. “What’s that you’ve got there, sweetheart?”

No, no no... this wasn’t how this was supposed to go! God, she should’ve said it before, should’ve said it when she could control it, but now it was too late.

“Well,” Waverly muttered, and Nicole cringed as she heard the crossbar slide, wood scraping on wood. “Nicole, what have you got under your house?” she mused, talking to herself. “And why is it locked from this side?”
The ladder creaked and Nicole physically flinched, pushing herself weakly backward, deeper into the cage, trying to find a good shadow to hide in.

“No, don’t,” she said, her voice weak and rough with misuse. Waverly didn’t react, maybe hadn’t heard.

“Nicole?” Waverly called, and she paused under the ladder, looking around and muttering to herself. “I swear, if this is what I think it is...”

“I can explain,” she croaked. “Please, just—”

Waverly spooked then, jumping, and took a few hurried steps closer. She smelled like warmth—like hot air on your face when the oven door opens or sheets fresh out of the dryer. She smelled like the wildflowers that grew along the dirt lane across Earp land, like home.

She smelled like concern, so thick and heavy it made Nicole’s heart ache.

“Oh my god, Nicole,” she whispered, fingers curling around the bars.

“Please,” Nicole whispered. She tried to sit up, but it was so early, still so dark outside. Pain wracked along her spine in a full-bodied convulsion and a snarl, a real, animal snarl, tore out of her throat, too-long teeth flashing in the light leaking in from the open trapdoor. Waverly leapt back so fast it might have been a gunshot. “Please! Waverly, I can explain—”

Waverly was back across the small space before Nicole could even reach a hand out, and she doubled over against the floor. She let out an anguished howl—she couldn’t hear Waverly’s feet on the ladder, couldn’t hear the door open and slam shut again, but she could imagine the sounds so clearly she wasn’t quite sure what was real and what wasn’t.

She curled up on the floor, shaking, silent. Hot tears ran down her face. The salt of it burned across an open scratch on her cheek, a new pain that didn’t quite distract from the deeper one. Shae’s words rattled around in her brain like a handful of ball bearings, and she felt sick.

*When you find someone who accepts your crazy, you shouldn’t let go.*

Waverly laughed, the sound a little high, almost hysterical.

She jerked her head up so fast her neck creaked, the sound of Waverly’s voice deafening in the horrible still, musty air of her basement.

“Wha– Waves?”

Waverly stalked closer again, standing in an angled patch of light where dawn peeked in past the trapdoor and an open curtain. “I knew it,” she breathed, and her expression was almost triumphant. Vindicated. She pointed at her, still laughing, breathless with excitement. “I knew it! At first I thought maybe the book was wrong, or that maybe I hadn’t seen what I thought I’d seen, but– ooh! I knew I was right!” Nicole opened her mouth to say something, and Waverly frowned. “Aand, um. That’s not important right now. Right. Nicole. Where’s your first aid kit?”

Panic lanced through her chest as a physical pain. “Are you hurt?” Nicole asked, crawling forward again and pulling herself upright against the bars, trying to see her, sniffing the air for blood.

Waverly stared at her in utter disbelief, silent, then laughed and crouched down and pressed her fingers against Nicole’s, warm and soft. “No. No, you impossible woman. For you.”
“Oh,” she breathed, and let herself drop a little along the steel bars, until she was sitting again, leaning on one hip. “Oh. Um. Under... under the bathroom sink.”

“Okay.” Waverly was quiet for a moment, agonizingly long seconds. She watched Nicole, and Nicole watched her back, and when she spoke again, her voice was firm. “I’m gonna go and get it, and... and I’m going to patch you up, and while I do, you’re gonna tell me what the hell is going on, Nicole Haught.”

“Okay. Yes,” she said softly, letting her head droop forward. “I promise. Um. Before you go upstairs though...”

“What?”

Nicole cleared her throat, and felt a flush of heat spreading across her chest and shoulders. “Would you toss me my jeans?”

This was not how she anticipated sitting half-naked with Waverly Earp for the first time. Specifically, she did not anticipate it being while she was sitting on a towel on the floor in nothing but a pair of jeans, with Waverly sitting behind her on the armchair, a steaming bowl of water and a first aid kit on a side table. Reheated food was sitting within reach to quell the grumbling of her stomach, but she couldn’t focus enough to eat. Not when the hot water Waverly was using to rinse out the cuts sent thin rivulets of bloodied water down her back, or when the burning sting of peroxide made her snarl and growl.

“Hush,” Waverly said, amused. “This isn’t a Disney movie.”

“What?”

“Oh come on, tell me you saw Beauty and the Beast.”

She had, many years ago, but it took her a moment to remember the scene Waverly was talking about. “I suppose that tracks.”

“Hm?”

“Vous êtes une beauté.”

A fingernail flicked across the back of her ear and she yelped. “Ouch!”

“Your French is awful. So,” Waverly said, and Nicole laughed. Waverly set the bottle of peroxide aside and started laying out gauze pads across Nicole’s shoulders, the roll of medical tape scraping and creaking as she tore off strips. “Talk.”

“I meant to tell you earlier,” Nicole said, rueful. “I swear.”

“Tell me what,” Waverly prompted.

Nicole ducked her head. They both knew she already knew, but Waverly deserved to hear it spoken plainly. To hear it from her mouth.

“That I’m...” It occurred to her that she’d never actually said it out loud. Not to Dolls. Not even to Mikael. It was hard to make it come out as anything above a whisper.

“That I’m a werewolf.”
Waverly said nothing, just focused on her work.

“And, uh, that Dolls and your sister already know.”

“Mm, I figured that too, actually.”

“Yeah?” Nicole said, twisting to look over her shoulder.

“Dolls was lying about not knowing what poisoned you,” she said simply, then tilted her head in mock thoughtfulness. “And Wynonna was acting *really* suspicious when I said I wanted to swing by this morning.”

Nicole chuckled faintly and shook her head. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“I’m not upset you didn’t tell me,” she said, her voice soft.

She couldn’t have heard that right. Nicole turned a little more, earning a small, irritated huff—Waverly hadn’t finished.

“You aren’t?”

“I kept things from you too, Nicole. About BBD, about... Wynonna.”

“Sure, but that’s a government agency. And your sister. Who’s kind of scary.”

“Yeah, but. Jack.”

“Well,” she said, but the protest was half-hearted. She could still remember all too well the feeling of a hellfire-infused kick snapping her ribs. “We weren’t dating then, though.”

“No,” Waverly allowed. “But we both kept secrets. Not ideal, maybe, but understandable. And yours is... well, pretty personal.”

Nicole ducked her head again, smiling a little. “Yeah, I guess.”

“But you don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

Nicole looked up.

Waverly’s gaze dropped a little, then came back up, a slight flush across her cheeks. Right. Still no shirt.

“I just... I hate the idea of you doing all this by yourself. You work so hard as it is, and then to have to come back here and— and lock yourself downstairs, and then get up the next day and clean up and go to *work*, and do it all over again.” Nicole stared at her. “I know you’re fine, that you’ve probably been doing this for a while. Just...”

Nicole turned around fully, rising onto her knees, and set her hands on the arms of the chair to brace her weight. Waverly was fussing with the front of her sweater, her gaze somewhere around her knees, though it strayed to Nicole’s bare chest now and then.

“I’m sure you have a system. And— and I’m not trying to imply you *can’t* do it alone. I don’t want to insult you, you’re plenty capable, I just—”

“I just feel awful thinking of you putting yourself back together every morning alone, having to— to feed yourself and clean yourself off with no one to help you or talk to you or anything—”

“Waverly,” she said, with a little more force.

She dragged her gaze back up to Nicole’s face, her breath a little too fast, her heartbeat a little too loud. “I should stop talking.” she mumbled.

Nicole grinned, recalling the last time Waverly had said that, and shifted up a little more. “Yeah,” she said, and leaned in until her mouth was so close to Waverly’s that she could feel Waverly’s breath against her face. “You should.”

Nicole kissed her, and Waverly tangled her hands into Nicole’s hair, desperate and relieved and maybe a little manic, dragging her closer until Nicole had all but crawled into Waverly’s lap. The touch of Waverly’s tongue against hers was electric, a heat so raw and vibrant and alive that a sound rumbled in her chest, half moan and half possessive growl.

Waverly’s hands slid down from her hair and fluttered across her shoulders, as if trying to find a safe spot. Her fingers were warm from the cloth and the bandages. Waverly stiffened, then, as if she’d just noticed something, and pressed against Nicole’s shoulders until they parted. The soft wet sound of it was intoxicating, and Nicole let out a faint whine of displeasure at the loss.

“You aren’t done explaining,” Waverly said, though it lost some of its impact, since she was panting. “And you distracted me.”

Nicole grinned, but tried to look appropriately sheepish. “Right, right, sorry.”

Waverly ran a hand through her hair, sweeping it back from her face. Her gaze dropped to Nicole’s mouth, betraying how badly she didn’t want to keep talking, not when there were so many other, better uses for their mouths.

“All right. So, tell me.”

Nicole smiled and got up, offering a hand. “Mind if I multi-task? I need to start getting ready for work.”

“Right,” Waverly said, and followed her to her bedroom, sitting on Nicole’s bed as she started gathering up her uniform.

For a moment, Nicole was quiet, just absently folding and refolding a t-shirt as she tried to work out how to start. Maybe Waverly could tell. She smiled, just a little, and tangled her fingers together, and said softly, “How long?”

“A little less than a year,” Nicole said, glancing over at her. She sighed, and gave up the prospect of getting dressed to sit on the edge of her bed. Waverly shifted a little, sitting a bit closer, not touching, but so near she almost could have. “My...”

She hesitated, and Waverly set a hand lightly on her wrist, patient. God, it almost burned, how patient Waverly was, how understanding. She’d already thrown her one bombshell, even if it was something Waverly had already worked out on her own. To throw her another just seemed unfair.

“My lover, at the time,” she said, and shook her head. “She’s the one who bit me.”

Waverly inhaled. “Had you known?”
“No,” Nicole said, and found that there was a bit more bite in her voice as she said it. “I hadn’t. She hadn’t told me.”

“How long had you been together?”

What had it been? Weeks? Not long, objectively. But they’d ridden the high of a great concert and a big win at the slots and yet somehow, in all the time between the rock climbing trip and the detour into the city proper and that messy, hilariously unorganized visit to a Vegas chapel, Shae had not seen fit to share the punchline to her joke about preferring her steak rare.

Or a few other things, for that matter. But that reminded her of her dream, her father’s basement. She shoved those thoughts aside, hard.

“Long enough,” Nicole said, and sighed. She considered getting up, fishing out a bra that wouldn’t irritate the bandages, buttoning up her uniform shirt, swapping slightly bloodied black jeans for khakis. Just thinking about it was exhausting. She flopped backward onto her bed, looking up at the ceiling, one hand resting idly on her stomach. Waverly moved closer to her, lying down alongside her, and rested her head on the quilt next to Nicole’s. “Long enough for her to have mentioned it.”

Waverly nodded, watching her face. She reached out, gently stroking hair away from Nicole’s cheek. “Was it an accident?”

“No,” Nicole said, frowning at the ceiling, then waved one hand in a vague circle. “Or... yes? I guess she would say it was. We’d been rock-climbing. I fell. Wrecked my shoulder, fractured a whole lot of myself. It was... it was pretty ugly.”

Waverly inhaled sharply, maybe imagining it. She leaned up on her elbow then, running her hand over Nicole’s shoulders one at a time, as if looking for the wound, looking for any sign that the body beneath her fingers had once been so shattered the doctors thought it would be a miracle if she regained the ability to lift her arm over her head.

“You can’t even tell,” she mumbled, then frowned, her fingers finding the silvery pockmarks on her left shoulder, where a wolf’s fangs had torn into her skin. “Is this?”

“Mm.” She turned her head to look at her, gave Waverly a sort of crooked smile. “While I was in surgery, I had some allergic reaction. Nearly died on the table, I found out later. My lover,” she said, and couldn’t help herself—the word came out on a low, ripping growl. “Decided to save me.”

Waverly looked up to her face again then, her eyes very round, but she didn’t look like the sound had scared her. “She just...”

“Bit me while I was unconscious,” Nicole said. “I woke up after it had happened. Whole, alive, able to move, but... different.”

“God,” Waverly said. “I can’t even imagine.”

“I was angry,” she said, unnecessarily. That much was obvious from the low, persistent motorbike-engine growl grinding in her chest. “Very angry. But I stayed with her for two lunar cycles. I didn’t know enough, didn’t trust myself not to hurt someone by accident.”

“Hm.” Waverly’s fingers strayed away from Nicole’s shoulder, gliding along her collarbone, then down, just barely tracing the curve of her breast. Nicole let her eyes slip shut, let a low, pleased noise rumble in her chest. It made Waverly’s breath hitch, though, Nicole noticed, it did not make her pull her hand away.
It wasn’t how she’d pictured having this conversation, but then, Waverly never stopped surprising her, really. For a moment neither of them spoke, the tips of Waverly’s fingers touching, gently, with the lightness of a feather, dancing along a line neither of them knew the whole shape of. Then Waverly hummed softly, a thoughtful, curious sort of sound.

“But you left after that?” she asked, though her fingers stayed, still roaming over Nicole’s skin.

She let out a breath, shifting a little to try to alleviate the low smoldering heat deep in her belly. “Um. Right,” she said, gathering her thoughts. It was rather more difficult now. “She introduced me to some friends she had, some people she knew who were good at hiding from, well, groups like BBD. I found out that she was associated with some…” She frowned, thinking again of her dream, but Waverly’s nail traced the hollow of her throat, driving away the thoughts of blood and death. She tilted her head back, baring her throat to Waverly. The wolf itched, so very, very aware of the power of that one gesture, but grudgingly allowed it.

“How?”

“Some really bad people,” Nicole said, a little too fast, her breath a little sharper, a little quicker now. “Soonest chance I got, I got away from her. Got help from a vampire, of all things, and skipped town. Kept running until I learned about Purgatory. I still had friends at the academy, so I went through some back channels to get my name on Nedley’s desk, and he did the rest of the work himself. And, well, the rest is history.”

“Wow,” Waverly said, stunned, and finally let her hand trail down to rest on Nicole’s belly. Her fingers were warm where they rested on Nicole’s skin. She never wanted them to go away. Nicole took a deep, slow breath, regaining her focus in the absence of that light touch.

“Sounds nuts, right?”

“Yeah,” Waverly admitted. “If I hadn’t seen your cage myself I’m not sure I’d believe it.”

Nicole chuckled and rolled a hand. “Yeah. Well. I don’t blame you.”

“How’d you get it? The cage.”

“Called in a favor of Mikael’s with the Blacksmith,” she said, then sobered. “Rest her soul, I guess.”

“What does Dolls know?”

“Actually? Almost nothing. I made a deal with him last month that I’d give him any supernatural leads I found, and in exchange, he wouldn’t tell BBD about me.”

Waverly nodded, fitting that in with everything else she’d known. “And Wynonna?”

“Figured it out the night before the kidnapping. Not quite sure how, but she kinda got in my face that night. I was pretty mad. Sounds like she’d run with wolves before, so I guess she knew the signs.” She blinked, suddenly curious. “How’d you figure it out?”

“Mostly your eyes, at the restaurant,” she said. “Did some research.” She chewed on her lip, thinking. “And other little things, I guess. I’d never heard of moonwater for silver wounds though.”

She blinked. “I told you about moonwater?”
Waverly chuckled. “Well, that answers that. Wasn’t sure if you remembered waking up in BBD.”

“Maybe a little.” She smiled faintly. “I think I do remember you being mad at me.”

“You let the voice-mimic trick you,” Waverly said with an absolutely exasperated sigh. “Even after I’d told you what their big ruse is.” Nicole grinned. “I’m just glad all he did was stab you,” Waverly said. “If something happened to you...”

Nicole reached up, running her fingers along Waverly’s jaw, until she could slide one under Waverly’s chin. “Hey,” she said. “It’ll take a lot more than one measly little dagger to take me down, silver or no silver. Okay?”

Waverly smiled, and nodded. “Okay.”

“Guess I should get ready,” she said, though she didn’t want to get up.

“I guess so,” Waverly agreed. “Can’t really help you get dressed. Or, I can, but that seems a little bit much.”

Nicole grinned, laughing softly. “Yeah, maybe.” She paused. “Though, there is something you could help me with.”

“Hm?”

“How good are you with braiding someone else’s hair?”

Chapter End Notes

Cookies for all y'all who called it that Waverly would come back with the spare key. Honestly how could I NOT have that "caught red-handed" moment though.

Also, more pieces on the board are being revealed, but there's still more mysteries to be uncovered...
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walking out of her house with Waverly lingering beside her, watching her lock her door, felt... right. It felt easy, in a way that was maybe a bit too fast, for having only been together for, what, two weeks?

“Hey Wave,” Nicole said, as she walked Waverly around to the passenger side. “Have you given much thought to... you know, what we are?”

Waverly looked up from her phone, blinking owlishly. “Hm?”

“I mean, if you’re gonna be helping me with my uh, issues, at home, we’re gonna get pretty close, pretty fast,” she said, a smile curling across her mouth.

Waverly’s face went a little pink, though not from the cold.

“And, I mean, given what we talked about in the sheriff’s office, and... at the café?” she said, trailing off a little.

Waverly chewed on her lip, shuffling a little in place where she stood beside the car. Nicole stepped a little closer. For warmth, of course.

“I had, yes,” Waverly murmured, tilting her head back to look at her. “Did you have something in particular in mind?”

Nicole grinned and shook her head. “Nope. This is new territory for you. You call the shots here.”

Waverly blinked, surprised. “What?”

“You know I like you,” Nicole said, earning an amused little well yeah, “And I know you like me, at least enough to drag me into my boss’ office to make out on his couch.” Waverly’s face turned red and she bopped a gloved hand harmlessly against Nicole’s chest, making her laugh. “But I’m not going to push you to use particular words or to tell anyone else, or anything at all that you’re not ready for. Okay? We’re following your lead here.”

Waverly was quiet for a moment, reading her face, and then leaned up on her toes to kiss Nicole. “I don’t know if I’m ready to tell anyone,” she said softly, ducking her head for a moment. “But it is kind of nice, in my head, anyway, um, using the word girlfriend. If that’s okay.”

Anyone who says that happiness doesn’t feel warm is lying. Nicole was pretty sure she could’ve stood in the midst of a blizzard and not felt even a little chilled.

“That’s definitely okay,” she said, and opened the door for her so that Waverly could settle into the front seat.

“Hm,” Waverly murmured, reading texts on her phone as Nicole started up her cruiser and pulled out of her driveway.

“Hm?”

“Looks like Dolls is a no-show,” Waverly mused. “Not to like. Completely change the topic.” She
hummed, still reading. “And Doc has been staying at the Homestead, so he’s out of the way for today.”

“How?” Nicole asked.

“Oh, uh, Henry.” Nicole nodded and Waverly scrolled through the messages again. “So Wynonna and I will hit Shorty’s after I get in.”

“Hit Shorty’s?” Nicole frowned. “Why?”

Waverly looked up, as if she’d only just remembered where she was. “Oh, um, we need more information on Bobo.”

“Del Rey?” Nicole asked, frowning. “How’s he factor into this?”

“Oh,” Waverly said, and winced. “Right. My turn I guess.”

Nicole raised an eyebrow, but kept her eyes on the road. “Is this about the demons?”

“Yeah. They’re sort of…” Waverly laughed a little, maybe amused by her own hesitation. “The resurrected 77 outlaws that Wyatt Earp killed back in the 1800s? Cursed to rise from Hell whenever an Earp heir comes of age.”

Nicole considered that, weighing it against what she knew, what she’d seen. “That... actually explains a lot.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and laughed. “Yeah, actually.”

Waverly exhaled heavily. “That’s a relief.”

“Wait,” Nicole said, frowning. “Are you saying Bobo del Rey is a demon?”

“Eh,” Waverly said, hedging. “It’s not quite accurate to say that they’re demons. They’re people. You know. Damned, but still basically people. They come back a little... demon-adjacent, though.”

Nicole frowned. “Can they all wield hellfire?”

Waverly considered that. “I think it’s just the ones who’ve been down and back a few times. Or maybe the ones who’ve been sent back the least. It’s a little unclear. Why?”

“Would rather not tangle with that again,” Nicole said, frowning. “Once was enough.”

“Oh,” Waverly said, then again, with dawning understanding. “Oh. That’s why you... in the hospital?”

Nicole nodded. “Not a fun time.”

“No I bet not,” Waverly said. “Well, that’s good to know.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said. “It’s good to know what your limits are, is all,” she said, and reached out to set a hand on Nicole’s thigh, warm through the khakis. “If you’re gonna help Black Badge sometimes, especially.”
Nicole chuckled. “I’m pretty sure if Dolls has his way, that was a one-time thing.”


Maybe it was the moon that made Nicole itch to touch Waverly, to pull her body close and taste her mouth again. Or, maybe it wasn’t, and Nicole was just riding a high of energy and affection she hadn’t really felt for anyone since Shae. It crawled across her senses like a hard-to-identify smell, omnipresent but difficult to put words to. It started as soon as she saw Waverly leave with Wynonna, wearing her Shorty’s shirt again and an expression of pure defiant determination. It didn’t go away all morning, especially not when the Earps returned not even an hour later, looking a little rattled.

Nicole noticed that Waverly was missing her necklace, but elected not to ask—Waverly looked unsettled, and her unease made Nicole want to grab her and wrap her up in her arms and shut out the world even more.

BBD had been quiet for maybe an hour when she heard Waverly sigh, her footsteps ticking toward the door.

“Surveillance,” she was saying, complaining to Dolls and Wynonna. “Mucho taxing on my bladder.”

Nicole glanced up as BBD’s door opened, then shut, and then Waverly slid across the hall toward her and ducked around the counter. She grinned, sly as a fox, and glanced around for witnesses before she sat on the corner of Nicole’s desk.

“Hey,” Waverly said, bright and cheery. “Work going okay?”

*That delightful little sneak.*

Nicole smiled, leaning back in her chair. “Yeah. Yeah, it is. How about you guys? Anything good?”

Waverly rolled her eyes. “Men,” she said, by way of explanation.


“Anything I can do to help out here?” Waverly said, looking around. “I’m going a little stir-crazy in there I think.”

“Actually,” Nicole mused, looking around. “I did have a file I was thinking of giving Dolls but I might have misplaced it. Want to help me look?”

Waverly glanced at her, momentarily dubious—the look on her face read *you never misplace anything* as clear as if she’d actually spoken the words aloud—before her eyebrows rose and she grinned.

“Oh,” she said, feigning thoughtfulness. “You know, that’s a good idea.”

“Great,” Nicole said, and let her fingers brush the inside of Waverly’s wrist as she did.

Waverly grinned, but stepped away from her with a sly, teasing little smile. “Maybe... you left it in the sheriff’s office?” she suggested, backing up until she was standing by a worktable, running her
fingers over a clipboard.

“Maybe,” Nicole murmured, reminding herself to breathe.

Footsteps clicked in the hallway and Nicole cursed, ducking her head to pay attention to her desk. She heard Waverly hastily scoop up the clipboard, reading over it. Dolls stalked by, then out the front door, and Waverly slid a file over to the near side of the worktable.

It was something like an invitation, Nicole thought, and grinned as she rose from her chair, scooped up the file, and crossed the room in a few long strides. She curled her fingers around Waverly’s wrist, tugging her along as she opened the door to Nedley’s office. She heard the clipboard hit the table again as Waverly left it behind, and then they were face to face, in Nedley’s doorway.

Nicole made a soft sound in her chest, a rumbling burr that made Waverly lean up to kiss her, smiling like she was all too proud of the effect she had.

Except that then Nicole heard boots clicking on the linoleum and smelled whiskey and gunpowder. She pulled away as fast as was reasonable, turning toward Wynonna and trying to look casual, leaning one arm against the doorframe and holding the file in her free hand while Waverly squirmed and leaned against the door.

Wynonna leaned against the counter and gave them a bewildered frown.

“Why are you guys in Nedley’s office?”

“Well,” Waverly started, just as Nicole said “Cuz, when...”

“Uh, yes.”

“So...”

Wynonna ignored them. “Okay, uh, here she blows.” She inhaled, clearly distracted, and set her hands on the counter, then sighed, shaking her head. “Doc and I slept together.”

“And that’s news? Really?” Nicole asked, almost laughing. Waverly blew out a breath next to her and she hesitated, looking down. “To... you. To.” A phone was ringing somewhere, hopefully hers. “Okay.”

When she got to her desk, regrettably, her phone was not ringing, but she sat down, quiet as a mouse, and tried not to listen too closely.

“Waverly,” Wynonna said, her voice low with warning. “We are both grownups.”

“Yeah, well,” Waverly said, and kept her voice lower. “One of you’s a little bit more grown up than the other, don’t you think?”

The hell did that mean?

Wynonna exhaled and rolled her eyes. “Little bit,” she allowed.

“So why are you telling me this now?” Waverly asked.

“Cuz it’s out there,” Wynonna said, and sighed. “Thanks to Bobo.”

“Bobo knows?” Waverly said, and Nicole could hear the cringe in her voice even without seeing
her face.

“Yes,” Wynonna said, stiff, and then jerked a thumb over her shoulder toward the BBD office.
“And Dolls.”

“Uh-oh,” Waverly said, shifting on her feet. She was quiet for a moment, then asked, “Well... do–do you love Doc?”

Wynonna groaned and turned to go. “It’s just sex, Waverly. God.”

“That’s-- that’s not a ‘no!'” Waverly called after her.

Nicole tried to hide a laugh behind her hand and Waverly turned to look at her, sighing. “Really?”

“Sorry,” Nicole said, and raised her hands in surrender. “Sorry.”

“Seriously, how long have you known?” she asked, making her way back over to Nicole’s desk.

Nicole stood, leaning her hip against her desk. “Mm, since it started, I think. Give or take a few days.”

Waverly raised an eyebrow. “How?”

Nicole smirked. “Do you really want to know?”

Waverly narrowed her eyes. “Is this something that’ll make me want to bleach out my brain for thinking about my sister knocking boots with Doc?”

Nicole offered her a very innocent shrug, then leaned closer, her voice low, conspiratorial. “I have a really good nose.”

“Tell me you didn’t smell—”

“No, no, just smelled them on each other,” she said. She watched Waverly’s face for a moment, then decided to take a gamble. She grinned, all tooth and wolfish hunger, and leaned forward, her voice low and husky in Waverly’s ear. “On you, however.”

Waverly inhaled sharply, her heartbeat picking up, and went rabbit-still.

“Oh,” she said, with a shaky breath. “Well, that’s a little embarrassing.”

“Not at all,” Nicole said, and was suddenly glad Waverly had left her hair down—it perfectly hid the moment she let her lips brush the curve of Waverly’s ear. “It’s nice, knowing when someone wants you. Very good for the ego.”


Nicole grinned, and winked. “If it’s too much...”

“No,” Waverly said, maybe a bit too quickly. “Um. No, it isn’t.”

“Tell me if it ever is,” Nicole murmured, still grinning, but squarely meeting Waverly’s eyes. “I might get a little mouthy, especially uh, under the moon, but any circumstance, any time. You say no, and I’ll stop.”
Waverly inhaled, then nodded. “Right. Okay. I will um. I will keep that in mind.”

“Good,” Nicole murmured, and nudged her nose against Waverly’s.

Waverly grinned, nuzzling back, then sighed. “How many hours till you’re off for the night?”

“Three. It’s four to sundown,” she said, without even looking at the clock.

Waverly left for a bit, to fetch some things from the homestead, and when Nicole headed home for the afternoon, she found Waverly’s Jeep in her driveway and the scent of meat cooking coming from her kitchen window.

“Wave?” she called, as she came inside and toed off her boots.

“In here!”

In the kitchen she found Waverly, turning steaks over in a pan. Nicole lingered in the doorway for a moment, watching, and only noticed she had her mouth hanging open when Waverly looked over her shoulder, laughed, and gestured at her face.

“God,” Nicole said, hastily wiping her chin. “Maybe I do deserve all the slobber jokes.”

“I guess it smells good, then,” Waverly said, still laughing.

“It smells delicious,” Nicole assured her, stepping up behind her and looping her arms around Waverly’s waist. “Thank you.”

“Not too domestic?”

Nicole laughed. “No, not at all. I know usually giving your girlfriend a spare key is a big step and all but in the circumstances, I’d give you a key a dozen times if it meant a real, hot meal before a night sleeping on the floor.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Waverly said, and looked up over her shoulder to Nicole’s face. “Do you have to?”

For a moment she was very quiet, and she let go as Waverly started moving pans around and plating food. “Shae didn’t believe in cages,” she said finally, leaning back against the counter. “Said it was wrong to muzzle such an exquisite beast. She’d go out into the woods, run free across the tundra. Said she’s killed elk, even moose before.”


“I do,” Nicole said, and sighed. “Never quite understood how she meshed full moon hunting with the Hippocratic Oath, but, I guess sharing your body with a primal ancient hunter for a decade changes your stance on certain things. I just... I don’t like the risk.”

Waverly frowned at her, but if she wasn’t following something she didn’t ask.

“It’s too easy to mess up. What if there’s hikers, or other human hunters?” She shook her head. “I can’t accept that margin of error.”

Waverly set plates on the table and Nicole belatedly thought to grab silverware. There was something bizarre, almost comical, about the contrast.
“Have you?” Waverly asked.

“Hm.”

“Hurt anyone?”

Nicole hesitated, and Waverly bit her lip.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s. It’s fine.” Nicole hazarded a smile and sat down at the table. “I just don’t have an answer for you. I don’t know.”

Waverly tangled her fingers together, her expression not afraid, but very, very sad, and when she spoke, her voice was almost a whisper. “I’m sorry, baby.”

Nicole smiled, and reached out to curl a finger around Waverly’s, tugging her closer so that Waverly was standing beside her chair.

“Baby, huh?”

Waverly blushed. “Sorry, is it too...?”

“No,” Nicole murmured. Then pursed her lips. “Much better than Wynonna’s nicknames. I swear, I’m just waiting for her to bust out a dog whistle.”

At that Waverly laughed, brightening. “Yeah, well, puppy might raise eyebrows.”

“Probably, yeah,” Nicole said, laughing.

Waverly pulled a chair over, sitting within arm’s reach. “So, question.”

“Go for it.”

“Would you like me to stay?” she asked, soft, watching Nicole’s face. “Downstairs, or upstairs. I brought some clothes and books to read.”

Nicole inhaled, thinking. “I am open to you staying,” she said, slowly. “But if it gets... weird, or scary. I don’t want you to stay downstairs if you don’t feel totally safe.”

Waverly smiled. “Okay. I’ll give Wynonna a call then.”

“Maybe don’t tell her you’ll be in the basement,” Nicole said, wincing.

“Oh not a chance,” Waverly said, laughing, and pulled out her phone as Nicole picked up her fork and knife. She set it on speaker and put the phone down, giving Nicole a slightly wry smile as it rang.

Wynonna picked up, and in the background she could hear the growling grumble of a car that wasn’t, Nicole thought, Gus’ borrowed truck.

“Hey baby girl! Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, chewing on her lip. “Yeah, but I wanted to let you know I won’t be home tonight. Gonna stay with a friend.”
Wynonna snorted. “I knew it. You’re in too good a mood this past week. I knew you were getting laid again. Just please, please tell me you didn’t get back with Champ.”

Nicole almost choked on her food and Waverly yelped. “Wynonna! S-shut up! No, I’m not. And um. I’m gonna stay with Nicole.”

There was a very, very long pause.

“It’s uh,” Wynonna said, and Nicole could almost picture her leaning to look up through the windshield. “Are you sure? Seems like um, maybe tonight’s not a good night?”

Nicole cleared her throat and cut in to save Wynonna some dancing, as fun as it was to listen to her squirm. “I told her, Earp.”

Wynonna gave an absolutely explosive sigh. “Oh thank god.”

Waverly rolled her eyes. “I’ll be safe, Wy, I just want to be around and... you know. Help. If I can.”

“Honestly, Waverly, that helpful streak is gonna be the death of you someday. Haughtdog? You so much as breathe in her direction I’m gonna go all Old Yeller on your fuzzy ass.”

“That’s fair,” Nicole said, but chuckled. “Maybe not your best reference though. Points off for a weaker connection.”

“Oh go chase your tail or something.”

Nicole laughed and put her plate in the sink.

“I’ll text you, Wy, and keep you posted.”

“Okay. Just as long as you’re being careful, that’s all I care about. Oh, and Haught?”

Nicole leaned over Waverly’s shoulder. “Mm?”

There was a pause, maybe a little awkward. “Hope your night is... okay.”

Nicole smiled faintly. “Thanks, Wynonna.”

Waverly hung up and stood, squeezing Nicole’s hand. “You go on. I’ll lock up and feed Calamity Jane.”

Nicole smiled and leaned down, kissing her once, then went to change clothes and climb down into the basement. Her nerves hadn’t subsided at all, but the thought of dozing on the floor with Waverly close enough to smell her, to hear her voice... maybe tonight wouldn’t be so bad.

Chapter End Notes

I initially thought this chapter would move a bit deeper into episode 10, but the lovebirds started chatting and wouldn't shut the heck up sooo...
Tonight got unexpectedly busy so this one’s early and a little lean, but it seemed like it was time to show a little more of the beast...

Nicole left the trapdoor open when she went down into the basement, and for a minute or so Waverly was alone on the ground floor. Calamity Jane had long since vanished into the bedroom like a puff of smoke, and once the kitchen was more or less clean and pans set in the sink to soak, Waverly stepped into the living room.

She had said she wasn’t afraid of Nicole, and that was true. But at the same time, one did not just blithely walk down into a confined space with a moon-bound shapeshifter without at least a little bit of sensible, rational fear prickling around in one’s chest. Waverly wasn’t afraid that Nicole would hurt her, but she was also a little too aware that there might be a very significant difference between Nicole and the creature that she would become. Nicole’s preferences might not matter so much when the time came.

So, although she was definitely not paralyzed by fear, she did hesitate at the open trapdoor.

“Leave it open, when you come down,” Nicole called, and she heard the cage door clang shut. “I don’t want you trapped down here. Just in case.”

“Right,” Waverly breathed, then said more clearly, “Right, um, sure, yeah, I’ll do that.”

“It’s okay if you want to just sit up there, Waverly. Like I said, only if you feel safe.”

“I’m fine!” she called down.

And she was almost convincing, except that then a cell phone rang and she jumped, letting out the smallest yelp.

For a moment it just rang, and she could hear Nicole rustling around.

“Is that your phone?” Waverly asked.

“Yeah. On the coffee table.” Nicole’s words cut off with a growl, a sound vaguely like paper going through a shredder, and she was panting when she added, “Go ahead and answer it, baby.”

Waverly fumbled for the coffee table, scooping up the phone before it could go to voicemail.

“Um, hello?” she asked, just as there was a terrible roaring sound from below, like a car engine revving inside a garage, echoing and furious.

There was a moment of silence, and then a man spoke, cold with disapproval and a touch of an accent—Norwegian? Swedish maybe?

“You are not Nicole.”
“Oh, um, no, I’m not,” Waverly said, and jumped when there was another terrible sound from the basement, this one anguished and wracked with pain. “I’m Waverly. She’s um. A little busy. Can I take a message?”

“If you have imprisoned her,” the man said, his voice absolutely arctic. “You will regret it by sunrise.”

“What?” Waverly said, startled. “No, um. I’m her... friend.” She considered her words for a moment, then said slowly, trying to infuse the words with extra meaning. “She’s in her basement...?”

For a moment she thought he would press it, but she heard him let out a slow breath. There was a sickening set of noises from downstairs, squelching and cracking and then a howl of pain that, judging by the way he inhaled sharply, she thought maybe he had heard.

“Sorry,” she said, trying not to listen to the sound of Nicole crying out, one moment too human and the next all animal. “Um. Who is this?”

He was quiet for a moment longer. “My name is Mikael.”

“Oh!” she said, and ran a hand through her hair, pacing nervously around the living room. “She’s mentioned you.”

“She did not mention you, but I am glad she has someone,” Mikael murmured, and he chuckled, the sound like chocolate—sinful and smooth. “My hjärta forgets that wolves are pack animals.”

“Hjär– right, um, well, I should probably check on her, but uh, did you need something, Mr. Mikael?”

He laughed again, a little more earnest. “I see why she likes you, little ocean-child.” She mouthed the word ocean-child to herself but elected not to question it. “Please, just call me Mikael. Mr. von Holstein was my father.”

“Right,” she said slowly.

“And my father has been dead since the 1600s.”

She made a faint choking noise, which must have been the reaction he was hoping for, because he laughed again.

“You’re the vampire,” she said softly. “The one who helped her get away from her lover.”

He made a soft, intrigued noise. “Ah, she told you a great deal then. Well then. Tell her this, when she is once again herself.” She nodded, though he couldn’t see it, and when he spoke again, his voice was deadly serious. “They move in the shadows. The night-barker was only the first. They seek the tomb. She is with them, and her lie runs deeper than even you know. When the seals break, she will be their hands.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “That’s not ominous or anything.”

“Repeat it back to me, child.”

She did, then once more, until he was satisfied she’d committed it to memory.

“Now,” he said, more brightly. “Look after her. She will make noise of it but she will appreciate
“Who, Nicole?” she asked. “I know, that’s why—”

“No, child,” Mikael said, and laughed. “The wolf.”

Waverly left Nicole’s phone in her pocket and very carefully climbed down the ladder. The horrible noises had ended before she got off the phone, but when she got down into the basement, there wasn’t much light to see into the cage, but she could see, maybe more so she could sense, an enormous thing within the bars.

“Nicole?” she said, her voice a rough whisper. “Baby?”

The thing in the cage huffed out a little growl, and she saw a flicker of movement, perhaps an ear. Feeling very much like she had walked into a horror movie she wanted no real part of, she pulled out her phone and turned on the flashlight, cautiously tilting her phone up to face the bars.

The werewolf within snarled and pivoted, so that her flashlight glinted off a huge, bright golden eye and a row of wet, shining fangs. She squeaked and skittered back a step on instinct, then eased forward, forcing her breath to even out again.

“Hey,” she whispered, and now she was sure, a large ear flicked, listening. The werewolf was enormous, all shaggy russet fur and massive, rounded shoulders. It was hard to tell with the beast cooped up in the cage, but she tried to find the line of its spine, of its hips, and gauge how tall it might be standing. Easily ten feet, she thought, though she wasn’t sure exactly. A low snarl rumbled out of the cage, the sound so much deeper, so much bigger now that it was coming from a chest as big around as a horse.

“Hey, baby, it’s me,” she said, inching closer until she was maybe five feet from the bars. The creature shifted within its confines, growling still, but it wasn’t, she thought, an aggressive sound. It seemed almost more thoughtful, like a car idling, like it was just automatic, a side effect of breathing.

The wolf’s head tilted just slightly, golden eyes glowing slightly, but narrowing in suspicion.

The creature pressed its nose between two bars, snuffling audibly.


doctor’s office.

Oh this is a bad idea, she thought furiously, This is such a bad idea.

Wynonna would kill her if she found out about this, but Waverly stepped a little closer, raising her hand to offer it to the wolf’s nose.

With a faint growl of frustration the wolf pressed a little further between the bars and Waverly took another step, until her palm almost touched the big wet nose.

Golden eyes flashed and she yanked her hand back just as fangs slashed the air and closed together with an audible snap, inches from where her fingers had just been. Before she could even think to scream or speak the wolf had yanked away from the bars, grabbing at its head with both paws, snarling and growling in a cadence that almost sounded like conversation. The wolf threw its head back, howling a long, mournful wail that made the soundproofing along the walls tremble. Waverly dropped her phone and clapped her hands over her ears to block out some of the sound, but even for that her ears rang when the howl faded out.
Her phone’s flashlight faced the ceiling of the tiny basement, giving her only a vague silhouette of the creature in the cage. But when she looked at it again, the wolf was safely back from the bars, and eyes that were warmer, more like honey or caramel than gold, watched her.

“Hey,” she said, one more time, and the wolf nosed at the bars, the gesture so much like Nicole’s little nuzzling touches that Waverly bit down on her lip to keep from sobbing, happy, or maybe relieved. “There’s my baby.”

The wolf made a grumbling noise, but then settled back on her haunches, and Waverly scooped up her phone, settling in on the floor a few feet from the cage. Ears flicked and the wolf tilted her head, then, evidently satisfied, got up on all fours, turned in a circle, and curled up within the bars, head on her front paws, warm golden eyes watching her.

“So,” Waverly said, and swiped through her phone. “Thought I might read to you some, or... something. Any requests?”

The wolf let out a huge doggy sigh, and Waverly bit her lip, trying not to laugh.

“Right. Sorry. Well, let’s um. Let’s see what I’ve got.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She dreamt of fire, of grasping clawed fingers that tore at her skin, of whispering voices and of a breeze rustling through long grasses and tree branches.

Right at the end of the dream a phrase echoed in her mind, spoken using Shae’s voice.

*The sleepers wake; the mind recalls. The eldest first, then the Old One wakes them all.*

In the morning Nicole woke to the smell of coffee and sausage and eggs. A plate sat on the floor just outside the cage, with a bathrobe folded neatly to one side. Waverly was moving around upstairs, and the sheer immensity of that single, tiny gesture made it difficult for her to even get up at first, literally floored by Waverly’s compassion. When she did get up, she found that she was still sore from sleeping on the ground in a little coil, but not as badly scratched up as usual. That probably tracked. She never remembered much of what happened under the moon, but she didn’t think she’d spent the whole night clawing at herself in frustration for being bound and leashed, the way she had the month before.

She crawled out of the cage and pulled the robe around her shoulders, devouring most of the food and climbing back upstairs with the coffee in hand. Waverly stopped her when she was halfway to the shower, kissed her cheek, and then went to the couch to sip coffee from a mug she’d borrowed from Nicole’s cabinet and read the news on her phone.

For a moment Nicole just reveled in the utter normalcy of it all. Even though it had only happened this once, Waverly made it all feel routine. Ordinary.

She could definitely get used to this.

Other than Mikael’s cryptic warning, which Nicole decided she would mull over more once the full moon wasn’t looming over her, Thursday was uneventful. The station was quiet, too—Wynonna and Dolls had gone out to the Pine Barrens in pursuit of some lead, Waverly wasn’t quite sure what. Nicole considered texting Dolls to warn him about the shapeshifter living out there, but by the time she learned they’d left, they’d been gone long enough she knew their phones wouldn’t be getting good service.

Friday morning on the way to work Waverly teased her about wearing dresses more often, which Nicole begrudgingly allowed might, in some circumstances, be easier to shift out of than pants. When they got to the station they parted to focus on their own workdays with a kiss and promises of reconnecting the next night. Nicole could actually do things after sundown, but Gus wanted to have dinner at the homestead. A family thing, Waverly said.

Wynonna swept through the station like a storm, a stained bit of paper in her hand, but didn’t acknowledge Nicole on her way into the BBD offices.

She smelled kind of weird, but Nicole elected not to think about it, and chalked it up to her nose being off after the moon. Or she did, until Wynonna came back out maybe 20 minutes later. There was a mark on her face, two parallel lines drawn in what looked almost like charcoal, and she stank of herbs and something earthen, like animal musk, maybe.
“Hey.” Wynonna flashed Nicole a grim, fake smile as she headed for the front door, and Nicole gave a vague hey in response, watching her go.

Waverly walked up to the counter and Nicole smiled, immediately distracted.

“Oh, so, where were we,” she murmured, teasing, “Because I seem to think it was something about, like, candles, you trying to get me into a sexy black dress…” She hesitated, noticing the strain around Waverly’s mouth and the tension in her shoulders as she leaned her arms on the counter, hands clasped together. “Something’s wrong.”

Waverly sighed and shook her head. “A lot of things might be wrong,” she agreed, closing her eyes. “Dolls, and Wynonna, and her gun…”

Why did it always come back to that Colt? “Okay, what is the deal with that gun, anyways,” she said, half-joking, but Waverly just shook her head, distracted.

The radio crackled, the dispatcher’s voice coming through tinny and a bit bewildered.

“We have reports of a pink four-doored sedan, driving erratically on Highway 81, please respond.”

Nicole raised her eyebrows, confused, as Waverly shot her a startled frown.

“Did she say pink?”

“Yes...?” Nicole said.

Someday, she thought. Someday, this town would stop getting weirder by the day.

“That’s gotta be Doc,” Waverly said, and sighed, burying her face in her hands.

“Why does he have a—” Nicole exhaled slowly. “All right, well, let’s go get him then, before he crashes into a fence.”

Waverly was tense the whole way out. She didn’t wring her hands—just as well, wringing her mittens wouldn’t have looked very impressive—or grind her teeth, but just sat, silent and trembling with barely controlled energy. Nicole tried twice to start conversation, but Waverly didn’t really respond, so Nicole left her to her thoughts and maneuvered the cruiser along snowy backroads.

The first thing she noticed after she pulled over the pink sedan, after its color at least, was the license plate.

“Well this oughta be good,” she muttered, grabbing her book and a pen as she got out of her car and walked the short distance between the pink sedan and her cruiser.

Sure enough, Henry sat behind the wheel. When she approached him, he grinned up at her, dopey and a little too eager. He chuckled at her, the sound itself guilty with the knowledge of having made a grave set of mistakes.

“You were doing 140 in a 50 zone,” she told Henry. He blinked uselessly at her, grinning, and she was reminded of an 80-some-year-old man she’d pulled over once. “License and registration?”

That, perhaps, finally gave him pause. “Well it’s me, Officer Haught,” he explained, as if maybe she was asking because she had not recognized him by face alone. “And I have neither of those things, no,” he explained, furrowing his brow and frowning. His mustache made him look a little like a confused walrus.
The cruiser’s passenger door slammed shut and Nicole glanced back at her small, angry girlfriend stomping across the snowy road toward the sedan.

“Oh boy,” she muttered.

“How about a frickin’ explanation, huh?” Waverly shouted, when she was still half a car length away.

Henry turned to look over his shoulder, noting the small thunderstorm of a woman, and looked up at Nicole, rather more alarmed now. “If there is any kindness in you,” he told her, “You will arrest me, and quick.”

She snorted and finished writing his citation. “Sorry there Stone Cold,” she said, tearing off his copy and handing it to him. “Not gettin’ off so easy.” He took it, wrinkling up his nose as he examined it. She wondered if he’d never seen one before in his life, but that seemed laughably unlikely.

Waverly’s eyes were on Henry, but as she headed back to her cruiser, Nicole lifted one shoulder in a gesture that radiated He’s all yours babe.

She sat in the car eating a sandwich as Waverly spoke with him, but to be polite she kept all the windows rolled up to keep out their voices. After a few minutes the sedan pulled away, and Waverly lingered in the road, watching him go.

Minutes passed. Nicole waited until she saw Waverly start to shiver a little even in her thick coat, her mittens, and her earmuffs.

She climbed back out of the car, standing with one boot on the ground.

“Baby?”

Waverly turned, wiping her face, and nodded, returning to the cruiser.

Nicole held her gloved hand all the way back to town, and let Waverly think without pushing her to talk about it. She didn’t.

That evening, Wynonna called her from Dolls’ phone.

“Haught.”

“Earp, hey.”

“You on shift?”

“Yep,” Nicole said, glancing at the clock. “Couple more hours.”

“Good.”

“Why?”

There was a pause, some shuffling sounds, and Nicole realized that behind the rumble of a car engine and Dolls’ quiet voice speaking to someone else, she could hear a group of people in the background, young women, maybe more than 10 of them.
“Wynonna, what’s with the sorority hanging out in your car?”

“I need you to call some parents,” she said, and her voice shook a little. “Bunch of girls we picked up in the Pine Barrens—some have been missing for months,” Wynonna said. “You got a pen?”

Sometimes BBD drove her crazy. Sometimes the paranoia got under her skin, sometimes Dolls’ attitude pissed her off, sometimes Wynonna’s insistence on secrecy that had nothing to do with government clearance and everything to do with being annoying made Nicole want to claw off her own face.

But sometimes.

Sometimes, BBD were big goddamn heroes. She’d never been so happy to be even tangentially associated with them as when she started placing phone calls, asking mothers and fathers and fiancés to come down to the station.

She’d also never seen something quite so odd in that station as a gaggle of 20-somethings in long white fur robes milling about in confusion before spotting family members or friends. Nicole lingered in the midst of it, signing paperwork and taking down names. She spotted Wynonna, standing in the hallway, looking absolutely shell-shocked.

“Earp,” Nicole said, stepping past another little cluster of young women, keeping her voice low. Wynonna didn’t even blink. “Wynonna.”

“She’s...”

Nicole frowned and looked back the way Wynonna was looking, spotting a taller woman, about Wynonna’s height. She looked lost, but in a way that was deeper than the others. She was visibly scanning faces, looking for recognition, looking for someone who recognized her.

“Who is that?” Nicole asked, glancing down at Wynonna. “You didn’t give a name for her.”

“She doesn’t remember,” Wynonna said, cautious, fragile, like she were made of cracked porcelain held together only by hope and a bit of glue. Like if she raised her voice or looked away from the woman across the room, she’d come apart into tiny pieces. “They called her Eve.”

Nicole frowned and looked at Eve, then back at Wynonna. “You look like you know her though, Earp.”

Wynonna blinked a few times, her eyes wet and shiny with emotion in a way that was almost unsettling. Nicole had never seen her so... so small.

“Maybe,” she said. “I don’t know. God, Haught, I don’t know.”

Nicole frowned and set a hand on Wynonna’s shoulder, squeezing gently. She heard Dolls’ footsteps, familiar and heavier than the strange, soft sounds of the missing women’s furred boots, and smiled at her. “It’ll be okay, Earp,” she said, waiting for Wynonna’s faint nod of acknowledgement before she stepped away.

She met Dolls’ eye and nodded, only looking away from Wynonna when she knew he’d stepped up beside her and taken over her post. She went back to work with the few remaining parents, but kept her ears open, listening to their quiet conversation.

“So I found an old photo in Waverly’s research of Lou’s first wife,” Dolls said quietly. “Her name was Tadewi. She was a horse whisperer of sorts, and uh, there were whispers about her. Lou was
likely using her as a weapon for over one hundred years. An actual Skinwalker.”

Nicole tried not to audibly inhale as she listened to a father thanking her and shaking her hand. If what Dolls was saying was true, she had really cut it close that evening in the woods.

“Seems like the Ghost River Triangle is playing host to a whole realm of supernatural phenomenon,” Dolls murmured. “This... This is huge.” There was a pause as Dolls realized Wynonna wasn’t really listening. “She didn’t remember anything since Lou found her, huh?” Her reply was so soft Nicole didn’t catch it, but Dolls’ voice was low, gentle. “Yeah. Prolonged psychological trauma can cause amnesia. She may have been brainwashed, or...” He blew out a breath and turned around, so that no one might watch his lips. “She’s lying.”

“She’s not lying,” Wynonna said, and Nicole could hear it in her voice, the tears finally starting to fall. “We thought she was dead.”

“Wynonna,” Dolls said quietly.

“We gave up,” she insisted. “We stopped looking for her.”

“Wynonna. We don’t know anything for sure. There could be a thousand reasons why Peacemaker worked in her hand, you hear me?”

Nicole frowned, filling out paperwork in a moment’s pause at the counter. She wondered if she’d ever get the full story on that gun.

“Or there’s one,” Wynonna said, and crossed the hall. “Eve?”

The last woman in furs turned to look at her.

“Come on,” Wynonna said, and offered a hand as Nicole glanced toward them. “You’re coming home, with me.”

Nicole watched them walk out, noting the way Wynonna had said home.

It was maybe an hour before she got a text from Waverly.

*Gus thinks that Eve woman is our older sister.*

Well. Shit.

Chapter End Notes

There's a very good chance my schedule is about to get really solidly fucked the next couple days and I don't have as much buffer as I was hoping to have by now, so it is possible I won't update again till Wednesday. Sorry guys, I'll update when I can!
Nicole stood in the hallway and squinted at the work schedule, feeling very strongly like she might be misreading something.

Nedley’s voice rumbled from down the hall and she half-turned even before he’d called out, “Nicole.”

“Sheriff? What the hell is a Poker Spectacular?”

He made a vaguely amused noise and lifted his mug in her direction. “Come on.”

She followed him down the hall and they settled in his office. His chair creaked when he sat down in it, and she tried not to visibly wince when she sat down in the little chair on the opposite side of the desk. Not exactly comfortable furnishings.

“Big event Judge Cryderman’s cooked up. He does it every year.”

She grunted, acknowledging it.

“We’ll be running security detail on the hotel, as the venue, but I need you on tonight. We’re running down a tip about some poaching and illegal sale of meat uptown.”

She narrowed her eyes. Something about it smelled wrong, but she wasn’t sure how to say so.

“I know what you’re thinkin’,” Nedley said. “Awful convenient timing.” She blinked, startled, and if she didn’t know better she’d have said the corner of his mouth ticked up, half-obscured by his mustache. “It is. But, gotta run it down anyway. And if it turns out to be a good lead, we’ll follow. So go on and git. I’ll see you back here at 4.”

She shrugged, but nodded as she got up from her chair. “Sure thing, sir.”

As she headed out to her car, she plucked her phone from her pocket and texted Waverly. By the time she’d gotten home, Waverly had crowded her message inbox with approval, though she noted it was more muted than she would have expected. Which she presumed was at least partially due to the text several rows up, almost like it were whispered between other messages, that Dolls had come back with test results. Eve really was Willa.

Nicole got out of her car and sent back, How are you holding up?

It’s a lot to process came through a minute or so later, as she was unlocking the front door, and after she stepped inside, she leaned against the door to close it.

I know

Waverly’s replies were quicker now and Nicole guessed she was heading out—she was usually a little slower when Wynonna was in the room.

She’s been gone almost my whole life, as far as I remember

Nicole went to make coffee, frowning at her phone and shooting Calamity Jane an amused frown
when the cat nearly tripped up her feet. *I can’t even imagine*

*In other news, Wynonna asked me if we’re “best friends”*

Nicole snorted and nearly dumped coffee grounds all over the floor.

...whaaaaa?

Waverly sent her back a text devoid of words, just a single emoji: a tiny unicorn’s head. Nicole laughed, taking that as a sign Waverly was on the road, and sat by the window with her coffee, sipping now and then and waiting for Waverly to arrive.

When the Jeep pulled in, she perked up, grinning, and pressed her nose to the glass, and didn’t really think much of it until Waverly stopped halfway up the driveway, leaning on the hood of her car because she was laughing.

Nicole frowned and went to the door, pulling it open. “What the hell, Wave.”

Waverly was slow coming up the front walk—she was still laughing.

“You just– you looked like– like a puppy,” she wheezed, wiping her face with a gloved hand. “Waiting by the window– for her human to get home from school. Cutest thing I’ve ever seen!”

“Oh shut up,” Nicole grumbled, but she was grinning as Waverly stepped inside, nudged her chilled nose to Nicole’s, and stomped snow off her boots in the entryway.

“Haught.”

Nicole almost tripped over her own shoes as she slipped behind the counter toward her desk. Nedley was standing in his doorway, looking more grim and angry than she’d ever seen him.

“Sir? Did that poaching thing turn out?”

He shook his head and pointed to a side room. When she stepped inside she found Dolls sitting at a small conference table, frowning at a series of photos.

“Game face, Dolls?”

He slid one of the photos to her and she grimaced. A motel bed, covered in blood.

“Jesus,” she breathed, as Nedley walked in behind them.

“He’s got nothin’ to do with this,” Nedley grumbled, settling into a chair and sliding over a laptop in a plastic evidence bag. He tossed a pair of latex gloves to Nicole. “You’re better with the technical stuff.”

She looked up at Nedley, then at Dolls, then shrugged. “Not going to question this allegiance between PSD and BBD,” she muttered, and started pulling on the gloves.

“Sheriff Nedley believes this one might have some... relevance to us,” Dolls noted, his voice back to its usual professionally dry tone.

She glanced up at him, reading the expression on his face, and nodded.
“Fair enough,” she said, and sat down, powering up the laptop. “Bradley Stokes,” she noted, paging through some of his apps.

Dolls frowned. “Stokes, Stokes... Don’t know that I know him.”

“He’s one of Cryderman’s buy-ins for the poker game,” Nedley said. “Hedge fund type. Got to town just this morning.”

“I thought Cryderman had PSD running in circles today,” Dolls mused, eyeing Nedley with something like intrigued respect.

“I like to keep my eyes open,” Nedley said. “Specially when someone tells me, direct or otherwise, to keep ‘em shut.”

Dolls grunted, approving, and Nicole frowned at the laptop display. “Sheriff. Dolls. I’ve got an active connected device.” Nedley gave her an absolutely bewildered look, but Dolls leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees as she clarified, “Looks like it’s a smartwatch.”

“Tell me you’ve got a bead on it?” Dolls asked.

She flashed him a grin. “Have a little faith, Deputy Marshal.”

Waverly hadn’t texted all evening, though that wasn’t, all by itself, cause for alarm. Dolls hadn’t said anything about how the search went—that was also not cause for alarm, on account of Dolls still being kind of an asshole, no matter how much progress he might make in his friendships.

Which was sort of an odd thought, taken independent of anything else. Did she consider Dolls a friend? He was brusque, invasive, and demanding, but she’d give him this: he was reliable and true. And that was more than could be said for some of the people she’d known in the last few years. And some of the non-people, besides.

When she stepped into her house that night, her cell rang. It wasn’t a number she recognized, and for a moment she considered ignoring it, but something told her that might not be a good idea.

“Haught speaking.”

“Hjärtat, so business-like.”

She grinned and hung her hat on its post, shrugging out of her coat. “Mike, hey. I presume you’re calling because you want to discuss your incredibly cryptic warning from the other night?”

“I do, ja. I figured I would give you a couple days with your new ah... friend, first.”

“Mike,” Nicole warned, but she was laughing.

“Well?” the vampire demanded. “Who is she? Tell me about this fine young woman who has charmed you such that you let her in your home on the full moon?”

“Why were you calling right as the sun was setting?” she countered. “You know better than that.”

“I was going to leave a voicemail,” he said, with a disdainful little sniff. “I did not anticipate someone actually answering. No dodging questions, you little rascal. Spill.”

She sighed and settled on her couch, looking for the words. Mikael was so distant she knew he was
hardly a security risk, but it still felt weighted to say aloud. “Waverly is my girlfriend. Though she’s a little new to the whole...”

“Supernatural scene?” he mused.

She laughed. “No, actually. That she’s got plenty experience in. It seems her family is the axis on which this whole crazy town’s supernatural scene spins.”

Mikael was quiet for a moment, sounding sad but also as if he were struggling not to laugh. “Oh, hjärtat. You didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?”

“You fell for an Earp?”

That made her pause, both that he could tell that just from one comment, and that he said it like it was, in fact, a bad thing.

“Is that a problem?” she asked, wary, maybe warning.

“No,” he said. “But it means you will have no shortage of interesting days ahead.”

“Great,” she said, sighing. “As if your warning about the seals breaking wasn’t bad enough.”

“I know.”

“Did you know he’s in the Ghost River Triangle?” she asked him. “Did you know, when you told me I could come here?”

“If I say yes, would it make you regret going?”

She growled into the receiver. To his credit, he let her.

“Mikael, if I’d known...”

“You would never have gone,” he said. “Why do you think I did not tell you? Something is coming, hjärtat. And not just Legion.”

“Why not come yourself? Why send me in, half-blind and looking for a way out of all my history with them, with Shae?”

“The Triangle guards its treasures jealously, hjärtat. Inhuman creatures cannot pass the borders.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You are human.” At her derisive scoff he chuckled. “All right, mostly. You are mostly human. You hold more within you than that, but your outsides are still quite ordinary. The Triangle’s walls cannot bar out humans.”

She frowned and picked at a loose thread on the seam of her khakis. “Why are you telling me this now? Why wait?”

“I think it may be obvious why I waited,” he said. But then he was quiet for a moment, considering. “On Longest Night, the walls are at their most weak.”

“You think this Legion thing is coming to awaken—”
“It tries every year, hjärtat. It sends agents when it can, in order to bypass the walls, but the Triangle has its guards as much as its prison gates.”

“Any time you feel like talking sensibly, Mike, I’m listening.”

“Just, be careful, hjärtat. This year feels different.”

“How so?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But I can feel it in the air. I know,” he said, before she could respond to that, “That is unhelpful.”

“No kidding,” she muttered. “Say, here’s a question for you.”

“Hm.”

“If something perhaps may have referred to an awakening, specifically that of something called the Old One, would that uh, maybe be relevant?”

She could hear his frown through the phone.

“Hjärtat, where did you hear this?”

“A moon dream?”

He cursed, something long-winded and possibly in more languages than just Swedish. “What did you hear?”

She pressed her thumb between her eyes, frowning and trying to think. “Um— mind recalls... eldest first, then the Old One wakes them all.”

“I am not sure who this eldest could be, hjärtat, but if they were named in conjunction with him...”

She groaned. “Awesome, so I need to keep an eye out for this ‘eldest’ and Legion and mostly-human agents of the great darkness that might seek to awaken—” She caught herself a moment before she could speak its name. It usually wasn’t wise to do so, especially not over a telephone. His followers had a way of overhearing things one really did not want them to hear. Some of those ways she was even personally familiar with. “The Old One.”

“It seems that way,” he murmured.

Her phone pinged and she frowned, pulling it away from her ear to see. A text message from Waverly popped up on the preview screen. *I fucked up. Willa ran off. I’ll keep you posted.*

“Oh, shit,” Nicole whispered, and Mikael grunted, curious. “I might know who the eldest is.”

It would be a bit of an understatement to say that Nicole didn’t sleep well that night. Waverly hadn’t texted back after Nicole’s response, probably busy with Wynonna, and Mikael had left her with a laundry list of things to do. People to call, leads to follow, and ancient texts to read. That last, since she wouldn’t really have direct access to it personally, would fall to him, and he would send her updates once he knew anything concrete.

All told, not conducive to good rest.
So when Lonnie leaned over the edge of his desk to talk to her after lunch, it was kind of a miracle she didn’t bite his head off. Literally or otherwise.

“Did you hear?”

“Hear what, Lonnie.”

“There was a fight at Shorty’s a couple hours ago. Or, well, Bobo’s. Not that anyone called it in. Del Rey’s handling it himself I guess.”

“Big surprise,” she muttered.

It didn’t take him long to realize she wasn’t particularly interested in the gossip, and he went to find something to do. After a couple minutes she was alone in the bullpen.

Her phone went off—the short musical ringtone she’d set for Waverly.

“Hey baby, I can spare a couple minutes but I’m on the clock right now,” she began, with a smile that vanished when Waverly’s breath hitched. Nicole didn’t know the sound by heart yet, thank god, but she knew the sound of a woman in pain well enough. “Waverly? What’s wrong?”

“Oh,” Waverly said, and then there was a sound of pillows shifting and a low hiss of pain, maybe as she adjusted her position on a couch? “So, um, don’t panic.”

“Waverly.”


“Jesus,” Nicole said, and got up from her chair, reaching for her keys.

“I’m not calling it in,” Waverly said, firm despite the strain in her voice, and Nicole begrudgingly sat back down with a heavy breath. “Not until we know more. But I just wanted you to know that we’re fine. Dolls, Wynonna, and Willa are all unharmed, and aside from a few broken windows and bullet holes, everything’s okay.”

“I can hear in your voice,” Nicole whispered, “That you’re not.”

“Well, um,” she said, with forced brightness. “About that.”

“Waverly, please.”

“I was grazed, Nicole. Rifle round, Dolls thinks. It’s fine, just...”

“It hurts?” Nicole prompted, and Waverly let out a very slow, shaky breath. “It’s okay, baby, tell me.”

“Yeah,” she whispered, and Nicole could hear the strain in her voice, the desperation not to break in front of anyone else. It made her ache, made the animal of her shake with powerless fury, not only that she was hurt, but also that she trusted Nicole to know the truth. “It hurts a lot. Dolls gave me some painkillers but I didn’t want to take them, and...”

“No one else is there right now, right?” Nicole asked.

“No, the others are looking into how this happened. Who might’ve paid them.”

“Then I want you to take the medicine, baby. Please?” Waverly sighed, so fast that Nicole knew
she’d just needed to be told it was okay. She wasn’t really going to fight. “For me?”

“All right,” Waverly said, pretending to grumble to keep up the façade. “For you, I suppose.”

“Good.” For a moment she was quiet, and listened to Waverly moving around the house, pouring a glass of water, opening up a bottle, swallowing some pills. When she finally did speak, it was a struggle to sound normal, even. “Did any of them get away?”

“No,” Waverly said. “We got them all.”

She didn’t manage to bite down the vicious, rumbling snarl in her chest, and was glad no one else was around to hear it other than Waverly.

“Good.”

Chapter End Notes

I dunno about y'all but I love that in the Road to Purgatory blog we see that the unicorn emoji became an inside joke for them...
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two days passed in a haze of almost normalcy. There was a certain comfort to it, a certain routine. Wake up, see Waverly before work, then again after. Research the strange warning and Mikael’s leads in the off-moments. Waverly could have helped, but Waverly still tired pretty quick, and Nicole decided she’d wait until things were a little calmer. Even if it meant preparing for the Winter Solstice and whatever it would bring on her own.

When she got the invitation for Del Rey’s big night, she wanted badly to ignore it out of principle, but Nedley made it clear that was not an option. He would be expected to make an appearance, and he insisted that Nicole be the one to accompany him as his right hand, representing the department at his side.

Well, at least she had a nice dress she could use for it. That purple one would do—she hadn’t gotten to wear it in ages.

Still, something about the whole scenario bothered her. She woke up early and couldn’t fall back asleep, though maybe that was all well and good. Dolls called her a little after dawn.

“Dolls?”

“Haught,” he said, and he sounded exhausted. “Mind if I call in a favor?”

She frowned at that, looking up from some of the emails Mikael had sent her. “Sure.”

“We’re at the shop. I’ve spent an hour with Willa trying to access old memories but she’s wiped. Mind taking her home?”

She stiffened and was quiet long enough that he noticed.

“Haught, I wouldn’t ask, but...”

“No,” she said, and sighed. “No, it’s fine. Sure. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Thanks.” He was quiet a moment. “Besides, I’m sure Waverly’ll be happy to see you.”

She grunted, intending to convey disapproval, but he chuckled.

“See you, Dolls,” she grumbled, and hung up on him, swapping a tank top for a thick red sweater—more than enough to keep her warm even in the snowy weather. The roads were slick, a bit icy with re-frozen meltwater, but the snow crunched satisfyingly under the tires of her cruiser as she pulled up at the station and waited for Wynonna to help Willa into the passenger seat of her cruiser.

“Thanks, Haught,” Wynonna said, with a curt nod. Nicole noted the lack of canine-related humor, and found herself immensely grateful that Wynonna had not seen fit, at least so far, to bring her older sister into the loop on that one.

“No problem, Earp,” she said, leaning her head down to meet Wynonna’s eye for a moment. “I’ll get her home safe.”
Willa shot her a look that might have been slightly irritated, but waited until Wynonna had nodded, shut the door, and stepped away.

“You don’t need to talk about me like I’m not here,” Willa said.

“Sorry,” Nicole said, though she only barely meant it. “Didn’t mean anything by it.”

Willa subsided, evidently appeased, and was quiet for a few minutes as Nicole navigated the snowy streets, heading for the roads out of town.

“I’m sorry,” Willa said, her voice different now, softer. This, Nicole thought, was the part of her that was still Eve, the strange, confused girl from the forest. “Sometimes it’s... hard.”

Nicole blew out a breath. She wasn’t quite sure how to feel about Willa, but that, at least, she could understand.

“I get it. Feeling out of touch with yourself, out of control.”

Willa looked at her, eyes narrowed. “You hardly seem the type to be out of touch with your emotions, Officer Haught.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I might surprise you, I guess. But trust me, how I seem now is the product of a lot of work. And I still have my moments.”

“Hm,” Willa said, though she wasn’t sure if it was a sound of agreement. “You strike me as a passionate woman.”

There was a part of her that was embarrassed, thinking of certain things—in particular people—she was very passionate about. But another part of her was suspicious, wary of Willa’s attempts at insight or psychoanalysis.

“I don’t think that’s inaccurate,” Nicole allowed. “And sometimes that makes it hard to keep myself level. But I try anyway.”

Willa nodded, turning to look out the windshield again. “What’s your read on the Deputy Marshal?”

Nicole glanced toward her, then forward again, making a faint humming noise to indicate she’d heard, and was thinking. “I think in general he’s a good man.”

“I don’t trust him,” Willa said, her tone harsh again, cold.

“Anything in particular?”

Willa, she realized, was very hard to read. She was so cold, so level, that her heart betrayed very little—her pulse never raced with anger, only excitement, and only sometimes. It was hard to tell what she was thinking, even when Nicole could hear the rise and fall of her voice, of her breath.

Waverly was kind, unsubtle. An open book. Wynonna wore her heart—all the jagged pieces of it—on her sleeves, and wasn’t ashamed of it. But Willa. Willa was quiet, and slow-moving, like the placid surface of a river hiding a vicious riptide that would dash you against jagged stones and carry your bloodied body out to sea without a care.


“Hm,” Nicole said, the sound vague and appeasing.
They finished the drive to the Homestead in silence, and Nicole didn’t think she’d ever felt so uncomfortable in her life.

Waverly was sitting at one of the small tables when they arrived. There was a cup of tea on the table, and her phone, and the various medical supplies. Willa went upstairs first, giving Nicole a moment to look. Waverly was smiling, but there was a tension in it, a strain that Nicole hated seeing. Only when she heard the sink running upstairs did she allow herself a small, muted whine of frustration.

Waverly looked up, a small but more genuine smile curling her mouth. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Nicole murmured, moving to sit next to her. Waverly’s fingers ran along her hair from ear to shoulder, and Nicole leaned her cheek into Waverly’s hand.

“Wasn’t expecting you till later.”

“Dolls asked me to drive Willa home,” she explained, and reached for the first aid kit. “Have you fixed it yet?”

“No,” Waverly said, smiling. “I hate doing it myself.”

Nicole smiled and gathered what she needed as Waverly pulled her shirt up to give her space. There was a moment, just a moment, as Nicole peeled off the bandages, where she pushed down the animal, the side of her that wanted so badly to just press Waverly to the ground and lick the scraped and healing skin until it was clean, but she shook her head and gently cleaned the wound the sensible, modern way.

She almost didn’t hear the footsteps, and when Willa came around the corner with a jar in hand, Nicole fought the urge to sigh.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Willa demanded, the harsh Earp version of her back again. “That stuff is poison.”

Nicole stared at her, not sure what surprised her more, but glanced at Waverly and then back to Willa. “I’ve been dressin’ her wound for the past two days,” she noted.

“Yeah,” Willa said, her sarcasm a palpable thing. “And I’ve been re-dressing it.”

Nicole looked to Waverly for confirmation, and pressed her lips together when Waverly looked away, regret flickering over her face. What the hell did Willa put her through?

“Coconut oil,” Willa explained, as she crouched down next to Waverly and started applying it with a touch that wasn’t rough, but wasn’t gentle enough for Nicole’s preference. “We used it on everything at the commune.” Switching focus as fast as a breeze, she turned cool eyes on Nicole. “You know you don’t have to be here every time. I know what I’m doing.”

Nicole stared at her, stunned. “Okay—” she started, looking for an argument.

“Oh,” Waverly said, interrupting, “Hey, why don’t you...” She flicked her head toward the barn. “Pop out, and... I’ll talk to you later?”

Nicole frowned, reading Waverly's intent across her face. “Yeah, sure,” she muttered, tossing down the gauze she’d been holding. “I’ll just... pop out.”

She headed for the door, but the two Earp sisters said nothing until she’d closed the door and
 lingered on the porch, her head tilted slightly toward a window.

“I was rude again, wasn’t I,” Willa muttered.

“No, it’s fine,” Waverly said, but even from here Nicole could hear the strain it put on her to lie.

“On top of everything else,” Willa mused, “I have to learn how to be around regular people again.”

There was a moment’s pause, an awkward moment stretching out like a cat.

“Until then,” Waverly said, “You’ve got me.”

Nicole sighed and headed for the barn. Her girlfriend was, sometimes, entirely too kind for her own good.

For maybe ten minutes she paced in the barn, growling softly for the comfort of hearing her own voice, and muttering wordless frustrations against the eldest Earp, until she heard footsteps crunching in the snow, and then the barn door creaking open. She leaned against the wall, silent, hoping she looked normal, just in case it wasn’t Waverly who’d come looking.

Waverly looked at her, eye contact standing as the acknowledgement of everything that was hanging between them, but said nothing. She crossed the barn, sat on the end of the bed Henry had, until recently, been using, and sighed, hugging her arms around herself.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

“I’m exhausted,” Waverly whispered, with the dusty church-air weight of confession.

“Hey,” Nicole murmured, and moved to sit a little to her side, her hip pressed to Waverly’s. She kissed Waverly’s jaw, looking at her, watching the tired tilt of her head, the crease of strain at the corners of her eye and her mouth. “I know, baby.”

Waverly turned toward her then, a little, as Nicole brushed strands of Waverly’s hair away from her neck, kissing behind her ear, then at her temple as Waverly turned the rest of the way, eyes still closed but seeking her out, like a blind dog following the call of its master. Their noses touched first, and only then Waverly lifted her hands, framing Nicole’s face between her palms.

The brush of her fingers was like sunlight through blinds, warm and soft, and was simultaneously ephemeral and delightfully tangible. Her kisses, delicate and a little quick, sent heat racing through Nicole’s whole body, like napping in a sunbeam, her lips so familiar it was like coming home after a long trip. Nicole couldn’t speak to exactly what Waverly felt, but she thought she might understand, as Waverly’s hands trailed down across Nicole’s chest, her fingers snagging on the knit of her sweater.

Nicole curled her arm around Waverly, holding her close, trying not to let her hand rest over the bandages under Waverly’s shirt. She was so small, and now, though Waverly was still an Earp, still whiskey and flint and gunpowder, now she felt terribly fragile in Nicole’s arms. A few inches and a few seconds difference and Waverly wouldn’t be here at all and that—that singular thought—was so unacceptable it was almost paralyzing.

Waverly’s hand slid up under the hem of her sweater and her breath caught in between kisses. Warm fingers slid across her belly, tentative touches over smooth skin, and Nicole pulled back only far enough to pull the sweater over her head before leaning back in.

“Yeah?” she breathed, plucking once at the hem of Waverly’s shirt.
At Waverly’s small, quick nod she pulled the shirt up and over Waverly’s head, setting it aside as she leaned back in. For a moment, she thought, Waverly wasn’t sure where to put her arms—hesitating for fractions of seconds before she let her arms drape over Nicole’s shoulders, one of her hands tangling for a moment in Nicole’s hair.

There was something decidedly youthful about it, something about it that belonged to teenagers learning each other for the first time. A heat, a desperation for each other that Nicole hadn’t felt in so long it didn’t bear wondering long enough about it to count the days. One of Waverly’s hands skimmed down Nicole’s back, brushing over the lace of her bra and down, just alongside her spine, to curl into the waistband of her pants while their lips met in an ever more urgent string of kisses.

Footsteps outside. Snow crunching under soft fur boots. The creak of the barn door.

“Shit,” Nicole whispered, pulling back, and she felt worse when she saw the evolution of hurt to confusion to understanding flicker across Waverly’s face in that clipped, slow, too-few-frames-per-second way of early film.

Waverly spun around, her eyes finding Willa, and Nicole heard her hoarse whisper.

“Oh God...”

“S–” Willa said, hesitating backward a half-step. “Sorry.” Nicole watched her, wary. “Wow,” Willa added, though her gaze never left Waverly’s face. “Wynonna never said anything about you being a... a gay.”

She had tried. She really had. She’d tried to be patient, to be kind, to not cause trouble. But at Willa’s words, Nicole glanced to Waverly, who looked down, straightening her shirt out a little as a prelude to putting it back on.

She felt it, more so than she heard it or even allowed it—the beginnings of a rumbling growl deep in her chest. Who was this woman, who dared to speak this way, to make Waverly feel so small, to doubt herself like that? She’d known all too many people like Willa, and it was the last thing she wanted for Waverly, for whom this was still so new, so fragile, so surreal.

Waverly’s hand found her wrist and tightened, once. Not gently, not soothing, but a sharp, hard grip. A warning. She’d heard it too.

“Oh geez,” Willa added, her tone lofty, somehow, maybe at the edge of disapproval. But not, Nicole noticed, in regard to her. She hadn’t heard anything. “You haven’t told her.”

An almost sound in her throat. Another sharp squeeze.

“I have to go,” Nicole bit out, struggling to keep her voice level, to keep from snarling at Willa, to keep from flashing fangs in open dominance.

The thought that revealing herself to Willa, now, like this, might result in a Colt .45 bullet ripping through her chest, seemed very distant. Irrelevant. What mattered was this, now, here, this audacity, this insult that she’d been given, as soon as Willa started talking down to Waverly. She couldn’t sit by while someone talked this way to her girlfriend.

Which... was all the more reason she needed to leave. Now.

Waverly glanced at her, relieved, and didn’t speak as Nicole got up and headed for the barn door, pulling her sweater up to her elbows to put it back on. “Call me later?”
At Waverly’s tiny nod Nicole looked to Willa again, biting down every animal instinct—even ones she hadn’t known she’d had—as she swept past and shoved her way outside. For a moment, just a moment, she hesitated, standing in the snow, and listened.

Willa’s voice was level, casual, dangerous for how normal it sounded. “Wynonna’d probably be pretty pissed if she found out you didn’t tell her something like this, wouldn’t she?”

No. No, she couldn’t do this. She couldn’t listen, not without getting even more angry. Nicole forced herself forward, throwing herself into her cruiser and slamming the door shut, and only when it was closed did she allow herself to snarl, to bare her teeth. Her jaw rippled as it started to change in response, in support, more of her teeth sharpening, and the pain was sobering. She bit it down, forcing it back, and a moment later, she watched Waverly leave the barn, stomping back to the Homestead and throwing herself inside, phone in hand.

what the hell

In any other circumstance, Nicole might’ve laughed. Oh my god

oh my god Waverly’s text came immediately, and Nicole watched the barn door for a moment, half-expecting Willa to come back through.

OH my GOD, she sent back, because that was better than sending “I really wanted to rip off your sister’s face right then so it’s probably a good thing you stopped me.”

OH MY GOD

Okay, now this was getting silly.

Well that was strange

Even through text she could imagine Waverly’s frustrated sigh. She’s going to tell Wynonna

Is that...bad?

She didn’t mean it to be a leading question, but Waverly’s reply came after a moment’s pause, as if after some real thought.

I don’t...know?

That was a good sign, she thought, but didn’t press the issue. I didn’t think it was possible for another of your sisters to be more socially awkward, yet here we are

NOT HELPING OFFICER SMARTASS

Nicole grinned at her phone, glancing up when she heard Willa’s boots crunching on the snow. She didn’t look around, and Nicole didn’t think she’d noticed the cruiser was still there. She headed off the property, out beyond the house.

That’s Officer Haughtass to you

Oh my god. So not ready for jokes

Nicole waited until Willa had been walking for a couple minutes before starting her car.

See you tonight?
Chapter End Notes

Confession time: the idea that it was the wolf that made her bail out of the barn like that was one of the earliest ideas I had for this conception of the show canon, and I've been ITCHING to get to this scene since I started. And hey, more *Road to Purgatory* content!

Also, have any of y'all seen [Eadweard Muybridge’s 1878 film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eadweard_Muybridge) of a horse riding at a gallop? Because it’s pretty nifty.
Chapter 22

Looking at her now, it was hard to believe that at university Nicole had partied like a champion. Formal or informal, it didn’t matter. Hosted by the school? By a fraternity? By some kids living just off-campus where they could start an honest-to-god garage band? Any event, she could blend like a chameleon and make herself at home. She was, after all, a bright, warm person, and it didn’t take that much effort to get other people to see it too. She’d been able to flit between social circles with ease, making friends in every group until she could sit at the center of her complex web of contacts like a spider. She’d loved the music, the dancing, the games, the drinks. All of it.

Now, though, everything was different. Now it wouldn’t be hard to mistake her for a very agitated wall decoration.

She’d once been caught in an elevator with a psych student high on too many painkillers and exam stress. The poor kid had stood there for five floors, insisting, vibrantly, that the term agoraphobia was constantly incorrectly defined. That it was not a fear of open spaces, rather the fear of having a panic attack in an open space. She’d been drunk at the time, but it had certainly made an impression.

She wasn’t agoraphobic, as a rule, but replace “panic attack” with “fit of wolfish berserker rage that would make Bruce Banner a little nervous” and that was definitely the gist of her current problem.

The Wainwright was beautiful, as ever. Wood floors and paneling, elegant furnishings, well-dressed guests, the whole nine yards. But there were too many people. She was too much in the middle of it. It wasn’t even that it was so loud the voices blurred into each other, either. That happened occasionally, and that she could deal with. After a certain level, noise was just noise. But with the Solstice drawing nearer she was on guard, tense, and the overload of trying to track fifty different conversations all at once made her head ache and made her grind her teeth together.

And that didn’t even acknowledge the smells. The cleaning agents that had been used to scrub every surface this morning. The food two rooms away. The musty, close scent of heavy curtains that had been upkept but not replaced since maybe the late 80s. Some kind of cheap air freshener that made her skin itch. All beneath a hundred or more different iterations of cologne and perfume.

It made her head spin. She’d been hugging a wall and holding a flute of champagne for probably half an hour now, pretending to make conversation with anyone who spoke to her. Every time she raised her glass the scent of peaches and fizzing alcohol made her stomach turn, and she never seemed to actually take a sip.

She’d stopped looking up when she heard footsteps on the stairs, but there was a shift in the rhythm this time that caught her attention. A step, then two, then a pause. A soft murmur of other guests on the stairs, then another step, and another.

Nicole looked up and her eyes snapped to the woman descending the stairs. Waverly. She took in details in a haphazard scattering of data: seafoam cloth and beading that looked too intricate to be real; hair drawn up tight and leaving bare shoulders that all but invited a soft, roaming kiss; ruffles that immediately reminded Nicole of crashing waves.

And for just a moment, the rest of the world fell away. She stopped listening, stopped noticing every puff of air from every corner of the room. She ducked her head, aware she was grinning like a fool, but even then she couldn’t keep her eyes off Waverly for long, and she looked up as Waverly crossed the small entry hall to stand in front of her.
That beautiful creature is mine, she thought.

“You,” she said instead, and for a moment words didn’t come. What words were good enough to express what she thought? “Are a vision.”

“Oh please,” Waverly murmured, looking around, scanning the crowd, but her eyes crinkled on a smile. “I didn’t even have time to accessorize.”

“Ah,” Nicole said, and winked while no one was paying them any mind, “See, I knew I wore this bracelet for a reason.” It was a small thing, a delicate loop of gold. Waverly smiled as Nicole closed it around her wrist, and she tried not to think of it as anything more than a loan. Gifts, and the bonds they bore, were the realm of faerie, not werewolves. It wasn’t a wedding ring, it was just a bracelet. No more, no less.

So why did it feel like something important, like a step?

“Thanks,” Waverly murmured, as the clasp clicked shut, then looked Nicole up and down, her gaze warm and appreciative. “Hey, if we get out of here, we are getting dressed up way more often.”

Anxiety ratcheted around Nicole’s heart like a pinball. Did Waverly know something was up too?

“What do— what d’you mean if we get out of here?” Nicole asked, grinning and hoping she looked casual.

“Um,” Waverly said, and her eyes scanned Nicole’s, as if looking for reassurance, or trust, maybe. “Just... stay by the exits, okay?”

To say Nicole did not like what she saw in Waverly’s face would be a vast understatement of fact. Nicole heard someone new on the steps and glanced up. She exhaled slowly, to steady her nerves. “Willa.”

The eldest Earp waved Waverly over, mouthing a request to her, and Nicole frowned when Waverly started to turn away, flashing Nicole one last small smile. But there was a tension there, she noticed—and Waverly’s expression was troubled, a little stiff. She was hiding something. Maybe several somethings. Nicole watched her as she started up the stairs, fear and nerves chasing each other like fox and hound around her guts.

Before she could work up the nerve to follow her and to hell with what Willa might think, she smelled cheap cologne, rented tux, and way too much peach-tinged champagne.

Champ Hardy. Of course.

“I saw all that, y’know,” he mused, and leaned his elbow against the wall next to her, trying to loom over her. Not that it was very effective, seeing as he could barely stand up straight.

“Not now, Champ,” she said, and later she would pat herself on the back for not growling in his face. He stank of champagne and insecurity.

“So you two are like, together now, eh? That’s disgusting. Disgusting.”

“What’s it matter to you, Champ?”

He drank from his flute of champagne, gulping down a little less than half of it.

“What’s it matter?” he slurred, and she flicked her gaze up to the second floor, where Waverly was
lingering with her sister. If she could keep him busy here, he wouldn’t try to go upstairs. The last person she wanted to spend an evening talking to was Hardy, but at least if he made a scene with her, it was just with her. She didn’t want Waverly to have to deal with this. “It matters because Waverly’s not like you.”

Nicole didn’t quite manage to bite down a low scoff and he took that as invitation to continue.

“She’s not,” he insisted, leaning more into her space. She let him, to let him think he had the upper hand. “S’just new and fun, y’know? Experimentin’ and all. She’ll wise up.”

“Right,” Nicole muttered, “Because you know the inner workings of her mind so well.”

“Yeah I do,” he said, gesturing in her face with his half-full flute of champagne. The scent of peaches was stronger now, clinging to his mouth and his glass alike. If she didn’t smell a peach for another year, it’d be too soon. “You know how long we were together?”

“No,” she mused, “But I suspect you’re gonna tell me.”

“Three years,” he said. “Three years, and it ends like this? Listen, I fucked up sometimes but that wasn’t as bad s’all that.”

From what she’d heard around town about just how many times Champ had been in the doghouse, and in particular how many times other women had been seen leaving his apartment, she wasn’t sure she believed that. But she made a faint noise of acknowledgement, just to keep him vaguely on-task, and started looking for a way out.

He followed her through three rooms, whining like a child and generally being so exasperating that she wanted desperately to just fling him out a window into the snow and let him sober up out there. Except that would probably qualify as assault, or at least endangerment. Damn.

Champ even followed her as she headed for another set of stairs, setting down his emptied champagne flute as he went. It gave her a moment in which to take a deep breath, and remind herself that this was only one night, that she would never have to listen to this shit again, and that ultimately, she still came out on top. She had what he wanted, and while she was, in general, not an overly petty person, she took some comfort in that.

“You know,” he continued, as if beginning a new point that was somehow not exactly the same as the one he’d been on for ten minutes, “As soon as we break up, you swoop in and steal my girl?”

“Oh!” Champ groused, and Nicole settled against the railing, curling one hand around it to keep from cuffing him and knocking him down the stairs, no matter how much she might want to.
Nedley was a few steps above Waverly, and regardless of how much the washed up rodeo clown might deserve it, she really shouldn’t hit a civilian in front of her boss. “You think this is ‘cuz she’s a girl?”

“Okay,” Nedley said, his voice level as he stopped a step above Waverly, with Chrissy standing beyond him. More witnesses. Perfect. “Champ. I think you’ve had enough.”

“Oh of course you’re gonna take her side,” Champ said, and Nicole wondered idly if she’d ever seen a man act more like a child than in this moment.

Waverly, she noticed, was standing very still, and very tense. Nicole knew that, if necessary, she could get between Champ and Waverly if he was actually stupid enough as to lunge, but she knew her own capabilities a lot better than Waverly did, and for the moment Waverly looked like she was expecting this to escalate, as if she was doing the math, trying to find where the line was between Champ being rude but harmless, and being actually violent.

“You know, every time I failed that preliminary law enforcement exam?” Champ added, turning to face Nicole, directing this delightful little anecdote at her, as the new kid on the block, “She would say ‘It’s okay Champ, you’ve got nothin’ to prove.’ But apparently that was a lie.” He swallowed, and Nicole realized too late what he was about to say as his hand swept out to indicate Nicole. “She’s datin’ a cop.”

A chill like icewater shot through her, trickling down her spine. She looked to Nedley, and knew, with no mirror required, that fear was plain on her face, then to Waverly, who looked a little like she might be sick. She watched the old man’s gaze flick from Champ to Waverly and then to her, doing the math.

Randy Nedley was no slacker.

“Well,” Nedley said, his voice softening slightly in a way that was entirely for her and Waverly’s benefit, and not for Champ’s. Champ scoffed and drained the champagne Nicole had been holding all night. “I guess that would be their own private business.”

The sensation of warmth, of support, of upheld trust, was so overwhelming Nicole couldn’t even find the outer edges of it. She pushed it to the back of her mind, trying to focus.

“Come on son,” Nedley continued. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“No!” Champ said, the sound half protest and half pain. Nicole looked at him again, almost gagging on the smell of peaches and blood and that acrid, sharp smell of chemicals. His hand gripped tighter and tighter around the flute until it shattered, sending bits of glass everywhere, and foam was building up at the corners of his mouth like an honest to god rabid beast. The animal of her cringed back, furious and terrified, and she hesitated a second too long.

“Champ,” Waverly asked, eyeing him, “Are you... on something other than bubbly?”

Champ lurched up two steps toward her while Nicole was wrestling with the wolf and as Waverly leapt back, alarmed, Nedley moved to intercept him.

“Ho!” Nedley snapped, warning him back with both hands. “Ho, ho, ho.”

Champ whirled around again, drunken and blind with something that smelled like rage and fear and panic and something else, something sick and wrong.

Somewhere else in the room people were shouting in alarm at his outburst. Though she wanted to,
there was no time to change, to bite, to claw. And she had witnesses. So Nicole did the only thing she could think to do.

She decked him, smashing her fist into his face so hard he staggered back and hit the stairs, collapsing in a heap. Nedley held his shoulders so he couldn’t get up and she fished a set of handcuffs out of her clutch while Champ choked on foam and spit and despair. The sound of the cuffs ratcheting shut didn’t fix this mess, and she wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but it did make her feel a little better.

When she looked up she barely registered Nedley or his mask of professional calm. Instead she looked to Waverly, who was inhaling slowly and watching with... well, the only words that came to mind were undisguised desire. In any other circumstance, that might have seemed at odds with the situation.

Well. Duly noted, getting all gallant and aggressive was not something Waverly found distasteful. Maybe the complete opposite, in fact.

“What are we gonna do with him?” Nicole muttered, as Waverly and Chrissy headed upstairs out of the way.

Nedley sighed. “Bathroom upstairs. Work out the details after.”

She rolled her eyes, but nodded, and with a little grunting and cursing they each looped an arm under Champ’s shoulders. In theory, they were guiding him up the stairs, but he was so clumsy and uncoordinated they were more carrying him than anything else, his shoes striking the wood with the clumsy, clopping gait of a newborn foal.

They’d barely gotten him all the way up to the second floor when she heard someone shout further off in the room, and she spotted Henry, angrily gesturing at Wynonna with an empty flute of champagne.

“I’m too late goddammit,” he said, and gestured around them. “We got to stop all these people from drinking the champagne now.”

“Sir,” she started to say, to make sure Nedley was paying attention, but Del Rey stepped up behind them on the stairs, grinning like a jackal.

“Good evening! Is everyone having a good time? Well I hope so,” he said, wandering amongst the crowd with a leisurely little spin. He oozed smugness and confidence and she wanted to slap him down just for the principle of the thing. “Because I’m only gonna say this once. Maybe twice. I haven’t decided yet.”

Nedley was watching him, skittish and tense, and Nicole realized she could smell blood. She tightened her grip on Champ’s arm and glanced at him, noting the smear of red around his nose.

“I,” Del Rey continued, and Nicole wondered who had hated him enough to trick him into thinking fur coats were a good idea, “Have some good news, and I have some bad news.” Champ staggered and she gripped his elbow. Del Rey scanned the room, then sauntered through a gap in the crowd to stand beside Willa, reaching up to run two gloved fingers over her face. And against all reason, Willa didn’t pull away. Not because she was frozen with fear or even bloodlust, no—god, she leaned toward him, just an inch or two, drifting closer in that way that lovers do, aware of each other, moving around each other’s body with the practiced grace of those who’ve learned every inch of each other with touch and tongue.
“The good news,” he murmured, as his fingers cupped Willa’s chin, “Is there’s an antidote.” He snapped his teeth shut with an audible click that made Nicole’s hair stand on end.

Nicole knew, in that moment, with a clarity born of blood and fear, the difference between them. She was a wolf borrowing a human vessel, a case study in contradictions and willpower and restraint. But Del Rey... Del Rey was all beast. A hyena, wearing a suit of human skin, solely to fool those who looked at him into letting him lurk closer to the campfire.

The urge to abandon Champ and move forward, to grab Waverly and pull her away from the demon prowling through the crowd, was so strong she caught herself leaning forward. She only stopped when Champ groaned and ducked his head, blood still running from his nose.

“To what, you ask,” Del Rey added, moving among the gathered crowd again. He paused in front of a woman who was bouncing on the balls of her feet like a rabbit preparing to bolt.

“Hi,” he growled, and she tensed, clutching at the champagne flute in her hands until it exploded, shattered glass scattering across the floor.

“Oh hell,” she muttered to Nedley, as she started to see the breadth of Del Rey’s plan. Nedley glanced to her and she leaned over Champ’s head to whisper in his ear. “That’s what’s wrong with Champ.”

Nedley grunted as Del Rey scooped up an unopened bottle of champagne, flipping it once in the air.

“Well, you see, that’s the bad news. All this delicious bubbly that you’ve been drinking, like drunken pigs, has been poisoned.”

A murmur went through the crowd and Nicole grimaced as the stench of human panic started to rise up, overtaking the fog of cologne and perfume as the dominant scent in the room.

“You will all slowly go batshit crazy,” Del Rey continued, and stepped up beside Wynonna. She flinched as he pointed past her to where Nicole and Nedley stood. “Exhibit A: Champ Hardy.” He crossed the room toward them as Champ doubled over, retching and coughing up foaming spit and stomach acid onto the floor. Nicole and Nedley tried to keep him vaguely on his feet, but it was a struggle.

“How ya feelin’, Champ?” Del Rey asked, crouching down to be on eye level and grabbing Hardy by the hair to lift his head. His nose was still bloodied and Nicole could smell where the skin around his wrists had started to tear as he struggled against the cuffs. “Not good!” Del Rey crowed, and shoved Champ’s face away.

He was so close. She forced herself to keep a hold of Champ and not to just grab Bobo’s stupid coat by the ruff of its fur and shred his skin from his bones with her teeth and her claws. As bad ideas went, that would’ve been pretty high up there.

Del Rey turned to the crowd again, looking around the gathered townsfolk like they were sheep and he the hungry wolf.

“One lucky contestant will receive the antidote,” he continued, and Nicole struggled to keep a hold on Champ as he doubled over again, his whole body convulsing. “All they have to do is bring me one person, dead or alive, and that one person is...” He spun in a lazy circle, pointing into the crowd, until he stopped, like some horrible game of spin the bottle, with one finger directly at his target.
“Ms. Wynonna Earp.”

Nicole stiffened, shifting her weight to move, but there were so many civilians in the way, and the other guests were already starting to close ranks around their target, blocking her from running forward through the crowd.

“Have fun,” Del Rey purred, and slipped out of the closing circle before he could get stuck on the other side.

Nicole saw Doc and Dolls move to take up positions around Wynonna. Dolls had drawn a pistol. She growled faintly, the sound lost in the din of maddened voices and pained groans. Somewhere within that circle was Waverly, Wynonna, Doc, and Dolls, and she was on the outside, stuck with the sheriff and a foaming-at-the-mouth Champ Hardy.

“Well this is a right mess,” Nedley muttered, and pulled a phone out of his pocket.

“No kidding,” Nicole growled, trying to see over shoulders to pick out her friends’ faces among the crowd.

Yeah sure, “if we get out of here,” Nicole thought, scanning the crowd as Nedley called the station. To hell with dressing up, if we get out of this we have got to talk about sharing notes.
When Pompeii burned it was a marvel of destruction. A city that had stood for some six hundred years, and in an evening, every citizen was incinerated. By some accounts it took only months for the entire city to be buried in ash. A marvel of human engineering, a vacation spot that had drawn hundreds of Roman citizens, and in a season, it was gone, not to be seen again for more than a thousand years.

That’s the funny thing about societies. They take ages to build, and mere moments to tear apart.

The Wainwright fell the way all societies fall. In seconds, into chaos.

The room was crowded with people, many of whom were now starting to foam at the mouth like Champ as the poison really took hold. Somewhere on the first floor a woman screamed, the sound answered by a man’s panicked bellow of rage, then more screams. The throngs of people on the second floor were more sedate, perhaps calmed slightly by the fact that their target—Wynonna, who had never looked so vulnerable as she did now standing in her bright red dress, unarmed and unarmored—was, in theory, within arm’s reach.

The clamor of a few dozen voices made it hard to pick out any one in particular, but Nicole partially saw Wynonna push Waverly away and then huddle a little more in between her two guardians. That was more sobering than anything else: if Wynonna was willing to hide behind Henry and Dolls, she was more afraid than Nicole had ever seen her.

Nicole was scanning the crowd, looking for escape routes for her friends when Waverly slid out of the press of people, Willa in tow.

Waverly slid to a stop in front of her, all business. “Uh, Nicole, come with us.”

Nicole was vaguely aware of Willa a few feet away, but she focused her attention on Waverly—Waverly who was not combat-trained, who was just a consultant, who was not ever meant to be a curse-breaking Earp heir and had no preparation for this. Who was standing in the middle of a crowd of poisoned townsfolk, some of whom, Nicole noted, had started scratching at their faces as if to pull the poison out of their blood, leaving angry red lines over any part of them they could reach. Waverly was small and still wounded under her clothing and not at all dressed for fending off a mob, but she was fierce and strong and Nicole had never known she could be impressed, full of admiration, and maybe a little aroused, all at the same time.

“Champ’s right, Waves,” she murmured, and there was something amusing at how fucked the night had become, because if she didn’t laugh she’d scream. Was it even 1 in the morning? “You’re dating a cop now, and we go where the danger is.”

Waverly inhaled, sharp and a little manic. “God that’s sexy,” she muttered, almost as if she hadn’t meant to say it aloud, and Nicole grinned.
“Look, Nedley’s calling backup,” she said, leaning a little closer, eye to eye, so that Waverly would keep focused on her. She could smell the mix of determination and panic in her and the latter wouldn’t help anyone, Waverly especially. “We’re gonna contain this, okay?”

“Okay.”

She didn’t smell peaches on Waverly but a passing thought brought on a wave of anxiety. “You didn’t drink the champagne, did you?”

“No,” Waverly said. “You?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Waverly said again, and her eyes flicked down, the only warning Nicole got before Waverly curled a hand around the back of Nicole’s neck and kissed her, hard, full of a desperation and leashed fear that made Nicole ache to put her at ease. There were people around, but with all of them addled by poison and champagne, did it even matter? What were the odds any of them would notice, or even remember it if they did? She grabbed Waverly’s arm, squeezing gently, trying to say I’m here with just that one gesture.

“Okay,” Nicole whispered, pulling back. “Go.”

Waverly nodded and turned, eyes scanning the crowd. “Shit. Willa?” She gathered up her skirt and headed for the stairs.

“Willa!”

The screaming was getting louder and Nicole snarled, the sound low but loud enough to get a few people to slip aside, giving her room to shove through. Nedley slid in behind her, taking up a position near the table Wynonna was using to guard her back. Nicole stepped back toward Wynonna and the almost bizarrely elegant ice sculpture of an elk wobbled for a second when her hip hit the table. Right in the middle of the circle of rabid citizens.

It was exactly where she’d been trying to go, but now that she was here, she realized just how much this was not where her wolf wanted to be. She fought its pull to bolt, to put nose to ground and tail between her legs and flee because to the animal part of her foam and blood and wide-eyed madness was a death sentence. It was contagion and fear and despair in the form of a rhabdovirus and every bit of that side wanted to be very literally anywhere but within biting range, even though the human part of her knew it was poison, not illness.

“It can’t be true,” she snapped, and the wolf’s panic had started infecting her voice, scrambling her thoughts. She knew the answer, but she asked it anyway, backing up till her shoulders hit Dolls, holding both arms out to hold off as many of the guests as she could. “How could he have poisoned the whole town?”

“The champagne!” Wynonna called back, without quite turning around, her eyes scanning the crowd just as much as Nicole’s were.

A man’s voice, one Nicole almost thought she recognized, called out “We need her!”

One of the guests wandered past Dolls and started slamming her head repeatedly into a column, and at the sight Nicole lost her grip on the nearest guests. A few of them surged forward, pushing her into Dolls again before she could regain her balance and shove them back.

“Now– now everybody just stay calm!” Dolls shouted, brandishing his pistol so it was visible, but still pointed at the floor.
A woman—god, it was Moira, wasn’t it, though she looked so different now with her eyes a little wild and her lip pulled back so all her teeth showed when she grimaced—was pointing at Henry. No, wait—slightly over his shoulder, at Wynonna.

“We give this Bobo fella exactly what he wants,” she insisted, looming closer.

Someone across from Wynonna lurched toward her, hands outstretched like claws. “What he wants is our resident bitch!”

“Not now, Alan!” Wynonna snapped, slamming her knee into his gut and tossing him aside like he were nothing more than a mild annoyance. “You left,” she snapped at Henry.

“Why, I came back,” he reminded her.

“Why? You miss me?” Wynonna asked, and if Nicole hadn’t been so busy holding back townsfolk she might have growled at them to stop flirting and do something.

“I never miss,” he said, and in a quickdraw that was so fast even Nicole barely tracked it he pulled a pistol and fired low. The roar of the revolver was deafening in the close space and Nicole yelped half a second before someone, Henry’s target, shouted in pain and hit the ground. How the hell did he move that fast?

“Doc!” Wynonna snapped. “You can’t shoot them! I hate them and they hate me, but they’re still humans.”

Three thoughts crossed Nicole’s mind simultaneously. First, she would never doubt Wynonna’s capacity for compassion ever again. Second, damn, but you really wouldn’t hear that kind of sentence anywhere but Purgatory.

Third: if she got out of this, she was going to lay ground rules. No more brushes with rabies. She was starting to lose ground with the wolf, a low, frustrated whine clicking in her chest whenever someone lurched a little closer or drooled out foam onto her bare arms.

“Hey, listen,” Dolls said, looking over his shoulder at Wynonna even as he kept his gun pointed toward the crowd. “We gotta get you out of here.”

“I hope my sisters made it out okay,” Wynonna said, though she let the two of them move her, the group of them stepping away from the table in a haphazard stumbling scramble. Nicole kept pace with them, holding her line. She looked over her shoulder, squinting through the crowd until she caught sight of Henry’s target: a window that led out toward the side of the hotel.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find them,” Dolls told her.

“No, I’ll find them, you find something that will turn the townspeople from rabid, drugged-up assholes back into regular assholes!”

Nicole almost laughed, high and a little frantic, and shifted her position a little more until she had a low table at her left. She set her heels against the floor, arms spread wide to hold off five or six people, giving Henry enough space to yank open the window.

Moira was jockeying against the crowd around her, throwing out a hand like some horrible half-crazed warlord. “Get her!”

Nicole only barely caught Henry’s voice behind her as he looked away from the crowd. “I’m sorry about this,” he said.
“For what?” Wynonna asked.

“Me too,” Dolls said, and a quick glance over her shoulder told her they’d grabbed her by the waist and knees.

Wynonna yelped out a confused little “What?” as they levered her out across the windowsill, and Nicole heard Wynonna’s scream as she flew out the window and hit a snowbank with a soft distant whump of impact.

For a moment, Nicole thought very, very hard about following suit.

“Antidote?” Henry asked Dolls.

“Weapons,” Dolls said, agreeing.

“Angry townspeople,” Henry noted, and went for his revolvers again. “I like where this is headed.”

Nicole glanced over her shoulder, catching Dolls’ eye.

“One,” he said, and she nodded, turning back to the crowd. “Two.” There were at least fifteen people between her and the stairs, but she snarled in their faces. A few of them growled back, too drugged or too stupid to recognize that it was like a cub threatening a lion, and she bared her fangs, her growl grinding in her throat.

“Three. Go!”

Nicole shoved forward step by clawing step, letting the sound of her threats drop into her chest so they became a full, if muted roar. That got some more attention, and a few people actually peeled away from her like falcons pulling out of a dive, muttering to themselves and skittering backward out of her path. She pushed the advantage, shoving more people out of her way and trusting Dolls and Henry to follow her. She heard Nedley’s labored breathing somewhere behind her and the hammers on Henry’s revolvers ratcheting back as she hit the stairs and kept pushing, driving guests out of her path like a battering ram so that her friends could follow her.

She didn’t stop until they’d hit the front door and lurched out into the snow and ice. Nicole leaned a hand on the railing, sucking in clean air that was so cold it almost hurt to breathe. Henry and Dolls stumbled out behind her, then Nedley. Henry clapped a hand on her shoulder, eyeing her, and she waved him off, straightening. Now that they were outside, away from the stench of peach-tinged poison and human despair and induced psychosis, the wolf eased back, the pressure of its terror fading to mere unease.

Dolls caught Henry’s eye and they moved toward the street as Nedley caught up beside Nicole.

“All right,” he said, the words a low but very human sort of growl, all gravel and gravity. “Haught, I’ve got cars on the way but it’s not gonna be enough. Did you drink any of the champagne.”

“No.”

“Good.” He looked back at the front doors, now closed—there were so many people trying to get out that no one could manage to work in concert enough to actually get the door back open, but that wouldn’t hold them forever. He looked at her, his eyes red-rimmed but utterly without fear. “Get to the shop, get into uniform, and get your ass back here. Dolls is gonna need us and if they can get an antidote, better everyone’s in one place.”

She nodded, moved to go, and then hesitated as an all-too familiar scent of fruit slapped her in the
face. She snapped her gaze back to him, eyes widening slightly.

“Sir...”

“Didn’t have much,” he said. “Just one glass. Move quick, Haught. I need every able-bodied officer we’ve got.”

She nodded and waited until he’d turned back to the hotel to yank off her shoes, letting her feet shift, just a little, until she had nails and pads enough to weather the snow. A few townsfolk were wandering, having clearly escaped the lower floor of the Wainwright while her group was getting Wynonna out the window, but they didn’t pay her any attention. She ran, flying over the ice-slicked streets as nimbly as a hound, only slipping once as she rounded the corner and hastily shoved her shoes back on as three squad cars roared out of the parking lot, sirens blaring. Once they were past she shifted her ears a little under her hair—the last thing she needed was someone getting the jump on her.

She threw herself into the station and followed voices—she recognized the low rumbling tones of Henry and Dolls, and caught just a bit of conversation when she paused in the entryway.

“—a drugged up mob is not our only problem,” Henry noted. “Where are the revenants?”

She resolved to have a conversation with Dolls after this about his alleged confidentiality clauses. Did everyone secretly know the truth about this crazy town? Or was it just Earp’s friends?

“Oh I doubt they’re having tea at the trailer park,” Dolls noted.

“You never know,” Henry mused. “We all have our vices. I think it is time we talked about yours.”

“It’s not what you think. It’s just medicine.”

“Now see, that one I have heard before,” Henry mused. “I am a doctor.”

“Look, I’ve taken it since I was a kid,” Dolls said, sounding drained and mechanical, like it was a rote answer. “It helps keep me alive. And some parts of me dead.”

She headed into BBD’s rooms without even pausing at the open doorway and hit Dolls’ personal office. If she’d walked a little faster, let her shoes click a little louder, to help give Dolls an out from a conversation he clearly didn’t want to be in, well. Let it not be said she didn’t look out for her friends.

“Have you seen what’s going on out there?” she asked, leaning against the doorframe. “The whole town’s gone 5150.” Dolls gave her an absolutely exhausted look and when he turned, nervous, she caught sight of his open gun safe. “Whatever you’ve got planned,” she added, stepping into the room, “I’m game.”

“Hey,” Dolls protested. “This is classified.”

It was a bit weak, considering she’d already worked with him once as it was. Though maybe it was more for Henry’s benefit than for hers.

Henry, for his part, glanced to Dolls and rolled his eyes so hard she thought he might strain something.

“Purgatory’s overrun by demon revenants, a.k.a. Wyatt Earp’s resurrected outlaws,” he explained, and she opened her mouth to let him know that she already knew that part, but he was still going,
“Bobo Del Rey is their leader, I am Doc Holliday—yes, that Doc Holliday—and Dolls here, he is just a dick.”

She blinked, startled, as all the missing pieces fell into place, answering questions she had only just begun putting together enough to ask. Why the Earps called him Doc when he was clearly not a practicing physician, why he talked like he’d fallen out of a Clint Eastwood movie, why he hadn’t had a driver’s license or known that he was actually supposed to pay the fine on the citation she’d given him, and how the hell he was so fast with a six-shooter that she couldn’t track his draw.

“Finally,” she said, shaking her head. “Thank you. It– actually it makes perfect sense.” Dolls shot her a wounded look. “Except for the last part,” she added, and cleared her throat.

He pressed his lips together, maybe stifling a laugh.

Doc tossed her a shotgun and she eyed the length of it, impressed.

“You still in?” he asked.

She worked the action, the sound almost deafening in her shifted ears, and grinned at him. “Like Flynn.” She turned to Dolls. This was probably not what Nedley had in mind when she said Dolls would need PSD’s help, but it was too late for that. “What do you need?”

“Okay,” he said, and straightened, perhaps accepting that these were weird enough times he needed to just go with it. “Find the Earp girls. See if Nedley’s still vertical.” He looked to Henry and tapped his shoulder before locking the cartridge into his gun. “We’ve got an antidote to steal, people.” He tucked the gun into his bag and looked up, buttoning his jacket. “And Agent Haught?”

She looked up, noting the change in title and standing a little straighter, tightening her grip on the shotgun.

“Welcome to the Black Badge Division.”

When Nicole found Nedley again he was, indeed, still vertical, but he was looking a bit worse for wear. She told him what she’d learned and he muttered to himself as he weighed options, as if his head was too crowded for more thoughts.

“Fine,” he said. “I think we’ve got the hotel pretty well locked down, at least for now, but if one of them finds Wynonna, it’s over. Go and git.”

She didn’t hesitate, jogging back to her cruiser and stashing the shotgun on the passenger seat, just in case.

The roads were icy and slick but she prowled through town, scanning every street corner and alleyway for signs of any of the three Earps, and starting to regret the decision to put on her vest. It chafed, it was heavy, and it wouldn’t bear up well to a shift if she needed one. But the last thing she needed was for someone, especially someone on the force, to notice that she’d taken bullets on the job without wearing it.

Worse than that would be if someone noticed she’d taken bullets without a vest on and walked away from it.

So she sat in her cruiser with the vest under her uniform, crawling down main roads and side roads with the patience of a consummate hunter.
Hours passed as she canvassed the town and doubled back to do another loop. She’d seen no sign of Waverly, Wynonna, or even Willa, who as far as she knew had been missing since Waverly first lost sight of her.

For that matter, she hadn’t seen Waverly since they parted ways at the hotel. Doubt crawled up her throat to sit and choke her and she struggled to keep her breath steady. Waverly was fine. Waverly had to be fine. Anything less was unacceptable.

Dawn was creeping over the horizon when she turned back for another loop and noticed Wynonna’s borrowed blue truck sitting outside the station, and she jerked the cruiser to the curb, flinging herself out into the road. She grabbed her phone and headed inside, scanning each closed door as she headed up the back hallway.

“What I am’s the goddamn Earp Heir,” she heard Willa saying, a few doors away, and the unmistakable sound of a gun leaving a holster made her hesitate, listening. “And I’m running out of goddamn time. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Nobody’s getting hurt on my watch,” Wynonna said.

“Nobody else, you mean,” Willa said, and even from down the hall Nicole could hear the sneer in her voice. “Daddy? Me? Everyone else out there? When are you gonna take responsibility for all that you’ve done!”

Willa’s shout made Nicole tense, and she shifted forward a step, trying to gauge by sound alone if it was safe to round the corner, safe to announce her presence. If she walked in too soon, Willa might startle, and there was no way Willa didn’t have her finger on the trigger. If she fired...

“Why did Bobo save you at the Homestead?” Wynonna asked, cautious, slow. There was anger there—though really when wasn’t there, with Wynonna—but it was deep, like she wasn’t sure yet if it was the right emotion to go with. Nicole grabbed her phone and dialed. “Why did you save him?”

Waverly’s phone rang and there was a lull in the conversation. Nicole rounded the corner, grinning and feigning innocence. “Hey!” she called, pocketing the phone. “Knew I recognized that ringtone.”

Willa’s revolver was heavy, big, maybe a .33 but probably a .45. As soon as she entered Willa snapped over to point it at Nicole’s chest.

“Whoa,” she said, continuing the charade. “Okay, okay.” She raised her hands, gun belt hanging from her palm. Waverly’s face twisted with fear, and Wynonna was still staring at Willa, waiting for answers.

“Give me Peacemaker,” Willa said, her voice low and cool and Nicole had never imagined she’d someday be held at gunpoint by a woman in a red peacoat and a fluffy knit scarf, but this was Purgatory and really, what else was new. “Or I punch a bunch of holes in Waverly’s girlfriend.”

Oh, hell.

Wynonna glanced to Waverly. “Girlfriend?”

“Uh, kind of,” Waverly muttered.

“Kind of?” Nicole asked, trying to pull focus back to her, looking at Waverly and willing her to read her thoughts in her face. Better me than either of you.
“I know you won’t shoot,” Wynonna said, and something in Nicole’s heart broke for her, because even from thirty feet away she could smell the rage and the hate coming off Willa in sickening waves. She would, she absolutely would, and Wynonna didn’t see it. Maybe couldn’t see it.

“What do I care about some ginger butch cop?” Willa said, with something like a smirk on her face, and Nicole bit down a low growl.

“No, please,” Waverly said, begging, her voice cracking.

“Waverly...” Nicole said, wishing that lycanthropy could have come with something actually super useful for once, like telepathy. It’s okay if she shoots me, she thought, as loud as she could, watching Waverly. It can’t hurt me, it’s okay, let her do it, just don’t give her what she wants.

“If I don’t have it in three...” Willa murmured.

“No, please,” Waverly said, begging, her voice cracking.

“Wynonna,” Waverly said, and Nicole almost spoke, almost gave away her play, just to keep Waverly from sounding so broken.

“I can’t.”

“Please,” she whispered, and Nicole wondered if they were both so past the point of reason they forgot she was more than able to hear them, with her ears. Waverly’s gaze flicked to Nicole and back to Wynonna, words coming out as little more than a breath. “I love her.”

Nicole froze. It shouldn’t have been like this. It shouldn’t have been something she overheard, it shouldn’t have been something confessed like a terrible secret, shouldn’t have been something said because she was begging for a life.

Wynonna went very still, and Waverly looked as though she wanted to keep begging but had no idea what else to say. Waverly wasn’t much of a gambler, throwing away her best cards on the opening hand.

The hammer of Willa’s revolver pulled back in a horrible click-click-thunk.

“One.” The word was almost a purr, lethal and utterly merciless, and Nicole looked at her again, steeling herself.

This was gonna hurt.


Willa extended a hand for the purse containing Peacemaker and Nicole exhaled, frustrated, watching as Wynonna offered out the bag. Willa snatched it away, and finally dropped her arm.

“So naïve,” Willa breathed, chastising somehow, like she was disappointed that her sisters weren’t as callous with human life as she was. “So emotional.”

“This isn’t over,” Wynonna said. “I’m coming for you.”

“Then I better slow you down,” Willa said, and before Nicole could quite prepare herself for it, the
eldest Earp raised her revolver, sighted, and fired, the bark of the gun deafening in such a small, empty space.

Waverly screamed as the round hit Nicole dead center in the chest. The concussive force—even dispersed by the vest—drove her back, her back hitting the wall and her head striking the doorframe. She felt ribs crack, first at the impact of the round and then again, when her already damaged body hit the wall, and she collapsed forward, her head spinning and her vision blurring, dizzy and confusing. Fever heat slammed through her body, maybe some after-effect of the wolf scrambling to heal the damage, but bones had always been harder than tissue and it burned, her whole chest ached horrendously and she felt like she was on fire. She let her forehead hit the ground, though even that minor thump tallied on top of the budding concussion and made her whole head throb. The tiles were blessedly cool against her face and for a moment she just lay there.

She heard Willa’s boots on the floor, coming closer, then passing her.

“Now you know what it feels like when people take your things,” Willa snapped as she slipped out into the hall, though the words were a little wobbly as they filtered into Nicole’s aching head and so... so older-sister-being-petty she felt like she couldn’t have possibly heard it right. Waverly collapsed to the floor next to her, fingers gently running over her hair.

“Come here,” Waverly whispered. She grabbed Nicole’s shoulders and started turning her over and Nicole let out a mewling cry of pain, struggling for breath—her ribs hadn’t sealed back together yet and the pressure of turning onto her side sent waves of agony flaring through her whole body.

“I’m— I’m w—”

“I know. I know,” Waverly whispered, and Nicole tried to take a full breath, tried to say no, you don’t know, it’s gonna be fine, but the words wouldn’t string together in the correct order.

“No blood,” Wynonna said, somewhere above and behind her as Wynonna moved slowly closer. “There’s no blood,” she insisted, though Waverly was only barely listening, and knelt at Nicole’s other shoulder. Wynonna grabbed her head and her arm to haul Nicole up onto her thigh, and Nicole’s cry of pain came out as an inaudible croaking noise as one of her ribs sealed together with a snap that she felt more than heard.

“Shh,” Waverly was whispering, both hands on Nicole’s face, and Nicole wanted to tell them both to get back from her, to let her breathe for a second, because she still ached and her head was spinning and her chest felt too tight where the vest kept her and the wolf contained in a prison of plates and ballistic weave.

“If my sister joined the dark side and if you’ve been a revenant this whole time, I’m just gonna call in sick tomorrow,” Wynonna growled, and now Nicole was sure they’d lost any sense of what was happening, because they both knew better, but neither of them was thinking clearly.

Waverly still sounded on the verge of tears. “She—”

“No, I’m—” Wynonna took hold of her uniform shirt and yanked, and there was a sound of ripping fabric and buttons scattering across the floor. Both Earps stared, and she adjusted her next words. “Wearing a bulletproof vest,” she noted, as if that had not become abundantly obvious. Waverly let out a short, wordless little cry of relief. “It’s kind of standard operating procedure when we’ve got a 404 on our hands,” Nicole continued, because one did not comfort an Earp without making bad jokes. She was pretty sure it was in their blood. Or maybe the fine print of their curse. She plucked the squashed round off the vest and tossed it aside, then looked up at Wynonna, who was staring,
mouth hanging open. As if the confusion was about the police code, and not the near brush with death, she explained, “Buncha crazy hicks off their rockers?”

Waverly laughed, the sound broken and so relieved it made Nicole want to hold her—though she didn’t try, her whole torso still burned while her ribs creaked and healed—and Wynonna sighed.

“Finally picked the smart one,” she murmured, and Nicole glanced up at her, pretty sure that was the nicest compliment she’d ever gotten from Wynonna. And without any jokes about obstacle courses involved, which was probably a record.

Waverly ran her hand over Nicole’s hair, looking very much like she was still somewhere between sobbing and laughing. “I’m gonna get you to the hospital, okay?”

“No, no,” Nicole breathed, shaking her head. “I’m just a little bit bruised.” That was a lie, but there just wasn’t time to sit here and remind them that she could take lead rounds all day and be fine. Waverly’s hand slid under her head to support her. “You gotta go with Wynonna and stop your sister. Sorry, but...” she muttered, glancing to Wynonna as her face twisted, something like grief sitting just behind her eyes. “She’s kindof a dickhead.”

“Wish Doc and Dolls were here,” Wynonna murmured.

Another rib sealed whole again and she struggled not to growl through it. “They went to raid Shorty’s,” she said, panting. “Somethin’ bout an antidote?”

“See?” Waverly said, looking to her sister and then back down. “Super smart.”

Wynonna smiled, nodding, and Waverly leaned down, holding Nicole’s head in both hands to kiss her. Her mouth was cool, and a little salty from tears. Even with the pain in her chest Nicole found herself pushing closer.

“Yeah, alright,” Wynonna muttered, scrambling to her feet. “You guys do that.”

Nicole grabbed for Waverly’s arm, squeezing the way she had at the Wainwright as Waverly looked up, tracking her sister before looking down again.

“I’m okay,” Nicole whispered, and Waverly’s coat struck them both where Wynonna dropped it on them.

“Time’s up, let’s go!”

Nicole let out a breathless little laugh and Waverly leaned closer again.

“Okay,” Nicole murmured, “Go.” Waverly kissed her again, hard, like it was a promise to come back, and then pulled away, grabbing her coat as she jogged to catch up to her sister.

Once they were gone Nicole let herself drop back to the floor and groan, twisting and wriggling out of the vest until she could roll over and brace herself on hands and knees. She growled in frustration and pain as her chest and back rippled, half-changing as the wolf snapped her ribs back into place with a crackling noise like a kids’ cereal gone horribly awry.

Nicole just knelt there for a second once it was over, panting, the pain finally fading to the background. Her head still throbbed but that would pass. When she got to her feet she swayed only once, which was gonna have to be good enough. Somewhere in the near distance she heard semi-automatic gunfire. Dolls must’ve brought his big guns out to play.
Nicole went to the sheriff’s office first, following a lingering scent of blood, and found Chrissy sprawled in the corner, unconscious but arranged like someone had been trying to make her comfortable. She lifted the young woman and set her on the sheriff’s couch instead, then frowned, taking stock of the station. Her shirt buttons were a lost cause, so she zipped up her jacket for decency’s sake, grabbed her gun belt, and headed outside again to her car. She’d need to find Nedley, figure out what was going on at the hotel, and then figure out where she was most needed.

She saw Shae barely a second before the wind brought the scent of fur and blood and hunger to her nose. Her wife was leaning against the hood of the cruiser, dressed in only a loose robe that looked insane in the cold weather and a small leather bag hanging down between her breasts. Her eyes slowly turned gold, glowing like the heart of the sun in the bright dawn light, and her voice was a low, absolutely lethal drawl.

“Hello, lover.”
Chapter 24

Shae smiled, twirling a finger in the cord hanging down her chest. “You know sweetheart, I think I’m disappointed. I thought you were a better cop than this. This place is an absolute madhouse.”

Distantly she could hear the sounds of the townsfolk, maybe even Nedley’s voice, but they were moving further away, not coming closer. Nicole growled, the sound low and resonant, chopping in her chest like helicopter blades. She narrowed her eyes at Shae and let her vision tint gold.

“Why are you here, Shae.”

“I told you,” she murmured. “I’m just looking out for you. It’s the Solstice, you know. Incredible things can happen when the Triangle’s walls are weak. Wouldn’t want you to get caught in the crossfire.”

“The seals are intact,” Nicole called to her, sneering. “You can’t free him.”

“No,” she agreed, and let a finger trail down her chest, the robe slipping along her shoulder. Despite the snow and the cold she seemed comfortable that way, even with so much dark skin exposed to winter air. “But that comes in time. For now, the eldest Earp fulfills her part in all this.”

Nicole snarled. “What does Willa have to do with this?”

Shae laughed, the sound bright and mocking. “Oh sweetheart, tell me you didn’t get close to them. You always did have terrible taste in friends.”

“You would know.”

Shae’s smile was all wolf—sharp fangs and glinting white.

“Come now, I didn’t lie to you.”

“Maybe,” Nicole said, and she couldn’t keep her words to anything less than a low, ripping growl. “But you certainly left out some key details.”

“What,” Shae murmured, “That I was involved with that little cult your parents are in?” Nicole growled, but Shae ignored her. “Or did you mean how your parents asked me to track where you’d run off to? That it was their idea for me to get close to you, to win you over, to get married in some little Vegas chapel?”

For hundreds of years adults have taught a little rhyme to their children. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* They arm their offspring with it like swords, let those little voices sing it, chant it at top volume, and in the shouting of it they build, brick by brick, the walls that will ward off the agony of words shaped into catapult stones. They strap on layers of armor to turn aside the poisoned blades that will bring down hearts and souls.

But adults lie.

Even the strongest armor cannot protect against the sharpest blades, and words hurt, will *always* hurt, when they’re the right ones, when they’re wielded by a master. It had been only a year since Nicole let Mikael help her, since she ran from Shae in the middle of the night, but even now, even after all that time, it cut into her like a blade, terrible and icy cold.
Nicole choked on her own breath. “What?”

Shae laughed at the look on her face. “Come on, you didn’t think it was a little too convenient? Your first trip away from home, out of the country, and you just happened to meet someone who was so incredibly into you? Who suggested getting married to piss off your parents just a week after meeting you? I worked hard not to let on but I figured you’d get wise eventually. You were always too sharp for your own good, Nicole. Or you were, when your heart wasn’t involved. Then you were just entirely too blind.”

“Shut up,” Nicole said, though it was barely audible, even to her.

“Well, if that isn’t what you meant, I guess those key details you’re talking about was something else. Maybe how every time you said you weren’t on good terms with your family, I already knew, because I know your father better than you ever will?”

“Shut up,” she said again, a little louder.

“Oh it was so hard not to laugh,” she murmured, standing up away from the car and strolling forward a few steps, sauntering along the edge of the sidewalk. “Every time you talked about them it was like this horrible burning secret—you’d only talk about them when you’d been drinking, did you think I wouldn’t notice that? Even if I hadn’t already known the truth, it was pretty obvious. You only talked about them when you were too far gone to censor yourself.”

“Shut up!” Nicole snarled, her whole body trembling as changes swept through her. Her nails turned sharper, longer, her teeth went jagged in her mouth, her nose flattening a little as a precursor to a muzzle.

“Temper, temper.” Shae smiled and Nicole bared her fangs in warning, eyes flashing brighter gold. Shae’s hand strayed to the belt of her robe, sliding across the knot of it. “Come now, you don’t really think you could take me in a fight, do you? You’ve never fought another werewolf, sweetheart, and if you lose now, no one will be here to protect your little town from the big bad demon cult. No one will be here to protect your cute little girlfriend. She’s darling by the way. So very unlike her sisters.”

Nicole snarled, so loud it echoed off walls, flexing her hands into fists.

“I’ll take that bet.”

They were roughly of a height and even as wolves they were more or less evenly matched for mass. Shae was older, more experienced, but Nicole had the advantage of youth and home turf advantage.

Or she should have. Shae was just so damn fast.

Shae changed in the span of a breath. It seemed like one second she was herself, her robe falling open, and the next she was halfway between, a foot taller and contorting, growing, and in the third, a thousand pounds of muscle and jet black fur and fangs slammed into Nicole with the force of a speeding car. Nicole had barely started to move forward when Shae struck her and she flew back into the station wall, brick crunching under her back. She felt her healed ribs creaking, threatening to re-break, but as soon as she hit her feet she was shifting again, letting the wolf shore up the damaged parts of her even as her chest expanded, the zipper of her coat groaning as she grew to fill it.

Her face shifted, more subtly than Shae’s, to account for a larger bite, but before she could so
much as pounce Shae hit her again, slamming a fist into Nicole’s gut and sending her tumbling down the sidewalk another fifteen feet. She wheezed, crawling upright again, and gingerly touched a hand—halfway to a paw—to her chest. The pain was lingering, tallying one on the other in a way that it shouldn’t have.

She thought of all the scratches that didn’t heal for hours during the full moon and cursed under her breath as Shae moved to charge her again.

This time she dodged, rolling into the street to let Shae sail by her, but she slid on the ice and heard claws scratching deep gouges into concrete, recovering way too fast. When Nicole got to her feet Shae hit her from behind, one of the wolf’s huge shoulders hitting her square in the back. She flew across the street, nearly clipping a bench with her shoes, and slammed her head into a shopfront window.

She was halfway up to her feet again when Shae’s voice carried across the road, guttural and loud where Shae had down-shifted to get back a human larynx.

“Give it up, sweetheart. You can’t win. You have no idea what you’re doing.”

Nicole panted, set her hands on her legs to brace her weight, and felt her car keys in her pocket. A brief flash of fantasy—hitting Shae with the cruiser like it was a ram—went through her mind, but she doubted that would do much more to stop Shae than it would a charging bull.

*Then again...* she had more than just a car at her disposal.

She leaned upright again, staggering across the street, down-shifting until she was entirely human.

“So, you’re right, Shae,” she called out, and coughed. Her vision was still swimming and the cold air bit at her chest where the jacket fell open. When she looked down she could see her skin was already swollen and reddening toward purple. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Shae watched her, gold eyes narrowed.

Nicole crossed the street and kept the car between her and Shae, groaning as she leaned a hand on the hood of the car for effect. Well. Mostly for effect. Her whole body throbbed with her new injuries, so it wasn’t that much of a stretch to pretend.

“I don’t like that you’re here, but, you’re right, I can’t count on beating you in a fair fight. You’re faster, you’re bigger, you’ve been doing this a lot longer. You were bitten what, when you were in high school?”

Shae growled, but didn’t answer, and Nicole stopped by the passenger door. “Listen, I’m just— let’s just talk. If you’re so keen to keep me from interfering in what the Earp is doing. Just. Fine. We’ll talk. Just lemme get some painkillers.”

Shae’s growl faded off, and she took a step back. Permission, of a sort.

Nicole opened the door and leaned over the console, setting a hand on the shotgun Dolls had given her.

Shae snarled, maybe sensing the trick, and lunged as Nicole spun and pulled the trigger right as Shae’s claws curled into her hair, tangling and *yanking*. Without being properly braced against her shoulder the shotgun kicked, *hard*, but Shae roared in pain, rearing back as she got a belly full of buckshot. It wouldn’t do much more than slow her down, but then, that’s all Nicole really needed.
Nicole let her hand change again and swung, raking her claws across Shae’s face, and the werewolf howled, retreating around the corner of the station and into an alley. She heard claws on stone, then nothing, and she picked up the shotgun, working the action to chamber a new round. She panted, trying to catch her breath, trying to hear past the ringing in her ears from the shotgun blast, trying to keep her eyes on every direction at once.

God, she ached. Her whole body was a mass of pain and bruising and throbbing where bones had started to fracture. The scrapes and scratches from sliding across ice were healing well enough, but the wolf was struggling to recover all the blunt strikes of Shae’s fists and body.

She leaned back against the door of her cruiser and slowly slid down to sit in the snow. Keeping the car at her back should at least narrow the angle of approach Shae could use. It wasn’t much, but anything was an improvement at this point.

But now that she’d stopped moving, stopped fighting, there was room for her thoughts to creep in, crawling into her heart like shadows.

Shae hadn’t even wanted her, not once. It had been a trick from the very start. All this time she’d at least taken some comfort in the knowledge that it had been what it was—even when she learned that Shae was involved with her family, Nicole had assumed it was some star-crossed thing, messy, unplanned, but at least genuine.

As if mocking her, a thought skittered around in the back of her mind, Mikael’s words relayed through Waverly’s mouth.

*Her lie runs deeper than even you know.*

“Hey!”

She lifted her head as Wynonna and Doc jogged down the sidewalk. Wynonna detoured, crouching down in front of her.

“Haught? Holy shit.” She pulled at the front of Nicole’s jacket, taking in the bruises. “What happened to you?”

Nicole blearily opened her eyes, alarmed that she had let them close. God, how much time had passed since she’d sat down? She was still clutching the shotgun across her chest like a lifeline, but she couldn’t say for sure how long she’d been sitting here in the snow. Her ass was numb with the cold though, which probably wasn’t a good sign.

“Wynonna?”

“Yeah. Willa only shot you once, what’s wrong with you? I’ve seen you take armor-piercing shit before, don’t wuss out on me now.”

“Oh now you remember,” she grumbled.

“Shut up, Haught, I was.” She huffed, bobbing her head. “Distracted. *Listen,*” she said, and patted Nicole’s cheek to make sure she was awake and paying attention, then frowned, brushing bits of frost off Nicole’s skin where tears had started to freeze. “Balto, listen. You better hunker down. Dolls called in the cavalry.”

Fear pricked down Nicole’s spine and she looked at Wynonna. “He did?”

“Yeah. Needed their help with the antidote. You better keep your nose down.”
Henry—no, Doc—looked at Nicole over Wynonna’s shoulder, frowned, then glanced around. “Wynonna we had best be hurryin’.”

“I know,” she snapped, then looked at Nicole again. “You got me, Haught? Make yourself scarce. You don’t wanna be downtown when they stomp through here in their jackboots.”

“Okay,” she said, and accepted Wynonna’s hand to get back up to her feet. “Okay.”

“Good. And don’t think we’re not gonna talk about my sister.”

God, she’d already forgotten about that. Nicole winced. “Yeah. I know.”

Wynonna went back into the station, and Doc followed after tipping the brim of his hat to Nicole. Thank god he hadn’t asked any questions. Yet, at least. She’d work out what to tell Doc later. Apparently he was far more wrapped up in all this BBD shit than she’d thought, so maybe he’d need to know.

Shit. Right. Black Badge was coming, and in force.

She turned back to the car, stashing the shotgun, but hesitated with her hand on the door. She looked around once, then tilted her head back, howling a mournful two-note call. It wasn’t something she’d had to use before, thankfully, but it was one of the few things Shae had taught her before they’d... split up.

A code, of sorts, among supernaturals in general and lycanthropes in particular. A warning: mortal hunters are coming. Get out.

After a moment, she heard the long one-note reply that meant Shae had heard, and would listen. Nicole looked up, following the sound, and saw Shae watching her from the roof of the police station. Her robe flicked out in the breeze, and from this distance her expression was impossible to read.

Then she slipped away, and Nicole was alone in the street again. She pushed her dark thoughts aside and circled to the other side of the cruiser. She’d have time for that later. Or preferably never.

She drove home, and didn’t quite stop looking over her shoulder until she was inside with the door locked.

Nicole had been home for maybe an hour, standing under the scalding spray of her shower to wash off the lingering feeling of Shae’s words. She felt slimy, and she shook with nerves. Sorrow she could deal with, if slowly, but once that was pushed back a little more, fear crept in to take its place. How had Shae known about Waverly?

A ripple of power skittered across the earth like a minor quake and she braced her hands on the walls of her shower to keep herself standing. The wolf scratched and dug at her with all the strength of sunset on a full moon’s night, not in panic but in hunger, powerful and desperate and aching for blood. She gasped at the onslaught, curling her nails against the tiles until she thought she might scratch them. Water was pouring down her face but she barely registered it even as it burned her skin pink. Seconds dragged on like minutes, minutes like hours as the wolf fought her for control, fur growing across her arms and shoulders and spine, then fading away every time she wrestled the beast back down.

A minute had passed, maybe two, when that ripple came again, louder, harder, like a door
slamming shut after creaking open, and the wolf subsided, whining at its defeat but docile again.

“What the hell,” she muttered, spluttering as she got a mouthful of water for her trouble. She knew, though she wasn’t sure how, that Willa was involved. Was this what all this had been about? What Shae wanted? What Willa had needed Peacemaker for?

*The walls are at their most weak on the Solstice*, she thought, thinking of Mikael’s warning. Damn. He’d been right.

She just hoped nothing had slipped through while the gate was open.

Around noon, Waverly texted.

*Cavalry’s still in town. Wynonna shot willa and stopped some weird tentacle monster from crossing the border. I pulled strings with nedley. Lay low for now*

Mikael called, though he was no less cryptic.

“The gate opened,” he said, as soon as she picked up.

“Hello to you too,” she muttered. “Yeah, I think so. Briefly.”

“Be careful, hjärtat. Hard to say what might’ve gotten in.”

She was quiet a moment, and he let her think.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

The noise he made wasn’t dismissive, but maybe a little sad. “Whatever for?”

“I didn’t stop it. Jesus, I mean Shae batted me around like I was an unruly puppy.”

“I never expected you to stop it, hjärtat, to stop her. So much is in motion. One wolf, no matter how strong, could never have stopped it.”

“Then why even send me here, Mikael?” The use of his full name made him inhale, swallowing whatever he was about to say. “Why bother?”

“This game is not yet over, Nicole.” She could hear his smile in his voice. God, she missed that stupid vampire. “Not yet over, and not yet lost. This is just the opening move.”

“Queen pawn to D4,” she muttered.

“Exactly. There is more to be done. They must find the seals, and break them. In the meantime, we prepare. Ready our defenses.”

“But I’m just ‘one wolf.’”

“Wrong,” he murmured. “You are you, Nicole. You are always just you. You have a sharp eye and a strong heart, and you will fight until the day silver pierces your heart. And that is enough. More than enough.”
It was almost four when Waverly called her, and Nicole swiped to accept it before she even realized it was a video call.

“Whoa, Waves, hey,” she said, fumbling her phone to pull it up to her face, her ribs twinging as she did. She winced, and Waverly squinted at her screen.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, a little too fast. “Yeah, um, I’m still a little sore, but it’s... it’s just a bruise. I’m fine.” For a moment Waverly said nothing, and she frowned. “Waves, are you okay?”

“Y-yeah,” she said, her eyes skittering to the side. “Of course I am. Wynonna shot that big... ugly thing before it had time to do any real damage to Purgatory, so...” For a moment, just a moment, Nicole found herself wondering if she meant the tentacle monster or her sister. Waverly shook her head. “Anyway, how’s my baby really feeling?” When Nicole mumbled her way through shrugging her off again, Waverly bit her lip. “I got you something that’ll make you feel better.”

Nicole raised an eyebrow and felt a smile curling her lips. “Oh? Well, I like the sound of that.”

“Yeah?”

Nicole chuckled. There was something so normal about it, so completely ordinary, that she couldn’t help but go along with it. Maybe after all this, Waverly needed a little normalcy.

“Come over?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, laughing still. “Yeah, okay. I’ll be right there.”

She took backroads, to keep out of Purgatory proper, though she still found herself watching the roadsides for ambushes, chokepoints, and snipers. She knew it was paranoid, but she did it anyway, and didn’t really start to relax until she was driving onto Earp land.

Waverly poked her head out through the front door when Nicole pulled up in front of the house and stepped outside, and Nicole grinned, calling out, “Now who’s the excited puppy?”

“Oh shut up,” Waverly said, and there was just a little edge to it that made Nicole blink. Waverly grinned, the moment passing as quickly as it had come, and waved her up. “Come on then.”

Nicole stepped inside, noting that Wynonna was upstairs. She heard bootsteps wandering from room to room, and Doc raising his voice just a little every time Wynonna changed venues.

“Here,” Waverly said, waving her into the kitchen and pulling a chair aside. She patted the table, and Nicole rested against it, blowing out a breath as she settled.

Waverly set a small jar behind her and stood in front of Nicole’s knees, taking stock of her and looking her over. She brushed her hands over Nicole’s forehead and down the sides of her face. “It still hurts?” Waverly murmured. “I know you were in the vest but...” She frowned. “It should’ve healed by now, right?”

Nicole let a smile tug at her lips. “Got into a fight with someone else, after you guys cleared out.”

“What?” Waverly’s eyes searched hers, startled, and touched her shoulders with each of her hands, not grabbing, maybe nervous to, but touching, feeling the heat of Nicole’s body through the knit. “God, baby, are you okay?”
“Yeah,” she said, and hoped Waverly wouldn’t look at her back. “It just... it’s just taking a bit longer than it should.”

Waverly chewed on her lip, then sighed, reaching past her. “Right, well, then I’m glad I picked this up after all.”

“Hm?” Nicole started to turn to look at the jar, then hissed, stopped short, and turned forward again.

Something flickered across Waverly’s eyes—pain, perhaps, something just a little dark—and she uncapped the jar. It didn’t smell chemical, the way she expected, but herbal. There was something bitter in it, and a little sweet, maybe St. John’s Wort and a few others, mixing together into something she hadn’t really encountered before.

“Sweater up,” Waverly murmured, and Nicole obeyed, leaning back on one hand as she pulled the knit up with the other.

Waverly’s eyebrow went up when she noted the lack of anything beneath the sweater, and Nicole flushed a little. “Too tight,” she muttered, as an explanation.

“Mm.” Waverly scooped a little of the salve onto a finger and dabbed it across the one of the darker lingering bruises along Nicole’s chest, making her hiss softly and squirm.

“S’cold,” she grumbled.

“My poor brave baby,” Waverly cooed, somehow both teasing and heartfelt all at once.

“We sure do a lot of patching each other up these days,” Nicole noted, glancing up at her with a wry smile.

“Yeah,” Waverly said, her gaze tracking up from Nicole’s chest to her face. “When there are so many other things that we should be doing.”

For a moment, neither of them moved, though Nicole itched to grab her. There was something hot and a little too alive lingering in the gaps between them, and Waverly was so close and yet somehow so very far away. This morning she’d lost her sister, a sister who had also shot someone she loved—god, she’d said she loved her and Nicole hadn’t even had time to begin unpacking that—and nearly lost friends and neighbors to a mad demon’s scheme. Why wouldn’t she feel distant, cool, like a comet passing overhead?

Besides which, maybe it was just her. Maybe everything seemed a little cold, a little too out of reach, now that she knew Shae had been very literally laughing behind her back for how much of a trusting idiot Nicole had been when they were together. She knew she could trust Waverly, but there was that little nagging voice now, that asked are you sure.

Waverly moved first, grabbing her by the back of the neck and pulling her closer, her lips hot and urgent and not at all comet-like against Nicole’s. All her darker thoughts flickered away like dust in a breeze. Waverly’s hands slid around Nicole’s neck so that there was always one above her collar, and like a cub carried in the mouth of its mother the pressure of Waverly’s hand behind her head settled her, grounded her, just as much, maybe, as the kiss grounded Waverly—reminded her that she was still here, she was still whole.

Waverly’s hand dropped, skimming across her sweater and her hand until warm fingers brushed up her belly and Nicole yelped, breaking away.
“Oh sorry,” Waverly breathed, grimacing.

“Sorry, still tender,” Nicole murmured, and Waverly flashed her a pained, sympathetic smile. Her gaze flicked down, both looking at the bruise she’d touched and, maybe, admiring the exposed skin where Nicole still hadn’t straightened her sweater.

But there was something else Nicole noticed. A faint... almost aftertaste, like a single note of bitterness that was left in her mouth.

“Hey Waves...”

“What?”

“You taste, um.” She frowned, trying to put words to it. “Different.”

Waverly pulled back a little more, blinking, and ran a thumb over her lip. “What?”

Behind them Doc cleared his throat. “I’m just here for the sweet tea,” he explained, and Nicole glanced over her shoulder at him. “I am in the kitchen,” he muttered, resolutely keeping his gaze on the fridge as he opened it, “I am now... in the kitchen.”

Waverly huffed a little laugh and stepped around the table behind Nicole. “When did you become such a prude, huh? Didn’t you own a brothel?”

Nicole pulled at her lip. Had she imagined it? Maybe she was just stressed. She still hurt from the fight with Shae—physically, not to even mention emotionally—and so much had happened today. Plus Dolls was still MIA... maybe she was losing her edge. She probably just needed a good night’s sleep.

Right?

“It was a bordello,” Doc grumbled, though it was a little hard to maintain one’s air of offended dignity when one was holding a whiskey glass and a carafe of tea, “And it is called being a gentleman.”

Nicole chuckled, setting her worries aside for the moment as she got up and turned to look at him. “Well, I appreciate it, Henry. I’m gonna go,” she said, glancing from him to Waverly. “Feed the cat.” And probably take a long, long nap in her bed until this day was well and truly over, but that was a secondary detail. She smiled, watching Waverly’s face as she went. Waverly watched her in turn, fiddling with the jar of salve between her hands, but she was smiling. “I’ll see you later.”

“Okay.”

“Officer Haught,” Doc murmured, reaching for a hat he wasn’t wearing as she headed for the door. As she grabbed her keys, she heard him tell Waverly, “She’s a lovely girl.”

She paused maybe a moment longer than she needed to just outside the front door—long enough to hear Waverly’s response, which she said a little bit loud, as if she knew Nicole was listening and wanted her to hear.

 Yep, which makes me the luckiest.”

She smiled and pushed thoughts of bittersweet kisses aside for further thought later. Waverly was fine. Or at least as fine as she could be in the circumstances.
They’d be fine.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Headsup to those of you who might’ve read last night’s chapter right after I posted it—maybe two hours later I added a line that I needed in order to set up a beat in this chapter where Nic mentions getting a haircut. (Check out the moment she fires the shotgun for Shae playing a bit dirty and pulling her hair.) Sorry about that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as Nicole stepped into the station the next morning, the cloying stench of industrial cleaners hit her in the face, so thick in the air it was like walking into a physical wall. She stopped short, sneezing and coughing and trying not to gag. Tears blurred her vision and before she could get them clear enough to see, warm hands touched her shoulder and her elbow, guiding her back outside. Out in clean air she could smell coffee and bourbon and she wiped at her face with one hand.

“Sheriff?”

Nedley chuckled. “Haught.”

She winced, blinking her streaming eyes. “What the heck’s goin’ on in there, sir?”

“Dolls’ people came to pack up all his stuff,” he explained, though he kept his voice so quiet it was almost sub-vocal. She leaned toward him slightly, the way a normal person would have. “Tell you what. Get out on the roads today. Need another set of eyes on the west side of town.”

She blinked again, though this time less to clear off tears and more in confusion. He didn’t... did he?

“Uh.” She nodded. “Sure, of course, I’ll do that.”

He smiled. “Good. Go on. And take your lunch off-site, Haught. They’re supposed to be here all day.” She watched him, wary. “Smell won’t do anyone’s appetites any favors.”

“Right,” she said, a little slow. “Right, yeah. Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, nodded, and headed back indoors.


A few hours later, she had a text from Waverly. Come by after work? News on Dolls.

Today was apparently a day for new smells, because when she walked through the Earps’ front door she smelled a new person in the house. She narrowed her eyes, sniffing the air a little. A woman, for sure, and... there was something inhuman but familiar about her. More and more odd.

“Down girl, she’s friendly,” Wynonna muttered, sifting through folders full of loose paper in an
armchair in the house’s small living room.

“Who’s that?” Nicole asked, pocketing her car keys and hanging her coat on the rack by the door.

“Out getting shit from the car,” she said, seemingly not noticing that it was the answer to the wrong question. Wynonna jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the kitchen. “Waves is in there.”

Nicole cleared her throat, a little embarrassed that her priorities were so well known, but headed into the kitchen. Doc, she noted, was by the stove, and made a point of not turning around right away when he heard her enter the room.

“Hey baby,” Waverly murmured, sitting up a little straighter to meet her halfway for a kiss. She tasted mostly like herself again, but there was just a tinge of that weird aftertaste still, and Nicole ran her tongue over her lip afterward, trying to work out what it was.

“Hey.”

“Are you okay?”

Nicole smiled a little. “Yeah. All healed up. Your salve helped.”

Waverly beamed up at her. “Good. I just... wanna know that you’re okay. Really okay.”

She didn’t say you still haven’t told me who you fought that could hurt you so badly and it worries me but she didn’t really have to. Nicole glanced over her shoulder at Doc, then back to Waverly. She nodded, understanding the underlying sentiment of yeah but not now and not here, and curled her fingers into Nicole’s, squeezing gently.

Wynonna cursed and levered herself up from the armchair, stomping over to the table. “All the files from Dolls’ motel room,” she groused, and tossed the folder down on the table. Waverly picked it up and started paging through it. “And nothing on where they might have taken him. The location of Black Badge satellite offices are kept secret, even from one another, so it just makes it way harder to track their movements, activities...”

The front door opened and shut as she was talking and Nicole stiffened a little, the butane and leather smell coming through stronger as the new contact strolled in.

“Paranoid much?” Waverly mused, glancing at Wynonna.

“And with good reason,” Wynonna’s new friend said. “Black Badge is so far off the government grid they’re sub-Atlantis.” She grabbed the remaining chair, turning it to sit down backward in it. Nicole forced herself not to bare her fangs, settling instead for eyeing the blonde woman with extreme skepticism. “If you only knew the stuff they were into.”

“I do not believe we have met,” Doc said, smiling his trademark old-timey-flirt smile. Nicole would give the man his due—for being over a hundred-fifty-some years old, the man had game.

“Yeah, okay,” Wynonna said, rolling her eyes, “This is Eliza, she’s a... friend of Dolls.”

Waverly glanced at her sister. “Dolls has a friend?” Wynonna very unsubtly mouthed the word friend at her and Nicole bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. “Oh,” Waverly said. “A friend.”

“Oh mercy me,” Doc said. “How complicated.”
“Yeah, okay,” Wynonna said again, a little quicker, “So this is my sister Waverly, and her...”

She looked to Nicole, then to Waverly, and Waverly smiled. “Girlfriend.”

“...Nicole Haught,” Wynonna finished, as Nicole glanced down at Waverly, trying not to smile quite so widely as to attract undue attention. God, she’d never get tired of hearing that word from Waverly’s mouth. “And that’s—”


Eliza raised an eyebrow. “As in Doc Holliday?”


Nicole turned toward him while Eliza watched Wynonna. She smirked at him, and he flashed her a quick grin.

“Okay,” Wynonna said, interrupting and walking away from the table, buzzing with nervous energy. “So! How do we spring Dolls. Uh, well, Eliza, Doc and I need to find the latest coordinates from the local BBD safe house.”

Eliza lifted a hand. “I can use my credentials, but here’s the thing. There are no guns allowed on site. Not even their own security uses them. It’s just plastic cattle prods and baseball bats.”

“Old school,” Doc noted, with a hint of satisfaction. “Means we got a fightin’ chance.”

“And they’ll have metal detectors,” Eliza noted, nodding at Wynonna, in particular the hip where she normally wore Peacemaker.

“We’ll adjust,” Wynonna said, exhaling heavily. Nicole frowned, watching her—the elder Earp sounded exhausted, drained, like she were operating at half her usual speed and wearing concrete blocks for shoes, but she came back in toward the table again. “Waverly.”

“Hm?”

“There are still sixty-two revenants trying to kill me.”

“Aw,” Waverly teased, “You did math.”

“I cannot believe I’m saying this, but without Bobo keeping them in line, who knows what they’re up to.”

“Yeah. Bobo,” Waverly said, and there was a tone in her voice that made Nicole frown and glance down at her. A darkness, somehow, an edge, like speaking his name made her sick. Nicole caught Wynonna’s eye across the table as Wynonna’s brow furrowed for a moment—she’d noticed it too.

“Well, Waverly can suss out the trailer park,” Doc suggested, and nodded his head toward Nicole. “She can go with Officer Haught.”

It occurred to her, just for a moment, that Doc was unknowingly giving her an out. All she had to do was agree and she would be in the clear. No one else knew that Dolls had, if unofficially, pulled her into this weird BBD family. If she kept her mouth shut, she could go back to being a regular, normal-looking cop who just happened to be dating a BBD consultant.

But, well, Nicole had never exactly been willing to turn away from something just because it was dangerous. Plus, if she wanted to be able to be any real help to Waverly and the others in whatever
was coming, she needed to stay close.

And if Shae was right about anything, it was that she had never had the best judgement where her heart was concerned.

“Agent,” Nicole said, and Eliza looked up.

“Yeah?”

“No, it’s...” She pressed her lips together. “It’s Agent Haught. Dolls deputized me before.” She looked to Wynonna and then to Doc, looking for backup. “He did. Right?”

“Indeed,” Doc murmured, smiling, and she realized it hadn’t been so unknowing after all. He’d been giving her space to choose. That sneaky bastard.

“Just... Just–” Wynonna was seething, Nicole realized, so tense she and the wolf both wanted to back away a little to get out of her blast radius. Wynonna on her best day was a time bomb in a human shell but this was different somehow, new and dark. “Just, find out where the revenants have gone. We need to make sure that they’re... not regrouping, or... or planning something.” She hissed out a breath. “God. Is it hot in here or is it just me,” she said, pulling off her jacket and scarf. All three of them—Doc, Waverly, and Nicole—were watching her, and Waverly shifted in her seat.

“Hey, can I... Can I talk to you? Somewhere private?”

Wynonna looked like she was considering refusing, but pulled a face and shrugged. “Yeah.”

The two Earps went upstairs, and Eliza flicked her gaze from Doc to Nicole, suddenly very attentive and very tense, the smell of butane and blood sharpening to a hostile edge.

“So, Agent Haught,” Eliza said, her voice cool but her gaze smoldering. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Purgatory Sheriff’s deputy,” she said drily. The animal part of her itched to show, not tell, but she eased it back. Mostly. She kept it near at hand this time, in case Eliza decided it was worth getting acquainted up close and personal. “Been in town since late last fall.”

“Mmhm,” Eliza said, and looked her up and down. “And did Dolls know you’re a—”

“Yes,” Nicole said, ignoring him and keeping her eyes locked on Eliza’s so she’d know exactly which question Nicole was answering. “He did. I take it he knew you’re—”

“All right that is quite enough,” Doc said, interrupting again. He stepped closer and set a hand against Nicole’s chest, the other extended to warn off Eliza, as if he expected the woman to leap from her chair at the slightest provocation. “Listen I know we are all a mite tense today but let us just keep this conversation to a sensible volume to avoid disturbin’ our friends upstairs. And perhaps we should also stick to topics of which we are all actually in the know, shall we?”

Nicole glanced toward him, then back at Eliza, who had the decency to look a little guilty, dropping her gaze and some of her hostility.

“Right, Henry. Sorry,” Nicole leaned back, finding that she actually had to lean pretty far—she wasn’t sure when she’d set her hands on the table, but that did explain some of Doc’s tension. She
cleared her throat. “Eliza here is like Dolls.”

Doc’s gaze flicked to her, then to Eliza. His face gave away nothing, but he nodded his head, slow and thoughtful. “I see,” he said, and looked to Nicole. “How, may I ask, did you know about Dolls?”

She pressed her lips together and glanced aside, aware they both were watching her.

“I heard your conversation, on the Solstice,” she explained.

“You have mighty keen ears then,” he mused. “I took you for the most normal of us, Miss Haught, but you continue to surprise me.”

She flashed him her most wolfish smile, short of actually growing fangs, and Eliza gave a derisive little snort.

“Oh don’t worry Henry. I don’t plan on stopping any time soon.”

After Wynonna left with Doc and Eliza, Waverly changed a little. She got... smaller, somehow, softer, finally removing the face she’d put on for the others now that she was alone with Nicole. It wasn’t something she heard or even something she saw or smelled. It was just that once the door closed and the truck’s engine turned over and tires crunched on snow, Waverly drifted into her like a wayward balloon, her arms sliding under Nicole’s to curl tight around her waist.

“Hey,” Nicole murmured, dipping her head to kiss the top of Waverly’s. “What’s wrong, baby.”

Waverly sighed, her breath warm against Nicole’s shirt. “Can we just. Sit, for a bit.”

She smiled, combing her fingers through Waverly’s hair. “Sure.”

She settled on the small sofa in the living room, across from Wynonna’s armchair, and Waverly crawled up to lay against her, her head tucked against Nicole’s chest so her ear was pressed over Nicole’s heart. For several minutes they sat in silence, Waverly listening to Nicole’s heartbeat as Nicole gently rubbed a hand over Waverly’s back and shoulders.

“I can’t believe it’s barely been a day,” Waverly said. “Since... since everything.”

“It’s okay to not be okay, you know,” Nicole murmured. “To mourn her. She was family.”

“We don’t have time to,” Waverly said, and that weird edge was back in her voice, but just as quick she eased back off the tension and sighed. “Wynonna said we’ll grieve after we have Dolls back.”

“Mm.”

Waverly slid a hand up to tangle, a little, into Nicole’s braid. She tensed for a second, irrationally expecting her to pull. It didn’t hurt as much now as it had after the fight with Shae, but it was still a little tender. She’d spent most of the night wondering if it was worth it to cut it again. It’d been a while.

“You okay?” Waverly said, glancing up at her.

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and forced herself to calm. “Sorry, I’m fine.”

Waverly was quiet for a moment, then shifted a little, like she couldn’t quite settle. Nicole made a
soft rumbling noise deep in her chest, hoping it was at least a little soothing, but Waverly’s pulse was a little too quick, a little too... sharp.

“What’s wrong?”

“What if I don’t?”

Nicole glanced down, brow furrowed, but Waverly’s gaze was still off to the side, somewhere along the wall.

“Don’t what?”

“Mourn her,” Waverly said, though her voice cracked halfway through, the words just above a whisper.

“If you’re saying that because of the whole thing where she shot me, I mean, I’m fine, Waves.”

“No,” Waverly said, then paused. She sighed. “Or rather, it’s not just that. It’s... more that her shooting you is just another example of– of everything about her.”

Nicole frowned. “What do you mean?”

“She...” Waverly hesitated and Nicole said nothing, giving her time. “I wasn’t quite being honest when I said I didn’t remember much of her. It’s just that everything I do remember was bad.”

“Older sisters,” Nicole said, agreeing, but Waverly sat up a little, propping herself up on one hand.

“Don’t,” she said, and her voice cracked again. Nicole frowned, reaching up to touch her face, tucking strands of hair behind her ear. “Please don’t say that. That’s not what I mean.”

“Oh,” Nicole said. “Okay. Then... then tell me what you do mean.”

Waverly bit her lip and looked aside.

“Waves? What is it?”

She sighed and shook her head, shifting back to sit in Nicole’s lap, leaning her arm on the back of the couch. “It’s just... stuff like the beam in the barn. The one she made me walk across when I was four. Or– or the lake, or...”

Nicole frowned. “What lake.”

“It was frozen. Or, it was, but when I ran out onto it to get Mr. Rabbit back from where she’d thrown him...”

She didn’t have to finish that sentence for Nicole to get the gist. If the ice hadn’t been thick enough to support Waverly’s weight, even as a child, and she’d fallen in...

She tried to keep the furious growl down but it came out anyway, crackling and rumbling in her chest until Waverly winced and set a hand where Nicole’s shirt fell open, feeling the vibrations of sound through her fingers. Nicole couldn’t quite put words to it—or at least not words that didn’t sound a bit too sappy, even for her—but that one touch soothed her, enough that she could quiet down and keep watching Waverly’s face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to upset you with it, I knew you’d be mad,” she said, and let out a fragile, broken little laugh, wiping at her eyes with her free hand. “And I shouldn’t say that about her, I
shouldn’t— I shouldn’t talk that way about the dead, right? But I just feel like…”

Nicole sat up a little more, pressing her forehead to Waverly’s so their noses touched. “Like what, Waves.”

“Like maybe what happened at the boundary isn’t that surprising. Not to me, at least. Wynonna wouldn’t talk about it but I could see it in her eyes—Willa tried to hurt her before the creature grabbed her. Tried to kill her, maybe. And I wish I could say I’m surprised but I’m not, because… because maybe she was always a little wrong. A little broken.”

Nicole let out a breath and pressed a little harder to Waverly’s forehead.

“And I can’t… I can’t say that to Wynonna, I can’t, because it would break her heart to think that Willa had always been like this and that she’d never seen, never… never known that Willa could be like that, that she hurt me like that.” The growl redoubled, completely without her intending it, and Waverly’s breath hitched. “And now you’re upset or— or your wolf is, I don’t know, I didn’t want you to know, or- or not like this anyway, and—”

“Hey,” Nicole said, and reached one hand up to cup Waverly’s cheek. She leaned into it, closing her eyes, her cheeks wet with tears. “Hey. Remember what I said, okay? I’m home base. You can always tell me stuff like this, Waves. Always. I can handle it. Me and the wolf part of me too. Okay?”

Waverly nodded and rested her cheek against Nicole’s hand. “Okay.”

“And I’m glad you told me,” she said, kissing the tip of Waverly’s nose and earning a fragile little smile for it. “You don’t have to carry stuff like this alone. Okay?”

“Okay.”

She smiled and nuzzled against Waverly’s nose, and the smile grew, cracking into a soft laugh. “How much longer till we gotta get ready to hit the trailer park?”

“Couple hours,” Waverly said. “Wynonna wanted us to wait till the sun’d gone down. Better odds they’d have hunkered down for the night then.”

Nicole smiled and pressed her lips to Waverly’s for a moment. “Okay. You look wiped. Think you could sleep a little?”

“Maybe,” Waverly said. “If you’re here, maybe.”

“Okay,” Nicole murmured, and kissed her nose again, tugging her down against her as she lay back on the couch. “Then I’ll be right here.”

The first thing she noticed in the barn was the stench. Something dead, maybe, and in particular, something that hadn’t been dead very long. It smelled… wrong, maybe non-human? Still, she tabled that for a moment, looking around the barn. It looked the way it had a few days ago, and for a moment, Nicole was struck by the inexorable press of time. Just a handful of days before she’d been sitting here with Waverly when Willa had walked in on them. Who could have guessed, then, that Willa would not only out them, as Waverly had feared, but would do so in a fit of pique, just because she was angry? Just because she had in secret gone absolutely off-the-deep-end evil?

Then again, after everything Waverly had told her that afternoon, maybe it was only astonishing to
Nicole. Maybe Waverly had known all along that it was possible, even if she hadn’t wanted to believe it would actually happen.

“All right,” Nicole said, frowning and looking around. “So we’re here for weapons. Where...”

Waverly pushed a barrel into the corner, its metal contents glinting in the lamplight, and nodded toward the far wall. “Check those crates first. Dolls gave them to us.”

Nicole nodded, setting down a duffel bag and crouching to open one of the boxes. “Jesus,” she muttered, levering open the lid and pulling out what looked suspiciously like a tactical shotgun. “Dolls provided you guys with guns I’ve never even heard of,” she said, turning the gun over to inspect the stock. “What is this, Russian?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, with an oddly casual tone to her voice. “We’re not taking any guns.”

Nicole glanced up and found that she had picked up an axe and was examining the blade with something like reverence, running her hand over the wooden haft like it was ritual. Preparation for combat, maybe?

“Okay,” she said, shrugging, and Waverly nodded.

“Hey,” Nicole said, and stood. “You gonna be okay with this? You and I working side by side for Black Badge?”

“Hmm,” Waverly said, as if she were considering it, “Having to stare at your gorgeous smile and pretty French braid around the conference table...”

“Actually,” she said, though she didn’t think Waverly had entirely heard, “I’ve been thinking about cutting it.”

“...think I’ll manage.”

“I don’t know what we’re gonna find at that trailer park,” Nicole said. It was a bit of a topic shift, but she was getting a little antsy. Something had the wolf on edge, but she wasn’t sure what it was. “All I know is with Bobo gone, those revenants are gonna be desperate.” Her gaze skipped around the barn again and fell on a strange, misshapen form under a thin brown sheet. The stench of death and decay was strongest there, and she leaned closer to it, frowning, “And desperate things make desperate decisions.” She wrinkled her nose, grunting in disapproval.

“We’re not going to the trailer park,” Waverly said, though Nicole was only half-listening to the words, wincing as she examined the purplish stains on the sheet.

“What is this?” she muttered, starting to pull back the sheet. Something demonic and very dead was beneath it, all tooth and red, meaty jaw.

“This, Nicole?” Waverly said, and swung the axe up over her shoulder. For once the wolf reacted even before Nicole herself did—yelping so loudly in her mind that she jerked back from the thing under the sheet and sprawled across the closed crate of Dolls’ weapons—and Waverly brought the axe down with a sickening squelch on the monster’s neck. “Is for the greater good.”

A severed head, about the size of a basketball, rolled free onto the barn floor with its open maw facing upward, its eyeless face slack-jawed in death. Nicole sat for a moment, catching her breath and staring at the thing. Waverly scooped it up and as Nicole got back to her feet, her girlfriend tucked the grisly trophy into a small travel suitcase, leaving the axe aside.
Waverly looked up at her, noticed Nicole’s expression, and hesitated. “What?”

“Okay,” she said, and managed not to growl. Barely. “If you want me to trust you, you’ve gotta tell me the plan. Preferably before I find you holding an axe over my head.”

“Wynonna made me promise not to,” Waverly said, though her expression had turned appropriately remorseful. “She’s my sister, Nicole. I have to protect her now more than ever.”

Nicole nodded, though she didn’t like it, or even quite understand it.

“Hey,” Waverly added, and stepped a little closer, lifting Nicole’s chin with a soft, gloved finger. “Just like I need to protect you.”

By all rights, it should have been comical. This tiny, firecracker of a woman, bundled up in so many layers her coat dwarfed her a little, protecting an honest-to-god werewolf. But there was something endearing about it, something that made Nicole smile, because even for all her talk about being home base for Waverly, it was nice to have the tables turned on her. She’d spent so much time doing everything for herself, believing, just a little, that the tooth-marks on her shoulder meant no one would be willing to get close enough to really help ever again. But here was the living, walking proof that it wasn’t true. That at least one person thought Nicole shouldn’t have to do everything by herself either.

Besides which, none of the Earps knew how to pick fights in their weight class. Waverly included.

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and Waverly ran a hand down her arm to curl her fingers into Nicole’s. “Okay. I just— I just wanna make sure that you’re okay, you know? That deep down you’re still...” She thought of bittersweet kisses and a new, harder edge. “My Waverly.”

“Totally,” Waverly said, and smiled, looking so utterly normal, so utterly herself, that suddenly Nicole felt a little silly for having doubted her at all. “But first... will you help me be somebody else?” she asked, and where she had managed to keep that pair of red cat-eye glasses, Nicole would never guess, but she put them on and flashed a sheepish grin. “We’re sort of Wynonna’s Plan B to get into BBD. If... you’re okay with that.”

Nicole inhaled slowly. “Me, in a BBD blacksite. Are you sure?”

“We thought of that,” Waverly said, and set her hands on Nicole’s. “So... how do you feel about being a getaway driver?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so tomorrow I’ve got another 13-hour day and now that we’re in season 2 I’m rewatching episodes to start working out the shape of the whole season, so there’s more planning that I just didn’t manage to get done. And unfortunately, time watching is not time writing (I wish I could explain how weird it is to find myself saying that). So I might not be able to post till Thursday this time, but I’m gonna try to post something to B-sides tomorrow or Wednesday. All my love, you guys. Y’all are seriously the best readers I could ever ask for.
Chapter 26

Nicole leaned forward in her seat until her nose almost touched her steering wheel, looking up at the ominous industrial plant looming above the cruiser. A palace of death in concrete clothing.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Waverly asked. It wasn’t the first time she’d asked it, and frankly, it hadn’t gotten much easier to answer with each successive iteration.

“Yeah,” Nicole said. “It’s fine.”

“Really? Cuz um. You’re whining.”

Nicole snapped her mouth shut and strangled down the low, nervous noise she was making with a grumble. Waverly’s hand settled gently on her wrist.

“It’s okay if you’re scared, baby.” Nicole sighed and forced herself to look Waverly in the eye. “I am too, and I’m just human. If you wanna leave...”

“No,” Nicole said, and sighed. “No, I don’t. You guys won’t be able to get out with Dolls without a car.” Not that they’d fit well into the cruiser with five passengers, but that was beside the point. They had to work with the cards they had.

“Okay.” Waverly leaned up to kiss her cheek. “See you in the garage then.” She got out of the car, taking a piece of Nicole’s heart with her, and gathered up her suitcase from the backseat. Nicole carefully drove into the garage to find a hiding spot for her car, and engaged the speaker, listening to Waverly’s heels click on the cement floors as she headed into the plant.

She kept the truth to herself. It would only add more stress to Waverly’s already difficult job, and besides, she didn’t fully have it all straight in her head as it was. It was more a confusing mush of emotions. Because no, she didn’t want to be inside a Black Badge blacksite. She didn’t want to be anywhere near this stupid building. But she wanted to be near Waverly, within range to take a bullet or a beating, and that far outweighed her fear of being caught. She was the super-durable one. Waverly was small, and fragile. She was an Earp, yes, and that counted for a lot, but she was still human. She still bled and bruised like a human.

She heard new footsteps as she turned off the engine and doused the lights.

“Liz Wallis Windsor,” Waverly crooned, her voice suddenly brighter, lighter, and lilting a little in... was that supposed to be a Londoner’s accent? “Scotland Yard. Here with the delivery? One ore daemonium? Jolly big mouth-demon?”

Nicole bit down on a finger to keep from laughing.

There was a high-pitched whine of an electronic engaging, then Waverly’s soft “Ah, of course.” She heard shifting fabric, maybe taking off her jacket, and then the hum of the metal detector hovering over her arms, and Nicole held her breath.

“Ah, the shoes, don’t forget the shoes.”

“The thing is,” said a man’s voice, nasal and pinched, like maybe his glasses didn’t quite fit, “Is there is no visit from Scotland Yard scheduled in the log.”

“Listen,” Waverly said, with a tone of exhausted impatience in the face of incompetence that was
somehow distinctly English. “I know the location of the Black Badge safe house, I have a stonking great demon head stuffed into a wheelie bag, and I’m due on a plane back to London in three hours.” Her tone was part ice, part exaggerated patience, and there was a faint sound as if maybe he’d just looked in the bag. “It’d be one remarkably elaborate con, right chap?”

There was a faint beeping noise from the metal detector.

“Silver bullets,” she explained, still managing to sound very much like she intended to take up his lack of intelligence with his manager at her first opportunity. “You want to dig them up and see?” There was no reply, and Waverly sighed, satisfied. “Brilliant. Uh, laboratory?”

Nicole wasn’t entirely sure how she managed to say it like there were four syllables in it.

“Left, right, and right again.”

“Marvelous,” Waverly said, and her heels clicked again, along with the low rattling noise of the bag’s wheels. “Toodles!”

Nicole pressed her lips together and struggled not to snicker, bringing her walkie-talkie up to her mouth. “Toodles? Really?”

“It just– it just slipped out!” Waverly whispered, sounding normal again and a bit embarrassed. She kept her voice low, so low that the speaker almost didn’t catch it.

“Waverly,” Nicole teased, “That is the worst British accent I’ve ever heard.”

“I improvised, okay?”

“Look,” Nicole said, and bit her lip, rubbing her hand over her forehead. “Stay safe in there, okay?”

“Keep that getaway car running,” Waverly murmured, with another slide of cloth like she was putting her jacket back on. “Agent Haught.”

Waverly’s voice did things to her, it always did, but tonight the anxiety that something would go wrong, that she was too far away to do anything but listen, was a creeping ivy of dread along her spine.

She listened as Waverly walked down concrete halls inside the plant, then entered the lab—even without sight or smell she could hear the way the echoes changed, hollowing out and growing deeper, bigger as the space around Waverly opened up.

“Helloooooo?” she called, and there was a distant, eerie scuttling sound, perhaps a prisoner of the lab. “Hello? Uh, here to drop off a—wha...” Nicole listened to her heels clicking, slower, as Waverly explored, and Nicole felt tension rise in her gut like acid. “What is...” A louder snarling noise came then, though not so close as to make Nicole panic. Waverly’s utter lack of concern made her think there must be a barrier between her and whatever was thrashing around and making that high, odd noise. She moved a little more and Nicole heard a faint noise like a child giggling, then a distant, throaty roar.

Waverly gasped and Nicole flinched at the sound.

“Oooh,” Waverly said, rather more nervous now. “Oh. But you guys already have one. A big one.” There was a very, very soft buzzing noise. “Shit,” Waverly whispered, and then Nicole heard the unique shuffling noise of someone digging for a phone.
“Plan B here,” she said, back in her accent, “Good for eliminating all unwanted problems quickly.”

Nicole choked, depressing the button on her radio by accident as she laughed out a strangled, “Oh my god, Waverly!”

“Oh,” Waverly said, more to Nicole than to whoever had called, “Yeah, okay, no. That was inappropriate.”

“Waverly,” Wynonna said, sharp, cutting in, and Nicole was suddenly grateful Waverly had put her phone on the same ear as the receiver so she could hear both sides of the call. “Listen—”

“Yes, I have delivered the package,” Waverly said, with the forced, even calm of someone giving code under duress.

“Why are you giving me the full Middleton,” Wynonna muttered.

“And yes, I’m on my way to the getaway car, far, far away from the danger.”


There was a momentary pause and Nicole struggled to keep her breathing steady as her nerves doubled up on each other, the wolf chafing under the pressure of her rising panic.

“Tell me what you need.”

“We need all the doors unlocked. All of them.”

“What, why?”

“We’ve been locked in.”

“Ah. Shut down all the garbage-mashers on the detention level, got it.”

“I swear, baby girl, sometimes I think you’re speaking a different language.”

Waverly hung up the phone and pocketed it, paused for a moment, maybe thinking, and then moved forward—click click click—and tapped someone on the shoulder.

“Excuse me?” she asked, back in the accent. “Hi. Yes. Liz Wallis Windsor. Scotland Yard. I’m a bit new here, but I thought a gallant young man like you might be able to show me the ropes?”

“Oh!” This voice, Nicole noted, was younger and had considerably more energy. “Hey. Uh, yeah, sure, I guess. Sorry, didn’t see you come in.”

“Not a problem at all,” she said. “So, tell me about your system here, won’t you?”

Nicole tuned out most of the technical talk, and she imagined Waverly wasn’t retaining much of it either, but as the young man spoke, she started to notice that Waverly was laughing more often and with a forced ease. It didn’t take long to work out the shape of Waverly’s plan, and to say that it made her and her wolf unhappy was a vast understatement. It was one thing to know Waverly was flirting with someone just to get Wynonna out of a bind—it was quite another to have to sit there listening to it.

“So– so in London,” Waverly said, after another loud and just slightly manic laugh, “We uh, we have an R-500?”
“Uh, do you mean the S-550?”

“Right, yes. Um, but I mean... Your system is– it’s just– it’s so...”

At a faint sound of fabric rustling Nicole curled her grip around the radio again and let out a low, grinding growl of disapproval, noticing a little too late that she’d pushed the button again.

“Bollocks!” the lab tech complained.

“Pardon?”

“Yeah, I agree. The schematics suck. Cellular monitoring is so buggy it gives malaria a good name, the C-MOS is ‘mo’ pathetic, and the firewall is less likely to show up to play than Kanye.” Waverly gave a soft, afterthought sort of laugh and Nicole heard him shift, maybe look over at her.

“He’s uh, he’s an American rapper.”

She could almost hear Waverly’s bewildered blink. “I’m British, not elderly,” she said.

“Oh wow!” he said, though he didn’t sound like he was paying much attention.

“No, listen, our system gives us trouble when it comes to... opening security doors?”

“You mean like...” She heard keys tapping. “This?”

“Can you open all of them simultaneously?” Waverly asked, feigning professional interest.

“Within the entire facility?” he asked. “Yeah, Option-J-3. Pretty basic stuff mate,” he said, and Nicole decided she owed Waverly an apology—his was the worst British accent she’d ever heard. “Oh not that you’d ever wanna do that,” he noted, just as Waverly grunted with effort, and there was a terrible clang of metal on bone.

The tech shouted in pain, and she heard Waverly’s breath pick up, ragged and tense, and her heels clicked a couple times.

“Ow!” he shouted. “What the hell!” For a second she just heard Waverly’s breath and the tech hissing a faint pained noise, and then she heard his breath pick up too. “We can’t bleed in here!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’ll smell it,” he said. Somewhere far too close for Nicole’s comfort there was a shattering of glass and that deep, terrible roar again, then a clattering like a chain link fence rattling against its posts. “That is a Hala,” the tech noted, even as Waverly’s breathing had picked up to a speed dangerously near hyperventilation. “A Bulgarian devourer of souls!” She heard a distant—but now slightly closer—roar. “And it’s mean.”

“Oh,” Waverly moaned, “And very mad!”

Another crash, metal shearing free, and the distinctive sound of a lightbulb shattering. Waverly screamed and the tech yelped.

“Yup! Yup, real mad! Okay, run!”

“Where?”

“Here!”
“Wait!” Nicole heard her heels click a few times and then Waverly struggling with something, and the horrible roaring was louder, far too close. Nicole clutched the radio in one hand and had the other on the door of her car, weighing her odds and trying to reconcile the absolute uselessness of following Waverly inside. She didn’t know where the lab was, she didn’t know how many guards were between her and Waverly, she didn’t know what a Hala even was or how big it might be...

“Leave it!” the tech was shouting, and Waverly was panicking still. The chaos of the demon wrecking jars and flinging objects onto the floor was deafening as Waverly broke away from it, running across the room and through a door. The demon struck the other side, roaring and wrenching more screams from both Waverly and the tech, but they must have blocked it out, because the tech was shouting again. “Okay why did you hit me!”

“Okay!” Waverly gasped, struggling to breathe in the rush of getting all the words out, “My name is Waverly. Waverly Earp!”

“What happened to your accent?”

“And I’m not here with Scotland Yard. I’m here with my sister and Doc Holliday, and—”

“Doc Holliday?” he snapped, “Doc Holliday, are you high too?”

“—and some super fit secret agent, all to rescue... all to rescue Dolls.”

In the pause as he registered what she’d said even Nicole held her breath.

“Dolls?”

“Yeah.”

“Agent Xavier Dolls?”

“Yes! Please— please, he’s our friend,” Waverly whispered, as the demon roared and slammed the door again. “Can you help us?”

“...yes,” the tech whispered, though he sounded furious with himself for saying it. “Okay!”

Waverly gasped out a breath, and Nicole exhaled too, shifting in her seat with nervous energy. Nicole heard him tapping keys—god, had Waverly gone back for his laptop? They really needed to talk about priorities in combat.

He finished tapping keys, and for a few minutes they waited, the demon still pounding against the door. After a short eternity the roaring eased off as the demon finally worked out it wasn’t going to get through by brute force.

“Maybe,” the tech whispered, and she heard them moving, standing. “Shh...”

The demon bellowed and hit the door and Waverly fell back to the floor with a tiny scream.

“Okay, okay,” the tech snapped, and Nicole could hear the fear and jackhammer of his heartbeat even from a foot away and through the communications receiver. “If we don’t get some real help, we’re gonna get super eaten!”

“Devourer of souls, eh?”

“Yeah it’s not just a cute nickname!” he growled.
The demon slammed the door again, then moved away, the sound distant and dulled by the door.

“Yeah we are not gonna make it,” the tech grumbled.

“Well then neither will they!” Waverly said, and took a breath. “I’ll take my chances.”

Nicole sat up in her seat again and clicked the button on her radio. “Waverly...”

“What?” the tech breathed, though he got up after she did. “Oh god.”

They were both quiet for a moment, and then Nicole heard the creak of hinges as they pushed the door open.

“Oh god.”

Nicole heard the door click shut, then the heavy impact of a body dropping down from a short height and the Hala’s horrible roar. Waverly and the tech let out clipped screams and the demon lumbered closer.

“Hey hey hey!” the tech shouted, as Waverly screamed again. “Take me, okay! Devour my soul, just let her go!”

“Wait, no!” Waverly said, and Nicole shoved the radio away from herself to make sure she didn’t whine and growl in Waverly’s ear—the last thing she needed to do was distract her more.

“Nobody’s getting devoured,” she said, her heels clicking.

Static crackled through the radio.

“At least,” she said, though the words came out a little garbled, a little too deep to be Waverly’s voice, maybe distorted by the feedback. “Not today.”

The demon growled, though it was almost... curious, hesitant. It leaned closer, making a snuffling noise as if it were scanning Waverly, then a fainter growl as it pulled back from her.

“Whoa,” the tech said, much more muted. “Okay what... what did you do?”

Waverly didn’t answer, and Nicole stared at the radio, confused, as the static sound faded back off. She scooped up the radio again, fiddling with it.

“The hell was that,” she muttered, though she kept her finger off the button this time. She heard new footsteps, boots, and then the familiar sound of Peacemaker’s hammer clicking back, and she blew out a breath. “Thank god.”

“Not today, Satan!” Wynonna shouted, and the demon roared, the sound dimming as the creature turned away from Waverly. The old Colt barked once and the demon collapsed with a strangled gurgling shout.

“Are you sure you’re not Scotland Yard?” the tech asked.

“Plan B,” Wynonna said, and Nicole could hear the grin from here, “When you don’t have a choice and you gotta get rid of—” She stopped abruptly. “Yeah. I hear it now.”

“Right?” Waverly said, with an audible wince.

“You okay?” Wynonna asked, stepping forward as Waverly ran toward her—there was a faint noise of fabric on fabric as they embraced, Waverly whispering, “Yeah.”
“Who are you?” Wynonna asked, but interrupted as the tech started to answer. “You know what! I don’t care. We gotta go.”

“Oh okay,” Waverly said, following Wynonna as the elder Earp headed for the door. “Wait, Dolls! Where’s Dolls?”

“Doc’s on it!”

Nicole listened, all but vibrating with tension as they ran down another hallway. By the sounds of the echoes, the tech must have been running alongside them. There was a sound of scuffling, and then the noise of their steps changed from concrete to steel, and a smaller space—maybe an elevator.

“How do we get out?” Waverly asked.

“We go down,” Eliza said, hoarse with exertion.

“What about me?” the tech said, a little high and manic with fear.

“*Ride or die,* dude!” Wynonna shouted, tapping a button.

“Oh okay yeah, no problem! Oh god...”

Nicole heard the elevator doors slide shut and the gears and cables grinding.

“Comin’ your way baby,” Waverly breathed, and Nicole exhaled.

“Ready when you are.”

“Thank god,” Waverly muttered, and Nicole heard Wynonna catching Eliza up somewhere in the background. “Also, for the record?”

“Yeah?”

“About that jealous streak you have.”

Nicole winced. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Maybe not the best time for it, but when you get all... *y’know.* Kinda hot.”

“Oh my god, Waves.”

“Just sayin’.”

Nicole slammed her fingers on the steering wheel in a clicking, staccato drumroll as she listened to the group of the four of them sprinting through cavernous spaces full of wheezing machinery and steaming vents. She listened as they muttered instructions to each other, navigation and warning and tense, wordless nothings in a shuffling sequence.

And then she heard Waverly’s gasp and a chorus of shoes skidding to a stop.

“Hey, Lucado,” Wynonna said in that tone of forced ease and sass she always seemed to bring out at the worst possible times. “You look pissed, someone mess with your shoulder pads?”
“No more bullshit.” Lucado’s voice was cold and hard and full of a bone-deep bitterness even therapy wouldn’t unpack. “You failed, Earp. Say goodbye.”

A pistol’s slide ratcheted back.

“No, no!” Wynonna shouted. “Listen, just. Let them go. I... blackmailed them into it, I told them if they didn’t help me, I– I’d... I don’t even know this guy!”

Nicole set her radio aside to keep from engaging it by accident and kept her frustrated furious growling to herself. Of course Wynonna would turn all noble and heroic now, when Nicole couldn’t even thank her for it or do anything about it.

“Jeremy,” the tech muttered. “‘Sup.”

“Shhhhhut! Up!” Wynonna hissed.

“Tell you what,” Lucado said. “You can watch the rest of them die first.”

Waverly gasped, Wynonna screamed, and there was a low sound of impact as Wynonna hit Waverly. Nicole didn’t have to see it to imagine Lucado snapping the sights of her pistol over to the younger Earp and Wynonna leaping to put herself in the line of fire. She was making a low, tense, whining sound, but she couldn’t stop herself. Fur rippled across the back of her hands as the wolf struggled to keep her calm, and the role reversal almost might’ve been funny if it weren’t so stressful.

A small noise came then, so soft it almost might’ve been static, but there was no report of gunfire, no deafening boom, no screaming.

“Stand down, Agent Lucado.”

There was a long pause and more distant footsteps, then the sound of a body being dropped on the ground.

“Oh good,” said the man who’d interrupted. “The gang’s all here.”

“Doc,” Wynonna breathed, half-relief and half-terror.

“It’s nothin’, darlin’,” Doc said, though his voice sounded rougher than usual. “You know how easily I bruise.”

“Sir, I can explain,” Lucado said, tense and hoarse with strain. “These traitors tried to get—”

“Oh they did more than try. Agent Dolls has gone AWOL.”

Waverly hissed out a faint “Yes!” and Nicole was inclined to agree, but also really hoped the BBD brass didn’t take that as an excuse to start shooting.

“Doesn’t make a lick of difference in the end. We’ll find him.”

“He doesn’t deserve this,” Wynonna insisted.

“Well, Xavier used his one freebie to save your little town from a nuclear mishap.”

Waverly’s voice carried enough shock and horror for both her and Nicole. “You were going to bomb Purgatory?”
“Seems you need to be reminded about your use of contraband weapons in general, Agent Lucado.”

A soft clack-clack of shoes, and then the low thunk of a pistol being placed on a table. Waverly and Wynonna both exhaled audibly but Nicole stayed tense, stiff, waiting for it all to go to hell.

“Now yours,” the brass said, and she heard Wynonna’s leather jacket creak as she stiffened.

“You can pry Peacemaker from my cold dead hands.”

“Hm,” he said, amused. “I think I’ll let one of the boys here do that for me. So you brought your magic gun just in case there was a demon attack, hm?”

“I brought my magic gun to remind you all that I’m the goddamn Earp heir and the only one who can send Wyatt’s revenants back to hell.”

“I think revenants are the least of your problems,” he noted. “Or haven’t you seen any of the new beasts that have flooded Purgatory?” Nicole flinched. Just how many things had gotten through the barrier on the Solstice? “But yes. You will continue to patrol the Ghost River Triangle, and you will do it on behalf of Black Badge. All of you.”

Doc stood, jangling a little, and she heard his suit jacket snap as he dusted himself off. “You can respectfully,” he said, and Nicole would never quite understand how the late 1800s managed to make fuck you sound so even-tempered, “Kiss my lily white ass.”

“Doc!” Waverly snapped.

“I tried being a lawman,” Doc told the Black Badge brass. “It didn’t take.”

“Okay,” Lucado cut in. “This is treason.”

“And you’re a dumpster fire,” Eliza cut in, her shoes clicking once. “Don’t sign anything, they’re liars.”

“What?” Waverly breathed. “Sign?”

“Somebody has to pay, Moody!” Lucado snapped. “Sir.”

“Someone will,” Moody said, and Nicole inhaled. Waverly and Wynonna both let out soft, panicking sounds, shifting against each other.

Moody’s pistol barked. Waverly gasped, and then a body hit the floor.

Nicole snarled and had the door half-open when she realized she could still hear Waverly and Wynonna’s ragged breathing.

“I can’t kill the heir,” Moody noted. “But the rest of you are expendable. Got it?” He paused, to let his words sink in. “Agent Lucado, the contracts, please.”

No one spoke. Who had he shot? It wasn’t Wynonna or Waverly, because she could hear them. Wynonna would have raised hell if it had been Doc, and Waverly, she thought, would have said something if it had been Jeremy, the lab tech, solely out of outrage. Jeremy was little more than innocent bystander in this.

Then it had to have been Eliza.

Of course. The only one poised to speak the truth about the danger of signing a Black Badge
contract.

And Nicole was yards away in a police cruiser waiting, unable to step in, unable to do anything. No guns allowed on site meant no silver bullets—maybe she could have done something if she’d just swallowed her own goddamn fear and gone in, but now it was too late, and she had failed to protect the Earps from this, from... whatever this was.

Wynonna’s footsteps pulled away from Waverly, a little quieter as she walked forward.

“You want us to sign in blood?” she said, gasping out the last word on a low noise of pain.

“It’s how it’s done,” Moody informed her. “How it’s always been done.”

Nicole growled, pressing her hands over her face. What kind of medieval vampire bullshit was this Black Badge deal?

“Who are you people, really?” Waverly demanded, and Nicole heard the soft sound of a hand grabbing Waverly’s. A low clicking noise, and Waverly let out a pained gasp that had Nicole snarling.

“Does it matter?” Moody asked.

“Don’t talk to them anymore,” Wynonna murmured to her.

“Cheer up Wynonna,” Moody said, sounding anything but cheery. There was a very soft grunt of pain that she thought was Jeremy’s voice. God, were they making him sign too? “I’ll sweeten the pot for you. You play ball, I’ll help you break the Earp curse.”

Wynonna scoffed. “I already know how to break it.”

“Bobo Del Rey has been dispatched,” Moody reported, as casually as he were discussing the bill for lunch. “And his revenants are all scattered. You’ll never find and kill them all, not in your lifetime. I’m being generous, Wynonna. You deal with the dozen or so demonic horrors that got into the Triangle when your sister opened the border, and could be we help you find a way. Lift your family’s burden for good.” Another pause as he surveyed them, perhaps reading Wynonna’s thoughts on her face. “Now get them out of my house.”

Boots thudded on concrete and then Wynonna and Doc let out soft grunts of disapproval, maybe shrugging off thugs who’d moved to grab them.

“Oh one more thing,” Moody said. “Is there anyone else who knows about this mission. About Black Badge’s assignment in Purgatory.”

Nicole inhaled, slow and careful, as if even that might be audible.

“Of course not,” Waverly said, immediately, and Nicole blew out a breath. Dammit. Dammit. If she’d just gone in, she’d have been pulled in on the inside of this. Could help from within. Now she’d be just out of arm’s reach again, unable to do anything except move in secret from the outside. “I– I swear on our mother’s grave.”

There was a moment’s pause and Nicole wondered if Wynonna was thinking the same thing she was—but Mama Earp’s not dead.

“Seriously,” Wynonna said, playing along. “How stupid do you think we are?”
Nicole stopped herself from listening to whatever Moody said in response and started her car. She left the garage, forcing herself not to tear out of the structure so fast her tires screeched, cursing at her windshield the whole time.

_Dammit. They had to sign in blood, and there’s nothing I can do about it._

Nicole beat them back to the Homestead, unsurprisingly, but when the three of them—Wynonna, Waverly, and Doc—all trudged up the driveway to the house, she got out of the car, trying to keep her frustrated whining to a low rattling sound deep in her throat.

“Hey,” Waverly said, breaking off from the other two to linger by her car.

“Hey,” Nicole said. “Um. Nice walk?”

“Awesome. Very bracing. Walking through the snow in heels, y’know, my favorite.” Nicole chuckled a little and leaned against the bumper of her cruiser. “You hate the cold, I know.”

Waverly smiled a little, but there was an edge to it, a coldness that didn’t make Nicole feel any better about the whole night.

“At least Dolls got away,” she said.

“Yeah, but who knows where he’ll go now,” Waverly muttered.

“He’ll stay close,” Nicole said. “Dolls wouldn’t stray too far from Wynonna. Not after all this. But he can’t come back, not while Black Badge is watching for him.”

Waverly sighed. “Yeah. Do you think he’ll be...” She trailed off, looking for words. “Close enough for you to, you know, _find_ him?”

Nicole hummed in thought. “Maybe. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Cool.”

For a moment neither of them spoke, and Doc walked by them on his way to the barn.

“I’m sorry I left,” she said.

“No,” Waverly said. “No, you had to. I... I wanted you to, of course.” She looked over Nicole’s face and she thought of what Waverly had said in the barn, just hours ago. _Just like I have to protect you._ But at what cost? “I didn’t have a choice, right? He would’ve killed you.”

“Oh made it official,” Nicole said, but the excuse sounded weak even to her. The unspoken _or he would’ve tried, found out lead rounds won’t kill me, and kept me for experimentation_ hung between them like a stormcloud. “Signed me up too.”

“In your own _blood,_” Waverly reminded her, and Nicole sighed.

“Look,” she said, shaking her head. “I better get back to the station. I’ve still got so much paperwork to do.”

Waverly glanced toward the house, and there was a quiet strain in her, an almost hostility, that made Nicole uneasy.
“Yeah, I... I best check on Wynonna.”

Nicole nodded, and Waverly stepped toward her, leaning up to kiss her. The thought of kissing her now, of learning her mouth still had that strange, bitter taste to it, made Nicole’s stomach churn with fear and stress. After this whole debacle, she didn’t think she could bear it. She turned her face, so that Waverly’s lips touched her cheek, and tried not to notice when Waverly pulled away, clearly confused.

An apology was hovering at the tip of Nicole’s tongue as Waverly went inside, and she growled, more at herself than anything else, and threw herself back into her car.
Chapter 27

In the couple weeks that followed their return from BBD’s blacksite, Nicole kept Waverly slightly at arm’s length, too frustrated by how everything played out to add more variables to the mix. It wasn’t fair to take it out on Waverly, and she knew that, but it was so hard to feel so powerless.

The irony that she felt that way even though once a month she transformed into a giant monster that could bench press a small car was not lost on her, but she needed some space to get her head back on straight.

Well, that, and to look for Dolls without giving Wynonna undue hope or the new BBD additions chances to realize she was looking.

That space, though, gave her the room to see what was happening to the two Earps that she might not have been capable of perceiving from up close. Namely, that they were a goddamn mess.

Waverly, who had gained so much ground as a consultant for BBD the prior year, was now sliding back down the chain under this new BBD overseer Lucado, and it was clear to Nicole that it bothered her. Wynonna, similarly, wasn’t remotely dealing with Willa’s death—and that wasn’t a surprise, this was, after all, Wynonna Earp—but without Dolls to keep her on her feet she was actively falling apart. So much so in fact that she didn’t seek Nicole out to talk about the whole dating my baby sister thing, and after a week, Nicole realized that if she didn’t bring it up, Wynonna wasn’t going to either.

And while she didn’t actually want to have that conversation, she knew they needed to or it was just going to come out later and inevitably be a thousand times worse.

So, against her better judgement, she visited the Earp homestead one evening while she knew Waverly was in the city to pick up some new research texts she’d ordered.

“Wynonna?” Nicole called, easing open the front door and poking her head through first. If she was skittish, well, who could blame her? “Hey, Wynonna?”

“In here.”

Nicole blew out a breath and shut the door behind her, following the sound of Wynonna’s voice. She was in the kitchen, sober, astonishingly, but staring down into a glass of whiskey.

“What do you want, Haught.”

Nicole hesitated in the doorway. “Mind if I sit?”

Wynonna shrugged one shoulder. “Go for it.”

She did, tugging the chair out and gingerly sitting down. “You wanted to talk, Wynonna.”

“I did,” Wynonna said, half a question, and then recognition came in a flash, along with a healthy dose of anger. Which was actually sort of reassuring—it was more familiar than apathetic fugue. “I did. About you banging my baby sister.”

“Okay, easy,” Nicole said, raising her hands.

“God dammit, Haught!” Wynonna shoved herself up out of her chair, brandishing the whiskey
glass like a weapon. Nicole stayed in her chair, letting Wynonna have the high ground. “When were you gonna tell me? Hmm? After I specifically told you not to hurt her and you just, what, decided this detail wasn’t relevant? And you let her into your house– you let my baby sister sit there while you were– were going all Benicio del Toro in your basement!”

Nicole leaned back in her chair, slow, like a pipe-player in front of a serpent. “Do you wanna keep going or can I offer counter-points, Earp.”

Wynonna seethed, but grunted. “No that was the gist. Fine. The floor is yours or. Whatever.”

Nicole ducked her head, hiding a brief grin. “Look, Wynonna, first off, I haven’t hurt her. Believe me or don’t, but I didn’t jump onto a moving truck that I thought Waverly was in because I think she’s kinda nice. I did it because—” She hesitated, and Wynonna frowned. “Look, I did that because I want her safe just as much as you do. I don’t know that me telling you we started dating has much to do with her safety, but I want you to know that I didn’t tell you because she wasn’t ready to tell anyone.” Wynonna made a face. “And I wasn’t gonna say anything to anyone until she was ready.”

Granted, she still wasn’t sure how Shae knew, but that was an issue for a different time.

“Well,” Wynonna grumbled, looking away, searching for words, “Then. I guess, that’s. Fine, I suppose.” She screwed up her face into a frown, then sighed through her nose. “Thank you. For. Y’know. Respecting her wishes. And her social... whatever. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. And for the record, Earp, I’m sorry that you found out like that,” Nicole said. “And I know Waverly is too.”

Wynonna sighed and leaned against the wall. “Yeah, well, I’m sorry she shot you.”

“Preciate it,” Nicole said, and grinned. “But hey, no real harm done. Though I haven’t forgotten that you were willing to let her shoot me to keep the gun, before Waverly started begging.”

“Oh for– it was you or the whole Ghost River Triangle, all right?” Wynonna glared at her, lips pressed into a line.

Nicole laughed and raised her hands in surrender. “All right, all right. Fair enough.”

“Listen, I said I’ll lay off this thing of you dating my baby sister, and I will, but don’t press your luck, Rin Tin Tin.”

“You know at some point you’re gonna run out of dog names.”

“Try me, Toto.”

It was maybe a week and a half after the blacksite mission when she got a weird missing persons case, and she found herself frustrated, yet again, that she couldn’t just walk into the Black Badge office and hand it off. If Dolls were still here, it would’ve been easy to get help and the right people on the job. Instead, she was stuck at her desk while a construction foreman insisted one of his workers vanished off the grounds, and Lucado would never take her seriously. For that matter, revealing to Lucado that she had any inkling of what was really going on in Purgatory would prove Waverly a liar, and possibly out herself in the process.

Worse still, with Jeremy the tech-expert now on the job, for all she knew the whole damn station
had been bugged. It put her on edge every time she was at work. What corner might be hiding a camera or a microphone? What could or couldn’t she say to civilians, to other cops, to Nedley, hell, to Waverly, that might look conspicuous if Jeremy overheard and reported it to Lucado like a lab-coat-wearing lapdog?

Which brought on new questions. Was Jeremy a lapdog? She didn’t know, but it was hell on her sanity to play mind games. God, she’d forgotten how good it was to not feel constantly paranoid. She wanted Dolls back, as soon as possible. But so far, keeping her ears to the ground had yielded jack shit.

“Mr. Kowalski, I– I walked the whole site myself, okay?” she explained, for the third time.
“There’s no evidence of foul play.”

She hated lying to citizens. Sure there was evidence—the stench of blood and fear, the unnatural sense of sickly dread. Or the way her hair stood on end whenever she walked the perimeter of the grounds near the toilets where Jesus had gone missing, a human manifestation of the wolf’s hackles rising. But supernatural evidence wouldn’t exactly fly with a judge.

“What about the blood?” Kowalski asked. “The– the creepy noises? The shrieking! Jesus hasn’t even come back to work.”

Waverly appeared beyond the counter and waved. Nicole bit the inside of her cheek. It wasn’t that she wasn’t happy to see Waverly, but her girlfriend was, for the moment, living proof of how fucked the BBD mission had been, and it still chafed to think about. She nodded at Waverly, acknowledging that she’d seen her, but kept her attention on Kowalski.

“Well, Ms. Gardner says he’s unreliable,” Nicole said. “He working under the table too?”

Kowalski’s gaze skittered to the side and she noted Waverly had sat down behind the counter.
“Yeah...”

“I’ll file the report anonymously,” she told him, leaning a little closer to keep her voice low, “And I will keep an eye out.”

“Alright,” Kowalski grumbled, getting up.

“But unless there’s a body or a missing persons report,” she continued, following him out, “That’s really the best I can do. See or hear anything new, you give me a call, okay?”

“Fine,” Kowalski grunted, and headed out the doors.

Nicole sighed and watched him go.

“I love watching you work,” Waverly mused, smiling and spinning a little on the chair, which was high enough to let her shoes dangle. “Professional, but caring.”

Nicole smiled and pretended she couldn’t feel her wolf chafing and grumbling at the tension. As she moved to walk back to her desk, Waverly propped her heels on the table to block her path with a grin. All of this fighting or... near-fighting, whatever it was, it was stupid, she knew that, but she couldn’t bear talking to Waverly about light, happy news when she still had no clues on where Dolls had gone. Add the paranoia that discussing anything in earshot of BBD’s doors might have Lucado crawling in their shadows, looking for the slightest transgression to report back to top brass, and it just made chatting with Waverly at the station immensely uncomfortable. She didn’t know if there really were cameras in the station, but sometimes she felt like she could feel eyes on her.
And until she had something useful to give Waverly, talking to her just felt like reminders of all the things she’d failed at.

“This is my job,” Nicole reminded her, moving her feet off the table.

“Hey...”

Waverly’s soft protest made Nicole feel worse, but she stuck to her position. They needed to pretend to be professional with each other, at least for now, until Lucado wasn’t looking for BBD leaks.

“I know it doesn’t seem like anything special,” she said, “Convincing Bill Lippencott to stop driving without a license or looking through security footage to figure out who was flying a drone over the girls’ dance studio, but...”

“But what?” Waverly asked.

It made her chest ache, to pretend it was about the job, to pretend it was anything other than her own frustrations that Moody had suckered them into a binding contract while she sat by and listened to it without being able to do a damn thing to get them out of it, but it was easier, at least right now, until she could think through everything. Until she could get her thoughts straight.

“Nothing,” Nicole said, and shook her head, gathering up files off the table. “Forget about it.”

“Look,” Waverly said, stepping a little closer. “I’m– I’m sorry about the whole... BBD undeputizing thing, okay? But please. Don’t shut me out.”

“I’ve got cases to track,” Nicole said, and glanced at Waverly once, hoping she would recognize that she meant it partially as code—I’m looking for Dolls but Lucado can’t know that—and then offered her another folder. “Looks like you might too.”

It wasn’t the same as handing off leads to Dolls, per their old agreement, but it was the best she could do in the circumstances.

A couple hours later, as the afternoon waned toward evening, she passed the BBD office and found herself walking a little more slowly, as if she were expecting to hear familiar voices and feel a little better.

Well, one out of two wasn’t bad.

“I don’t know how things were run around here before, but—”

“There were a lot less thumbs up asses,” Wynonna said.

“He’s gone,” Lucado snapped. “Dolls is gone. He’s alone, he’s injured, and he has a lot of enemies who want him dead.”

“Finally,” Wynonna said, all sugar. “Something you two have in common.”

Nicole, however, had stopped dead in front of the door, narrowing her eyes. Dolls was injured? How could Lucado possibly know that?

Unless...

“Sheriff,” Nicole said, knocking on his door and leaning her head into his line of sight. “Going undercover to follow up on a lead. Off-books case.”
Nedley glanced up, eyes narrowed in confusion.

“It’s about your mug, sir.”

Nedley glanced down to the black mug with the silvery-grey X on it that he’d nicked from BBD’s offices before they were emptied, and she watched the gears turn in his head.

“Get it done,” he said, nodding. “Look forward to losing your report.”

Nicole flashed him a grin and headed out to her cruiser. At home she changed into a nondescript outfit that was a couple sizes too big for her—jeans that didn’t fit well without a belt and a hoodie that draped on her like a trench coat on a scarecrow, and a pair of men’s boots a size too big. She slipped across the road and back toward town, partially shifting as she did until she filled in the outfit. She let some fur grow out on her face and let her head shift, just a little, to distort her profile, though most of that was covered by the hood besides.

She jogged downtown toward a bar she’d never been into, but which Dolls and Wynonna had visited once—a dingy little biker bar that doubled as a chapter house for the Machetes.

The exterior was watched over by a couple bikers in black leather vests and great big boots, but a quick growl and a flash of golden eyes glowing beneath her hood had them waving her inside.

It was almost homey on the inside, all well-worn wood furnishings and thick animal-skin rugs and leather sofas along the walls. An enormous icon was painted on one wall, the heraldry of the Machetes done in spray paint. The place was relatively empty when she arrived, only six or seven people milling about, which wasn’t surprising for early afternoon. A few women were dressed the way she pretty much expected for the territory—all short skirts and leather vests and tattoos—and the men were mostly jeans and fringe and cowboy boots.

Except for one guy, sitting in the corner in military fatigues that looked like they hadn’t been in rotation since the early days of Iraqi Freedom. He was nursing a black eye and a broken nose with a big slab of frozen steak. Old school. Huh.

She headed toward him, and one of the men in cowboy boots got up and shoved a broad hand with tattooed knuckles against her chest to stop her.

“Hold up,” he said. “No fightin’.”

She looked around at the evidence of a brawl still littered around the room. Bits of broken glass swept into corners, sawdust where a table had been broken, a mismatched set of chairs where a couple had to be replaced. It had still not quite been neatened up, and if she had her guess right, that was Dolls and Wynonna’s doing. She looked back at him, one brow rising.

He narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not here to pick a fight,” she growled, her voice too deep and too guttural to be recognizable as hers. “But I could be persuaded.”

He watched her through beady little blue eyes, but when she shoved his hand off, he didn’t press the issue, and watched her go. She walked up to the guy in fatigues.

“Looks like you’ve had a rough day,” she growled.

“Get fucked.”
“Let me guess,” she said, and leaned in real close. She grinned, letting her teeth catch light, and waited until she saw his eye flick down and then go wide in recognition. “You’re the last dude on your squad, because the rest of your guys got torn apart by a single dude out in the woods that y’all went to kill.”

He spat on the floor in front of her. “Get fucked, dog-breath.”

She grabbed the steak from his hand and slapped him across the face with it, the thick weighted smack of it satisfying. She dropped the steak on the bar and licked her hand clean.

“Try again.”

“I said, get f—”

She grabbed him by the back of the head, her hand—paw, really—large enough to cup the back of his skull like she were testing the ripeness of a cantaloupe, and she slammed his face down into the bar. Somewhere behind her a couple men shouted and got up, and she looked over her shoulder, letting her golden eyes catch lamplight. A few of them skidded to a stop. She snarled, baring fangs, and then returned her attention to the injured soldier. “Listen. I don’t want to do this, and neither do you. So how about you tell me what happened and maybe I leave here in a good mood. Cuz trust me, as much fun as it would be to smear your blood all over this room, violence does not make me feel better.”

Someone slammed a short club against her back. She grunted at the impact, rocking forward an inch, and then slowly turned.

A single man was in striking range, still clutching the baton. He’d seen combat before, that much was clear in the harsh, cold cut of his face, the scar that ran down his cheek, and the fact that he wasn’t fazed by her shrugging off the first blow.

“I wouldn’t,” she growled.

He twisted back and swung at her again, and she roared, letting it hit her arm. She snatched it from his hands and sank her fangs into the reinforced plastic, biting down until it splintered and fell apart into shards.

He crouched down, yanking a knife from a sheath mounted to his calf. He flicked it out at her in a practiced swipe, keeping the blade in close until he was ready to hit. He knew how to use it. The move was quick, striking-snake-fast, but the glint was wrong for silver. Steel then, hardly a concern. The blade scored across the front of her hoodie and ripped it open, spilling crimson blood. She grabbed his wrist, squeezing until he dropped the blade, and rammed him head-first into the bar. He went down in a heap, groaning and writhing but only barely clinging to consciousness, and she turned back to the Machete at the bar.

“Well?”

“All right,” he wheezed. “All right.”

She grunted and waited, listening to the sounds of muted chaos and scuffling behind her. The door opened and shut a few times as patrons made a break for it, and she rolled her shoulder, ignoring the uncomfortable burn of her skin sealing shut.

“Yes, we took a job. No questions asked, simple hit on some dude out in the woods. Sent a squad of five, and I’m the only one who came back.”
“Where?” she growled.

“Out by Falls Point but I dunno what way he went after that. I booked it and didn’t look back. Reported it to the buyer and let it drop.”

She snarled, clenching her hands into fists.

“She planning to hit him again?”

“I dunno,” he said, though his heart was pounding too loudly to be telling the truth. She shoved herself at him, slamming her paws on the bar on either side of him to trap him against the wood. She roared in his face and he cursed, leaning as far back from her as he could. “Okay! Okay! Jesus, okay, yes, I think she’s planning to bring in someone else! Jesus Christ, get the fuck off me!”

She pulled back, snarling. “Who’s she going to hire? You couldn’t possibly be stupid enough to try a third time.”

“No, fuckin— no, it won’t be us. Buyer’s bringing in out of towners or something.”

“You keeping track of it?”

He looked away, but she bared her fangs.

“Yes, God, dammit,” he wheezed. “Yes, we’re keeping track.”

She scribbled her cell phone number on a napkin and shoved it at him.

“When you know who they are, and where they’re hitting, you’re gonna tell me.”

“Why?”

“Because I know who the buyer is and she’s got the poker face of a child at Christmas,” she growled. “I will know if you fuck me. If the target dies, I will hunt you and your whole goddamn family and leave your entrails across Highway 81. Am I making myself perfectly fucking clear.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it with a snap when she flashed her fangs at him and snarled.

“Yes! Fucking Christ. Yes.”

“Good.” She growled at him, then turned toward the door, snarling at the few patrons standing between her and the exit. They dispersed, and she grabbed the denim jacket off the guy who’d fought her. She left the building, and at the first alley she found, swapped her hoodie for the jacket, leaving it in a dumpster. She flipped her t-shirt around so that the bloodied side was at her back and covered by the jacket, and she down-shifted to finish her jog back toward her house.

Though as she walked, she found herself thinking again of the ankle-mounted knife. She pulled her phone and called a familiar number.

“Hey Mike,” she said, when she heard his smooth voice on the other end. “I’ve got a favor to ask you. I think I’ve got an idea for dealing with certain agents who’ve been giving us problems, but I’m gonna need some of your resources for it.”

“You sound in a good mood, hjärtat.”

“I’m really not,” she said, and chuckled. “But you know me, I always have fun when I get to beat on thugs who don’t know better than to play rough with me.”
“You always did like to pick the honorable fights,” Mikael said, laughing. “So tell me. What do you have in mind?”

“Something custom, and a little bit unique. Do you know any other blacksmiths?”
The lingering irritability with BBD’s changes and the blacksite mission did not mix well with the morning of the full moon. She felt on edge from the moment Calamity Jane jumped up onto her pillow to meow requests for breakfast and the feeling just intensified the longer she was awake. Her skin prickled, her teeth felt like they were vibrating, even her nails felt fragile and somehow tender, like someone had been striking tiny mallets against them all night.

Nedley called her into his office to talk about a break-in at the hospital and she could barely keep focused. She thought maybe he noticed. Or maybe that was just the paranoia? It was hard to say.

She’d just sat down at her desk to gather up what she’d need for the investigation when her phone rang. The ringer was so piercingly loud she nearly grabbed it and threw it against the wall just to let it shatter.

“Hello?” she asked, trying to sound casual and trying very hard not to grind her teeth together.

“Hi,” Waverly said, subdued to an uncharacteristic degree. “It’s me.”

“Hey Waves,” Nicole said, and despite the lingering tension between the two of them, she felt the pressure ease back, just slightly. “What’s up?”

“W– Thank you, for... giving us that case earlier. Um. Lucado doesn’t think it’s anything, but Wynonna just left to check it out, so...”

“Okay,” Nicole said, and forced herself not to look up from her desk toward BBD’s office. “Well, um. Let me know?”

“So,” Waverly said, after a moment. “Wh... what are you doing later?”

“Oh, Nedley’s got another break-in, so,” Nicole said, and sighed, gathering up the file as she talked. “I’m gonna go check it out.”

“Oh,” Waverly said. “Okay.”

For a moment, the crackle of the phone receiver stretched between them like a physical wall.

“I could uh, come by after?”

Waverly’s voice brightened immediately. “Yes please!”

Nicole chuckled. “Okay. I’ll text you when I’m done? I’ll see you later.”

“Bye,” Waverly murmured, and Nicole set down the phone, gathering what she’d need. Despite her misgivings about everything, and her lingering concerns, it would be good to see Waverly again. Maybe... maybe it would be easier finally.

It started out that way, at least.

“Hey,” Nicole said, as Waverly opened the door, but the look on her girlfriend’s face made her hesitate. “What’s wrong?”
Waverly took one look at her and gave a rueful little laugh. “That obvious, huh.”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Come upstairs with me?” Waverly asked. “Wynonna will be home in a bit, I just.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said. “Yeah, of course.”

Despite the request, Waverly moved closer, tucking her face against Nicole’s sweater.

“I’ve got you,” Nicole said, keeping her voice low.

“Still home base?”

“Yeah.” She sighed and kissed the top of Waverly’s head. “Just... been dealing with stuff. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Waverly lied. “You know that goes both ways, right?”

“I know. Just... it’s a lot to unpack. And I’m not much good at thinking aloud.”

Waverly sighed, but wrapped her arms around Nicole’s waist. “Okay.”

“Let’s go upstairs.”

“Right,” Waverly said, and led Nicole up the steps.

Willa’s room—now Waverly’s, which seemed sort of odd, had she never had a room of her own? —was still a lot like it had been. Not identical, no, but the Earps still hadn’t changed much of it, and it was bordering on eerie. The furniture was mostly still the same, the stuffed animals were all still there, the posters of horses, the clothing... a shrine to a dead version of the dead. The ghost of Willa’s childhood was what was idolized here, not the woman she had become, and that was in its own way unsettling.

Nicole shuddered as she stepped inside, feeling something of the specter of death that crawled along the walls. The place wasn’t haunted, not really, but it was all too easy to imagine it becoming so. Perhaps if Willa really had died that night at age 13, her spirit might’ve returned here.

But she hadn’t. She’d been locked in a treehouse like some fucked up modern Rapunzel, with Bobo as both her witch and her terrible prince.

Even the bed was the same, and that made Nicole more uncomfortable than anything else as Waverly settled onto it and patted the space beside her for Nicole to sit. Still, being so close to Waverly, even with all the tension, even with all the mess, settled the wolf. God, she’d forgotten how much better it felt to have Waverly nearby during the moon. She felt more herself.

“Guess you haven’t had much time to redecorate.”

Waverly sighed. “No, not really. But... that’s actually a pretty good segue.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I wanted to show you,” Waverly said, frowning. “Something I found in Willa’s stuff.”

Waverly dug a small diary out from under one of the pillows, and opened it to where an ancient
photograph was tucked into the pages. A picture of two young girls, dressed in white and carrying flowers, maybe middle-school age. There was something about the eyes of one, the mouth of the other, that told her it was Willa and Wynonna. But the edge was torn, where perhaps a third girl would have been standing.

“That’s a beautiful photo,” Nicole murmured.

“The one I’ve been cropped out of?” Waverly said, and Nicole winced, looking away, because she could swear the edge was back. But it wasn’t the strange, hostile ice that had been making her so uneasy, this time, it was pain, something so deep and so unfathomable that Nicole only glimpsed it on occasion, like spotting a leviathan lurking in deep sea. Waverly hid it well but every now and then it escaped her grasp, running hot and cold like a bad water main. Nicole wasn’t sure how to help this pain, this old, deep thing that twined around Waverly’s bones like choking vines. She hadn’t been sure what to say when Waverly spoke of frozen ponds and balancing acts, and she wasn’t sure now.

“Here, listen to this: ‘I hate that they brought the baby into the house. There’s something wrong with it.’” Waverly’s voice cracked and shook and Nicole shifted her arm a little to press herself closer, letting her warmth keep back the icy blackness trying to swallow up her girlfriend. “‘Mama told Daddy that we have to do what is right,’” Waverly continued. “‘What does that even mean. And why does she get the pretty name? Waverly. Whatever. She’ll never be one of us.’”

“Willa was just a kid,” Nicole said, at a loss for what else to say.

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and slowly closed the diary. “She didn’t think I was an Earp.” Nicole waited, listening, because Waverly was vibrating with tension. “And neither did Bobo.”

A low grumble rolled in her chest at the name, and Nicole snapped her attention back up to Waverly’s face. “Bobo?” she asked, grasping at her thoughts, trying to push back anger and respond in a rational, useful way. Waverly made a face, like she knew how crazy it sounded, even though it didn’t keep her from believing it. “What wouldn’t that gaslighting sociopath say to freak you out?”

“There was another side to him, okay? A side that... that wouldn’t lie to me.”

“This— this is crazy,” Nicole said, and shifted, turning a little to look her in the eye. God, if Willa and Bobo weren’t already dead, she’d rip them apart for making Waverly feel so excluded, so much an alien in her own home. That, at least, she could relate to. “Hey, look, you,” she said, catching Waverly’s gaze and holding it. “Are the... Earp-iest Earp of them all.”

Waverly leaned into her, their foreheads resting together, and Nicole traced her nose along Waverly’s until Waverly shifted closer, tilting her head back to press her lips to Nicole’s. The bitter taste was back, stronger now, but Nicole forced herself to ignore it, because if this is what Waverly needed, she had to at least try.

But there were footsteps on the stairs, and Wynonna’s voice a second later, and Nicole pulled back, a little too grateful for an excuse to stop.

“Oop. Guess we’re still fighting,” Waverly said.

“Nope,” Nicole said, looking to the door. “Someone’s just coming up the...”

“Do you have any idea when Doc’s planning to—” The door snapped open and Wynonna abruptly pulled herself back toward the doorway. “Shit.”
“...stairs,” Nicole finished. “Hi Wynonna.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m gonna go,” Nicole said, and glanced down to Waverly.

“Cool kicks,” Wynonna muttered, as Nicole headed for the door, and as Nicole went by she muttered, “Sorry...”

“Okay.”

“Don’t even worry about it,” Waverly said, sighing, her voice carrying a little as Nicole headed down the stairs, already pulling her phone from her pocket. “She wanted to leave.”

She winced. It hadn’t been her intent, but it wasn’t strictly speaking inaccurate. She stopped beside her cruiser, her thumb hovering over Mikael’s contact to call him, but just as she tapped the screen it rang. It wasn’t a number she recognized, and when she picked up she waited for a moment, silent.


She shifted a little, pain flaring through her chest as it expanded, but when she growled “Who?” she sounded like gravel and chain-smoked cigarettes.

“Do you make a habit of threatening ex-Rangers so much that you can’t fucking remember which one you gave your number to, asshole?”

“Ah. Machete. Got it.”

“Clocked your hit squad,” he said, lowering his voice. “They’re moving on Beyers’ Ridge. Expecting to make contact at 1545.”

She growled and pulled her phone from her ear to check the time. A little after 2.

“If you’re playing me, Jackson...”

“I know, I know, Highway 81. Jesus.”

The phone clicked dead on the other end and she looked at her phone again. To make it in time she’d have to drive, and then run the rest of the way on foot. But if she moved quick, she could make it. She tossed the phone into the passenger seat of her cruiser and started the engine, peeling out of the Earp driveway in a little cloud of snow. She’d just have to wait to call Mikael.

When she reached the woods she was cutting time far narrower than she wanted. She’d never make it in her boots. She stripped out of her uniform, attaching her keys to a long bit of leather cording to hang them around her neck, and locked up the car, stumbling away into the snow to shift. The snow was frigid against her bare skin, but she closed her eyes and let the wolf out, bit by bit.

Or at least, that was the plan.

And it almost worked, except it was late afternoon on the first night of the full moon, and the wolf wasn’t satisfied with bits. It slammed the bars of its cage—her body—and wrenched free.

It started in her chest, her heart pounding faster and faster until she thought it would burst outright.
Raw pain cascaded down her spine like a bucket of icewater as it rippled and lengthened, her bones crunching against each other as her skeleton warped and stretched and grew to fit the ferocity of the beast. She could feel it, the crackling sound of her skull changing shape, nose ridge protruding, jaws expanding, and she collapsed into the snow with a strangled howl of pain. Her skin felt too tight, too enclosed, and she found herself tearing at it, her long, dark nails pulling away chunks to reveal glossy russet fur beneath. She howled, throwing her head back to let the sound free, and when she crawled free of herself and into the woods, she left the cruiser behind her without a thought.

Her vision had gone entirely over to achromatic, with just a slight filter of gold. She sniffed at the air, and smelled everything. Deer and elk and rabbit to hunt. The laughable markings of other predators, none of whom would be able to compete with her if she took something from them. And in the distance, gunpowder, wool, and hatred. Butane and fear.

She remembered. She had armed prey to hunt. Prey that, for once, the human sharing her body had fewer qualms about killing. These were different. These were fair game, because they were lethal, they were dangerous. Because they were cruel.

Because she had a packbrother to protect.
Chapter Notes

Really earning my “graphic depictions of violence” tag on this one, so. Headsup. This one’s bloody.

Dolls was pretty sure it had been nine days since the team had sprung him from BBD’s safe house at the edge of the Triangle. The only reason he wasn’t completely sure is that his hylophobia had been making it a little tough to keep track. Plus he lost some time after the Machete raid.

The bullet to his calf wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been, but it did slow him down, and speed wasn’t something he could afford to sacrifice, not out here in the middle of nowhere, miles and miles from civilization. Still, he kept Wynonna’s advice from the Pine Barrens to heart, and found a good cave to hunker down in on a ridge that crawled through a stretch of forest. All told, he’d been doing pretty well for himself.

Other than the lack of his meds, which was starting to make him very shaky, but not as bad as it would get in a couple weeks.

Also the lingering fear he felt being out in the woods.

And the gunshot wound.

Okay objectively, this was pretty bad. Really, at this point, he was just stalling the inevitable. Either the cold, the hit squads, or the beast inside him would kill him. But Xavier Dolls was no quitter.

Which is how he came to be crouched in the rocky crag above his temporary home, flat on his belly and clutching one of the M16s he’d lifted off the Machete squad that hit him a week before. He knew Lucado wouldn’t stop at one team, so he’d been splitting his time between the cave and the exposed rock above, keeping watch for more Machetes, or possibly someone new.

He checked his watch. 1540. Movement in the trees made him train the M16 on the woods, scanning the treeline. Another bit of movement. Ah, just as predicted.

They were well-trained, he’d give them that. They tossed a canister into the cave first, trying to smoke him out with thick green clouds, but they hadn’t seen him above the cavern’s opening. They closed in just a handful of breaths after the smoke choked the cave mouth. He tracked the chest of one of the men in back, keeping the sights just a bit above the man’s sternum, and squeezed off a quick burst of four shots. He let the rifle’s recoil carry the muzzle up, burying lead from the man’s collarbone to his nose in a spray of blood and gore that soaked eight feet of frigid white snow behind him.

A chorus of shouts and new orders went up and bullets struck the rocks around him as he picked a new target. He didn’t have as much time now, having lost the element of surprise, but he put two rounds into a man’s throat and shoulder.
Somewhere in the distance he heard a wolf howl, mournful and eerie. Odd, given it was the middle of the afternoon, and the gunfire should have sent prey and predator alike running for the hills.

He swept his gaze right to left across his killbox. There were three more. No. Four. There was another still at the trees, scanning the scene with a set of goggles.

A frag grenade bounced up toward his position and he swore, grabbing it and tossing it back down. The hitter who’d thrown it was already moving and the blast as the grenade detonated sent up a cloud of snow, but no bodies—they’d all moved out of the blast radius by the time it hit the snow.

He tracked his rifle sights back to the scout and clocked a hulking form in the trees just seconds before it grabbed the scout’s leg and yanked him back into the forest where Dolls couldn’t see.

A strangled shriek echoed across the frozen ground, and he saw a couple of the squad glance back.

The thing that had removed the scout roared, a barrel-chested call of challenge that belonged to something in the size range of a grizzly bear. Dolls lowered the sight of his rifle just an inch or two, keeping both eyes on the field.

A lycanthrope stepped out of the woods into the open space between the trees and the cave. It was leaner than the specimens he’d seen in the past, all corded muscle and sleek reddish-brown fur. Female, then, and tall for her sex. Based on the trees around her and sizing her against the blood splatter he’d spread in his first hit, she was ten feet at the shoulder, probably twelve at the head, if she stood up fully straight. She had the basic shape of a human, if a human could be covered in thick shaggy fur and exaggerated out in every direction: thighs so thick around that he’d have trouble getting his arms around one, broad, heavy shoulders, arms that looked like they’d belong on an NFL quarterback, and huge, clawed hands that were about as big across as a car tire.

She got less human at the edges. Huge paws sprawled flat across the snow without crunching all the way through, and a thick tail swayed behind her. The head was all canine, with sharp, luminescent eyes and a ruff of fur like you’d find on a German Shepherd. Her snout was a foot long, at least, maybe closer to two, and two big ears flicked forward and back together, pivoting to listen to the woods as she settled into a loose crouch.

Dolls watched her gold eyes track the field and pick out the nearest gunman. The squad had, for a moment, gone very still, as if waiting to see if she could see them in their white gear, but then the werewolf’s upper lip pulled back to reveal rows of shining white teeth, dripping with scarlet gore, and she snarled, the sound so loud and so unquestionably violent that it shook the snow from nearby trees.

She moved then, far too fast and too graceful for a beast her size, and the first gunman’s shots went completely wide, scattering across the trees and snow behind her. She hit him like a train, and Dolls heard bones crunch under the impact. She had ripped his head from his shoulders with the ease of a child dismantling a Barbie doll before he even had time to scream, and the two remaining hitters opened fire.

Dozens of rounds hit home and gore splattered around her in clouds of red spray, but all it really did was piss her off. She turned and roared as the bullets kept coming, staggering under the onslaught until hammers clicked on empty cartridges. She stood for a moment as her body healed itself, skin squelching as it knit back together, and then she was moving again, claws the length of bowie knives raking through body armor like it was made of paper and carving into flesh as easily as a Christmas turkey.

Her next target fountained blood and hit the snow as she moved to the last. She grabbed his rifle
even as he reloaded and crunched it in one huge paw, bending the barrel into a right angle. She tossed it aside and picked him up with her paw around his shoulders and his throat. She shook him like a ragdoll and threw him into the cave wall so that his bones snapped and crackled and he hit the ground in a heap, screaming with the only air he had left in his lungs.

She closed on him and tore into his body, shredding his armor and his clothing and biting down when she bared his chest to the air, ripping out chunks of meat and sinew. Blood coated her fur, dripping down her throat and across her chest, and Dolls stayed very, very still.

Gold eyes tracked to him like searchlights. He flicked the rifle’s safety back on with a low clunk that made the wolf’s ears flick forward, then back.

“Haught?” he called down. The wolf growled, the sound thunderous and brutal, and he raised one hand, palm out. “…Nicole?”

The werewolf snarled, again, the sound shorter, smaller somehow, and then she blinked. The eyes dimmed to a softer, darker color, more like caramel, and the big head tilted to one side like a hound’s.

“Oh wow,” Dolls breathed. “What uh. What big ears you have.”

Those ears flicked again, maybe unamused, but the wolf eased back, away from her final kill site. She looked down at herself, as if only just now noticing the thick coating of blood down her front, and then looked around, snuffling at the air.

“I’m coming down,” Dolls said, waiting until the wolf had looked at him and tilted her head back the other way before he actually started moving. He gingerly climbed down from his perch, favoring his left leg where the calf was still bandaged, and as he hit the ground the wolf narrowed its eyes, watching him closely and in particular noting his injury. But she didn’t move, only sat dog-style in the snow, considered her situation, and then flopped down, rolling back and forth to smear cold frost into her fur, letting it drip off her in bloodied rivulets.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” he called out, as she stood back up. “Hold on!” He remembered Wynonna’s advice—never get anything wet—and dove back into his cave just as the wolf shook, fur fluffing in all directions as bloodied snowmelt splattered everywhere. The green smoke had mostly cleared out, but when he could no longer hear motion and a jangling set of keys, he poked his head back out, coughing. “You’re gonna get me hypothermic, Haught.”

She whined at him, the sound surprisingly expressive, and lumbered into his cave, flopping down on the other side of his campfire.

It was still daylight outside, so he offered her one of his blankets and turned aside, trying not to listen to the sickening squelching and crackling noises as she changed back. Even for the effort he jumped when a howl of agony petered off into a very human cry of pain and something like despair.

He listened to her panting, and then the rustling of his blanket.

“’M good,” she said, and he turned again, settling down on the other side of his fire. He fed a few more pieces onto it and looked across at her. She looked like hell. There was blood smeared around her mouth, and several healing bullet holes still sealing themselves closed across her shoulders and arms and calves where he could see some of her past the blanket. Her car keys hung limply down her chest on a leather cord, clinking whenever she moved.
“Thanks,” he said.

She looked up at him, her eyes, brown and warm now, and so very human, spoke volumes to her exhaustion.

“Yeah well,” she said, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Purgatory’s not the same without you.”

“How’d you know where to find me?”

“The guy you let get away,” she said. “Got him to feed me info about the next squad.”

He grinned. Letting that weasel go had been a gamble, but it looks like it had paid off. “How’d you get that guy to talk?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Oh, y’know. The usual.”

“Threats of violence? For shame, Officer Haught.”

She grunted and stared into the fire.

“You okay?” he asked.

For a while she said nothing, and he started to wonder if she’d even actually heard him. Then she hung her head forward, talking to the ground.

“Everyone hates Lucado. Wynonna’s coming apart at the seams since she killed Willa and lost you. Waverly’s acting funny and I dunno if it’s grief or anger or something else. Henr—Doc’s playing something close the vest, even more than usual. Jeremy’s an unknown quantity. Nedley’s playing everything safe now that Lucado’s invaded his domain. Me and Waves are fighting. I think. That one’s my fault.”

He blew out a breath, but she wasn’t done, because her hoarse whisper cut through his thoughts before he could say anything.

“And I just killed four people.”

“Hey,” he said, and caught her eye when she looked up, dull eyes finding his face. “You killed four violent men carrying grenades and assault rifles who were trying to kill me. When you get into BBD, you cross outside the lines of what’s covered under Academy rules, okay?”

She sighed. “Yeah, well. Pretty sure I got kicked out of BBD once the others all signed a contract and I bolted.”

Well, shit. He considered that for a moment, watching her face.

“To hell with that,” Dolls said, shrugging one shoulder. “You were BBD when I said you were BBD, no paper required.” He considered her for a moment longer, then nodded. “Besides. Having you on the outside helps.”

She looked up at him, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“If you were on the inside and getting information to me, Lucado would figure it out eventually. This way, you’re not under her supervision. Sometimes the most helpful thing someone can do is peer in through the window and talk where those inside can’t hear.” She grunted, but it was a less hopeless sound now, and he nodded, satisfied. “Now. You better get outta here. It’s getting late.”
She shuddered. “No, it’s too late. I’ll never make it home in time.”

A prickle of fear ran down his spine. If she went full wolf now, there wasn’t much he’d be able to do to hold her off, and he was not quite confident that the wolf agreed with her about keeping him alive. He’d only gotten this far because it had been daylight.

“All right. What’s the play, Haught.”

“I’ll go north, as far as I can. Far enough that you’re not in my radius. And then tomorrow... I’ll figure out tomorrow when it comes.”

“Good a plan as any,” he said, and got up, favoring his leg. He extended a hand. She stood and took it, holding the blanket around her. Her grip was strong, and as he clasped her hand in his something in her warmed, and a smile curled across her mouth, fledgling, but real. “Thanks, Haught.”

“If you stay around here, I should be able to find you again. I’ll try to bring you news,” she said. “Once I have any. Supplies too, if you need.”

“I’ll try, but yeah, supplies would help a lot. I think there’s a cabin near here I can squat in for a bit too. Look for me there.” She nodded and he turned toward his cot, shuffling through his bag and giving her some privacy. After a moment he heard the blanket drop to the ground behind him, but when he looked over his shoulder, she was already out of sight, jogging out into the snow and, by the sounds of it, shifting as she went.

A minute later he heard a low, crooning howl, and then she was gone.

He kept watch all night, just in case, but the wolf never came back for him.

Chapter End Notes

And now we’ve finally seen the beast in its entirety... For all y’all who were asking about it, where it comes to my personal preference I like my werewolves like what you see in the 2004 Van Helsing or in World of Darkness’ Werewolf products, so that’s what I’m using as a model here for wolfhaught.
Chapter 30

For once, Nicole didn’t dream.

She woke up under a fallen log, and surprisingly, she wasn’t sore. She didn’t ache, she didn’t feel open scratch marks on her body, and when she stretched out in a languid sprawl, there were no complaints from her spine and hips. She stood and stretched out her shoulders, rolling her head back and forth and feeling her keys jangle against her chest. She examined her hands—relatively clean—and rubbed them over her face, feeling dried blood around her mouth.

Shit.

She looked around, but she couldn’t quite summon up real dread. The wolf sprawled in her thoughts like a cat in a sunbeam, content and unconcerned, and when she found the remains of an elk, mostly eaten, sprawled a few dozen feet from her napping spot, she let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding and laughed at herself a little. Just an elk. She hadn’t killed anyone else.

Anyone else. Dolls’ words came back before she could quite go down that rabbit hole. She had killed to protect someone who couldn’t have survived without her intervention. She had killed after shots had already been fired. Really it was no different from shooting a man who was seconds from rushing a police line or opening fire into a crowd of civilians. She just... hadn’t used a gun, that’s all.

Guilt prickled at the edges of her mind, but didn’t come pouring back in to choke her. Which, in the circumstances, she took as a win. She left her hiding spot, peering up at the sun to place herself and orient back toward the south. It was only a little after dawn, and it was freezing, but she found she didn’t really notice the cold. She scooped up a handful of snow to start scrubbing at her face, cleaning off the blood and gore as she went.

It was a long walk back to her cruiser, but once she found Dolls’ campsite it was a little easier to orient. His fire had gone down to embers and he looked to be asleep, sitting against the wall of his cave with his stolen M16 across his lap, so she gave him a wide berth, noting he had already disposed of the hitters’ bodies. Lucado wouldn’t be pleased, but at least Dolls would get credit for the victory.

And even that couldn’t hurt her good humor. Who knew spending a night out in the woods instead of cooped up in the cage was this good for her mood?

Then again, maybe that explained a lot about Shae. That was probably a dangerous track to go down.

When she got back to her car she checked her face in the mirror, then crawled back into her uniform. She let the engine idle for a bit until the heat kicked in, warming her body and her clothing until she didn’t feel quite so much like a popsicle in human guise.

And then a little guilt did creep in. How many times had she told Waverly she could weather any news, any crazy twists her life took, and be her rock through it? And then when confronted with I might not be an Earp, her response was to brush it off, to dismiss the fear as irrational. Not cool, Haught. Not cool.
She drove back to the station, arrived a little after 10, and snuck in during a shift change. Nedley was the only one in the office, and he gave her an absolutely bewildered look when he saw her. She stopped and glanced down at herself, taking stock of what she must look like to him. A rumpled uniform that looked rather like she’d slept in it, her hair tangled and unbraided (and please god let there not be any leaves in it, she had forgotten to check), her face clean, unbloodied, but surprisingly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed considering she otherwise looked like the picture on an advertisement for hangover remedies.

“Haught?” he said. “Wasn’t expecting you in today.”

“Just came by to pick up some forms,” she said.

He grunted something inquisitive and sipped coffee from Dolls’ mug.

She flushed and shuffled her feet a little, and considered lying to him before discarding the idea. “Friend of mine wants to clear up some paternity concerns. Figured I could help.”

Both his eyebrows rose then. “Is that so.”

“Yes sir.” She held her breath, hoping he wouldn’t push.

“Fair enough. How did that undercover job go?”

“Thought you lost my report, sir,” she said.

“I did.”

She grinned, then looked around her for a moment. “Got good intel out of it.”

“Oh yeah? Any results?”

“Positive contact.”

“Good,” he said, and nodded, with surprising warmth in his tone. “Well done, Haught.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He drew back into his office, and she gathered up the forms she needed, tucking them into a manila envelope. She went home, showered, changed clothes, and then she headed to the Earp homestead.

She found evidence of a bonfire in the front drive, smelled charcoal and whiskey and burnt clothing on top of the strange, slightly off smell of burnt paint. She examined the fire, peering into it and poking at the remnants of... a chair? She picked up a scrap of fabric and noted it looked familiar, just a little.

She rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. Gus’ truck was gone, but Waverly’s red Jeep was parked off to one side, so she should be home. She tucked the envelope under her arm, waited a little longer, and then knocked, hard.

Still nothing. She tried the knob—it opened, and she stepped through. She smelled whiskey and food and there were plates in the sink. She headed up the stairs, trying to avoid the ones that creaked the worst. A light was on in Willa’s—Waverly’s—room, and she eased the door open. The place was completely transformed. The posters were gone, though the wallpaper on half the room remained. The bed was the same, and most of the furniture, but the various trappings were gone, the belongings replaced. It no longer felt like a shrine to the dead, but a place of transition. This
room was not finished changing, but it was changing all the same, becoming something new, like a cocooned caterpillar halfway to a butterfly.

Like Waverly herself, really.

Who, she noted, was standing on the bed, hanging bits of drapery across the windows. And who, after a moment, started to turn, and finally noticed Nicole standing in the middle of the room.

“Oh jeeze!” Waverly gasped.

Nicole raised her hands, still holding the envelope. “Okay, I rang,” she said, in her defense. “And then I knocked,” she added, as Waverly laughed and set a hand to her chest, as if to ease her racing heart. “So...”

Waverly grinned and stepped forward to where she didn’t have to bend her head where the ceiling sloped down to the wall.

“Waves, this room!” she said, looking around. “It’s really ‘you.’ But... different.”

Waverly smiled, still standing on the bed. “Yeah, well. I feel different.”

Nicole nodded and tracked the slope of a long, tan leg where Waverly’s skirt ended. Before she could start drooling she pushed the wolf aside, back into its sunbeam nap.

“Are you still mad at me?” Waverly said, finally stepping down off the bed, her hand lingering on the footboard.

“Girlfriends fight,” Nicole said, as if that was even close to being an adequate apology. “It’s... it’s okay. It’s– it’s uh, it’s normal.”

“It’s kind of the worst,” Waverly said.

“It’s totally the worst, yeah,” Nicole said, grinning, and even if she hadn’t been in such a good mood already, she thought she would’ve hit it now, because it felt like she were talking to Waverly again, her Waverly, the one with no edge, no cold undertone. Waverly’s eyes flicked down to the envelope in her hands, and Nicole stepped forward. “So, I got you something. Ironically I hope it doesn’t make you mad?”

“Hm?” Waverly took the envelope from her, her expression flickering once in confusion until she turned the papers over and read the header of the first page. “Application forms? What– what for?”

“Birth certificate,” Nicole said, easing forward slightly so that she was just a little more in Waverly’s space. “Medical records, school documents...”

“Anything that could prove I’m an Earp,” Waverly said, glancing up to Nicole. She smiled, and Waverly’s gaze slid away again a moment later, down to the forms. “Or... not.”

“Hey,” Nicole said, tilting her head to catch Waverly’s eye again. “I know that going down this road is really important to you. And...” She looked down and felt Waverly’s gaze on her still, realizing almost as an afterthought how big what she wanted to say was, how much more significant it was than just an apology. After almost two weeks of cold shoulders and not-quite-arguments, after a sidewalk fight with her wife and a half-failed rescue mission, after cages and teeth and near misses with death, this was so much more. “And as long as you want me,” she said, forcing herself to look up again, “I will be by your side.”
For a moment, just a moment, she feared Waverly wouldn’t understand, wouldn’t see all the words that were lined up behind those ones like dominoes, but a smile cracked Waverly’s face, widening into something bright and warm, and Nicole stopped worrying. Waverly found Nicole’s hands with one of hers and turned to set the envelope aside, without breaking contact, and when she turned back, running her hand up to curl around the back of Nicole’s neck, Nicole pressed a tiny kiss to the tip of Waverly’s nose.

Waverly smiled and leaned up, and Nicole kissed her, feeling a little like she were holding her breath as she did it. That bitter note was all but gone, and when Waverly ran a finger under her jaw, drawing her in, she went all too willingly, letting their lips touch and linger, letting Waverly’s hands curl warm and gentle around the back of her neck. Waverly’s heart rate was picking up, a beat or two at a time, and Nicole tugged Waverly closer against her, her hands curled around slim hips.

Waverly’s fingers trailed to her shirt, sliding buttons free one after another, and Nicole kissed her forehead, letting her own hands stray to undo the few buttons holding Waverly’s shirt closed and untangling the ends where they’d been tied together. Waverly smelled like sunlight and clean fabric and toothpaste, with just a touch of lingering woodsmoke from the bonfire.

When those clever fingers tugged at her belt, the ringing of metal on metal felt very tangible, very real, and Nicole looked down, almost startled. There they were, Waverly’s hands inches from her belly and Waverly’s bare skin just behind, too, and she exhaled, sharp, thinking of words she’d said what felt like months ago, but could only have been weeks.

*Your pace. Our pace.*

“Okay whoa– whoa, whoa wait, Waverly, wait,” she said, and set her hands on Waverly’s wrists to hold her at bay. She tilted her head back and took a second just to breathe. It wasn’t enough distance to clear Waverly’s scent from her nose, but it was enough to give her room to think, just a little. The leather and glass of Waverly’s watch was cool, somehow reassuring under her touch. “Are you sure?” she asked, looking down again. Waverly was meeting her, gaze steady and her heart still pounding, her breath thin with desire and something so delightfully like hunger.

“Yeah,” she breathed.

“Yeah?” Nicole echoed, and grinned, biting her lip as Waverly smiled and lifted a shoulder in a shy little shrug.

“I mean... the best sex is– is makeup sex, right?”

Nicole’s laugh came out a little too breathy and a little too heated, and she looked down, listening to Waverly’s heart beating and watching the play of light through the windows on Waverly’s chest as she breathed.

“And I,” Waverly added, soft, like it was an afterthought, “I– I like you.”

It felt like code, somehow, since Nicole knew what she’d said in the station. It felt like the clumsy, uncoordinated confessions that came before the truth.

It felt like testing the waters.

So Nicole kept what she knew to herself, let out a breathless little chuckle, and lifted Waverly’s chin when she tried to look down. “Oh, I like you too,” she murmured, and leaned down to kiss her, and while she’d meant it when she said *your pace*, now she took the lead. Waverly let her,
mostly, but her hands skimmed across Nicole’s shirt, not nervous this time but urgent, pulling open the collar a little more and then pushing the cloth back at the shoulders. Her gaze fell to Nicole’s chest, and Nicole heard her breath catch.

Nicole scooped Waverly up into her arms, laughing, and lithe legs looped over her hips for stability, even though it was only a few steps to Waverly’s bed. She lowered Waverly onto the quilt like she were made of glass, breathing in the rich, fever-warm scent of Waverly’s skin. Waverly leaned up into her for another kiss and Nicole obliged her, reaching back to slide her shirt off her arms and let it drop somewhere to the floor. Waverly’s hands roamed up her back, tracing her spine, the blades of her shoulders.

The wolf stirred but stayed quiet, languid, and it hit her, really hit her, that she could take this slow—it was the day of a full moon but it didn’t even matter. She hadn’t felt so calm, so utterly at peace, in so long. Maybe not even before the bite. Waverly lay beneath her, leaning up on her elbows where her shirt had caught and gathered, watching her with her lip between her teeth, and when Nicole slid her knee up between Waverly’s thighs she squirmed, letting out a breath that sparked a low burr in Nicole’s chest.

She leaned down again, kissing along the column of Waverly’s throat, as sculpted as any statue but soft and so deliciously warm, and Waverly flopped back against the bed at the attention, tilting her head back to give her room. Nicole let out the rumbling noise in her throat and trailed her teeth along Waverly’s skin, feather-light, pressing kisses across her collarbone and then down, tracing the curve of her breast with the touch of her mouth until Waverly’s breath caught, high and desperate.

“How... I mean, what should...”

“Nothing, baby.”

Waverly picked up her head, a frown turning her mouth and drawing lines between her brows. “But—”

Nicole winked up at her, letting her tongue slide across her lips, and she grinned when Waverly sucked in a breath.

“Let me take care of you, Waves. You’re a quick study, I’m not worried.”

Waverly let her head flop back to the bed with a faint groan and threw one arm across her face. “God, Nicole...”

“Oh trust me,” she murmured. “You’ll say that again before I’m done with you.”

It was early afternoon when she woke up in Waverly’s bed with a blanket draped over her, a distinctly Waverly-shaped hole beside her on the bed. Not that it was an easy fit, as the bed was, objectively, sized for someone much smaller than Nicole, and certainly not for two people. She was yawning when she heard footsteps on the stairs, and picked up her head, listening as Waverly’s footsteps padded down the hall to the bathroom—the sink ran, and then the familiar sound of a toothbrush.
She had settled and was dozing again when Waverly slid into the room, sat on the edge of the bed, and traced her fingers along Nicole’s hair, brushing it back from her forehead. Nicole couldn’t remember where her hairtie had gone—the thought of cutting her hair came back with force, and even more tempting this time—but she cracked one eye open to look up at Waverly and smiled.

“Hey beautiful,” Waverly said, grinning.

“Hey yourself,” Nicole murmured, stretching her arms out and wrapping them around Waverly to tug her down next to her, nuzzling into the crook of her neck and tracing her lips down the strap of Waverly’s nightgown. Waverly sighed, content, and ran her fingers along Nicole’s hand, tracing the curves of her knuckles and following the lines of tendons.

“When do we need to go back to your place?”

Nicole smiled a little, lifting her head to catch Waverly’s eye. “You wanna come tonight?”

“Yeah,” she said, and turned to nudge her nose against Nicole’s. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there last night. Wynonna was freaking out about Willa haunting her, and then we got wrapped up into that case you gave us...”

“No, it’s okay, I—” She stopped short, almost laughing. “Hold on, Wynonna thought she was being haunted?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and grinned too. “We took care of it though.”


“Mmhm!” Waverly grinned and kissed Nicole’s nose. “Anyway. Gonna make it up to you tonight.”

“Sounds good,” she said, smiling. “Will you read to me again? That was nice.”

“Of course, baby. When do you wanna go?”

“In a bit,” Nicole said, trailing her nose up under Waverly’s jaw. “Too comfortable to get up just yet.”

Waverly turned to face her and tilted her head, pressing a warm kiss to Nicole’s mouth. “Well if it’s in just a bit, I suppose I shouldn’t distract you...”

“Mm,” Nicole murmured against her lips, grinning. “No, probably a bad plan.”

“Earp or not, I grew up with Wynonna,” Waverly murmured. “Trust me, I wouldn’t know a good plan if it kicked me in the face.”

Nicole laughed, but Waverly muffled it with more kisses, and Nicole let Waverly roll her onto her back, the silk of her nightgown trailing along Nicole’s bare skin.

Chapter End Notes

Posting this mad early from the train, but I’ll be in NYC for a couple days and won’t get home until late Wednesday night, so I will see you with another update on Thursday after I get back~.
The full moon. A time of mysticism, of ancient rites, of power. Waverly found the full moon fascinating, like so many women who shared her age and her, hmm, let’s say interests. Due to its metaphysical strength and its penchant for cycles, the moon was designated a symbol of femininity back when humanity was barely in its infancy, and even now in the modern age, it still held much of that power. Sure, it had lost some of its gravitas under the bonds of patriarchy and reason. Those who sought to weaken the feminine icon of the night forged terms like lunacy to describe the mad and the strange, and in so doing, relegated feminine strength into the same category. But even now, when most have forgotten the semantics of it, the moon still holds a great deal of power, of charisma. And Waverly was as enamored with it as any other woman.

This interest, of course, had only intensified in the wake of certain... discoveries about her new lover.

Disgusting.

Since the boundary arch, it had bided its time. Since the wolf had tasted some lingering afterthought of its essence, it had waited. But now. Oh, now it would see the beast for itself.

It was around 2 am when it took over Waverly’s body by main force, after Waverly had gone upstairs to make herself some coffee. It was a narrow thing that it didn’t drop the mug out of her hands. It set the ceramic down, pocketed a teaspoon she’d just used for sugar, and headed back into the living room, making its way down the ladder.

The wolf, which had been dozing comfortably in a coil in the cage when Waverly left, suddenly leapt up to her feet, a grinding, ripping snarl bubbling up in her chest like a pot of water boiling on a stove.

“"You’re beautiful," it murmured, using Waverly’s mouth, and made its way closer, placing Waverly’s feet with all the elegance of a model on the runway. “It’s a shame, you know. If it wouldn’t be so crowded, you’d make such a good host.” It turned Waverly’s head, exerting its will into the space between them as it had done in the Black Badge lab. “But, well, failing that, I need a good bodyguard, and your kind is so useful as raw muscle.”

The Hala had been strong, but just seconds under its gaze and the old Bulgarian demon had quailed before it like a mouse. This creature, however. Oh, this one was exciting. The force of Legion had subdued lycanthropes before, but this wolf fought. She fought like a desperate, rabid thing, and she might as well have been stone for all the progress it made in conquering her. The wolf snarled in open, violent defiance of the strength of its will.

The wolf roared and threw herself at the bars, sending up a ringing clang as her heavy body struck the metal. It stopped trying to win the creature, intrigued by her stamina, and placed Waverly’s hands on her hips. It took another step, and one large paw shot out between the bars, clawing at the space just in front of Waverly’s body, dark nails flashing in the little bit of moonlight angling down through the trapdoor.

“Oh Waverly. You silly little girl. To think you’ve charmed both the woman and the monster.”

The werewolf snarled, reaching as far as she could and baring her teeth from behind the bars.

“Even the beast wants to save you,” it murmured. “But what a shame... Nicole locked it up. And
now it can’t do *anything* to protect you.”

The wolf reached through one more time, but when her claws hit open air she sagged back behind the bars, whining, as if she had finally registered the words and accepted them as fact. The wolf threw her head back in a howl so full of primal, unfathomable despair that it couldn’t help but laugh, turning Waverly’s voice caustic and razorblade-sharp.

“Be a good girl,” it murmured, leaning a little closer to the wolf. “And maybe when the storm comes, we will add you to the Legion instead of stripping your fur from your flesh with these very hands.”

The wolf pressed against the rear side of the cage to get away from Waverly’s body with a halfhearted gnashing of fangs and a low, muted little growl.

It laughed again. It had gotten what it wanted. After a moment the black left Waverly’s eyes, and Waverly blinked, looking around the basement.

“Wasn’t I just...” She frowned and looked into the cage, realizing with a start that she was, in fact, directly next to the cage, with her hands on the bars. “Nicole?”

The wolf crept forward, slow, cautious, and nosed at her fingers, licking her hand when Waverly cautiously offered it through.

It took her a moment to realize she was looking at wolf-gold, not the warm, honey color she associated with Nicole—with *her* wolf. Or the version of it that was still mostly person, at least. She tensed for a moment, expecting another snapping of teeth like the month before, but the wolf just licked at her fingers again, nuzzling, and Waverly settled next to the bars.

“Maybe I’m losing my mind,” Waverly whispered, and the wolf whined, pressing her nose into Waverly’s palm. “But I guess I shouldn’t look a gift wolf in the mouth.”

The wolf huffed out a breath and settled. She stuck her nose out through the cage so that her chin rested on Waverly’s knee, with one big paw curled around Waverly’s hip. She waited, patient, watching, until Waverly had lay down on the floor before the cage and fallen asleep.

Nicole woke up with her fingers tangled into Waverly’s jacket and one of the beltloops on her jeans. They were mirrored, Waverly’s hand through the bars so that she could rest a hand on Nicole’s calf.

She didn’t understand how neither of them had any scratches, but after checking for bites and finding none, she took Waverly upstairs to her bed. Waverly never woke up as she moved her, and Nicole curled up around her like a watchdog, grumbling at every noise from outside as the rest of Purgatory began to stir.

The wolf was quiet, only grumbling when she grumbled, whining when she whined, and while it didn’t make sense, she felt... not at peace, exactly, but united. Unified in purpose, maybe. Sharing some goal that neither could articulate to the other, but which they both could feel humming through their shared nerves.

For the moment, she decided not to think about it, or at least not to question it, and just hugged Waverly a little tighter, listening as she mumbled in her sleep and tucked her face against the hollow of Nicole’s throat.
After another hour or so of dozing in her bed, she sent Waverly home. She was halfway into her uniform when she went into the kitchen to get breakfast, and found a mug sitting on the counter, full of cold coffee and completely untouched. It smelled fine, it looked fine, it didn’t even seem that out of place.

But something about it bothered her.

She pulled out her phone and dialed.

“...leave a message after the tone.”

Nicole frowned down into the mug and listened to the soft beep of Mikael’s voicemail.

“Hey, Mike. It’s uh. It’s Nicole. I’m calling on the 13th, if that matters. I’ve got some questions I need to talk to you about. Call me back, okay?”

Beep!

“Mike? Nicole again. It’s 8 pm on the 14th. I figure you should be awake by now? Well um... shoot me a text or something, okay? We need to talk.”

Beep!

“Mikael I swear to god if you’ve been staked or beheaded or something, I’m gonna dig up your coffin and slap you with your own stupid hand.”

“Still nothing?” Waverly asked, as Nicole hung up her phone and shoved it into a pocket. It was far too cold to be standing on the Earps’ front porch in just a t-shirt and jeans, which was why Waverly was bundled up in a thick parka and a scarf that was doing its best to cover her face. Waverly handed her a mug of cocoa and Nicole took it. She scowled, but let the steam wash up across her face as she sipped from it.

“Nothing,” she said, and looked out across the snowy plain before the house.

“I mean, he’s a vampire, right? I suppose radio silence isn’t really that weird.”

Mikael hadn’t sent an email about the seals or new texts he was reviewing since a few days after the Solstice, just a little before she’d called him to ask for a favor. She hadn’t heard a peep from him since that phone call, other than a single text to confirm her mailing address.

“Maybe,” she said. “But... he’s never ghosted like this before. Not to me.”

“He cares about you that much, huh?” Waverly asked, and there was an ice to it that felt right at home with the biting January wind. It made Nicole shiver, just a little.

“I think so,” she said.
Waverly chewed on her lip. “Maybe you should go look for him,” she said.

Nicole glanced her way.

“It’s just, if you’re so worried,” Waverly said. “He means a lot to you, so... don’t leave it to chance, right?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, cautious. “Maybe.”

“I guess Black Badge can’t really help though,” Waverly said, frowning into her own mug. “Even if they could help find him, they wouldn’t be satisfied with just chatting with him.”

“No,” Nicole said, and sighed. “And I know where to start looking. Starting isn’t the hard part.”

“What is?” Waverly asked.

Nicole bobbed her head a little, weighing her words.

“Convincing his sister to tell me where he is.”

Loretta von Holstein wasn’t hard to find. She ran clubs in almost every big city across the country, and it usually wasn’t very hard to get in touch with her if you could find some of her assistants.

The nearest of Loretta’s clubs was a few hours’ drive outside the Triangle and looked like it belonged between the covers of a William Gibson novel, not on the streets of a Canadian metropolis. It lurked like a crouching tiger along half a city block: a palace of neon and chrome, an ode to a time that everyone felt like they’d lived through even though it had never actually happened.

Even wearing earplugs Nicole heard the bass thumping from four blocks away, a low, pulsing beat that she could feel in her ribs as she got within a hundred yards, thrumming and vital. The club catered to supernaturals, adjacents, and humans alike, and while there was nothing supernatural about the music, it spoke to a deeper, more primal force. Nicole took a deep breath of city air to fill her lungs, then showed golden eyes to the bouncers and slid inside.

The air was a grey haze of several different kinds of smoke, some of which might have even come from some kind of smoldering djinn, but even for all that, none of the smells in the club were too much. Loretta wanted her supernatural clientele to be comfortable, and while Nicole didn’t have the vaguest notion how she did it, she was as good as her word. Somehow it wasn’t overwhelming, even though Nicole could smell smoke and alcohol and fruit juice and soda, could hear the pounding music that pulsed in time with lights of every color that shone down over the dance floor. She could smell cologne and perfume and sex, could hear clubgoers dancing, singing, laughing, moaning, the sounds loud and muffled by each other all at the same time.

Wherever she looked she saw the mixing of cultures. There, a vampire teasing kisses and nips along the shoulder and throat of a young human, here an immortal knight discussing fencing strategy with a faetouched graduate student. It reminded her that the supernatural world didn’t have to be all bad.

It also reminded her that a lot of it was no good.

She prowled the edges of the crowd, avoiding excessive eye contact and the attention of the bartenders. When she found an employee access door she slipped through and came face to face
with a man that was no man at all, but something with ogre’s blood and a suit that looked like it came straight off the runway.

“Stop,” he said, without actually holding up a hand or moving at all. He filled the hallway, his shoulders hunched just by virtue of the fact that he didn’t quite fit.

Nicole backpedaled until her shoulders hit the door she’d come through.

“You’re not employee,” the ogre-blooded guard said.

“Uh, no,” Nicole allowed, raising her hands. “But I need to speak with Ms. von Holstein. It’s kind of urgent?”

The guard narrowed his eyes.

“What’s your clan.”

She let her vision tint gold and smiled at him, showing him her fangs without real malice in it. “Moonsinger.”

The guard grunted, but withdrew a radio from the breast pocket of his jacket and spoke into it in a language she didn’t understand. She waited, smoothing her hands down the front of her white shirt, which looked luminescent under the blacklights, and fussed with the cuffs where they fell at her elbows. He listened to the response in his radio, then grunted again and turned aside.

“Go,” he said.

She nodded and went past him, though she had to turn sideways to fit alongside him in the hallway. The concrete hall led down a few dozen more feet before it hit a stairway leading up, and she followed it, climbing until the distant pulse of the music had faded out to almost nothing.

The hallway led in a couple directions, but she turned left, following light and the sound of soft, idle conversation.

Another guard, this one significantly smaller and probably human, or near-human, met her in the hallway and raised a hand to signal her to stop. He stepped forward and patted her down. She’d left her small boot-mounted sidearm at home, knowing she wouldn’t need it in a supernatural fight, and after a moment he pulled away from her, satisfied the only weapon she possessed was herself.

He opened the door for her and let her into a moderately sized room of glass and chrome that overlooked the dance floor. The walls didn’t look like they could possibly be soundproof, yet she could hear nothing of what was going on downstairs through the thick plate glass, and the lights dulled the potential glare of the colored lamps to something negligible. Thick red carpet muffled the sounds of her shoes and made the dark black leather chairs look positively luxurious.

As Nicole stepped in Loretta herself rose from her chair behind a chrome and black steel desk. She ducked her head in something like deference as Loretta took her in, and compared to von Holstein’s red silk dress and long, elegant blonde curls, Nicole suddenly felt very shabby in her black jeans and white shirt. Loretta looked like something out of a magazine—too perfect to be real, with a gentle face and thick, soft lips. But her eyes, a shade of violet that made Nicole think of the reflected light caught in a glacier, or the dancing ribbons of an aurora, were so cool and imposing it was like looking into the eyes of a cobra.

Her presence was a physical thing, a force of nature bound inside the walls and ceiling of the room. She was a storm in the shape of a human, thunder and lightning and wind contained within the cage
of ribs and sternum. She was something ancient and everlasting, forgotten and unforgettable. She was Loretta von Holstein, a creature of night and blood. A vampire who had seen the rise and fall of nations, who had seen the birth of American empires and the death of European juggernauts. Who would, if nothing else changed, watch as humanity devoured itself.

Even just being in the room with her was oppressive and heavy. The force of her will, of her very being, was like the crash of a wave. Trying to hold steady against it, similarly, felt like standing on a beach, stubbornly driving your feet into the sand for traction even as the pull of the tide pulled more and more sand away, until there was nothing left around your ankles.

“Nicole Haught,” Loretta said, somehow managing to suffuse her name with both warmth and contempt. Unlike her brother, Loretta had made almost no effort to hide her Scandinavian lilt, and Nicole imagined it did not hurt her efforts with young men who found her exotic and appealing. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

She scrambled to remember the words she had been taught and nodded her head more deeply. “The pleasure is mine, Lady Loretta. I apologize for my indiscretions. I did not expect to speak with you in person.”

Loretta laughed, the sound musical and maybe only a little mocking. “I see my brother has taught you well, little wolf. Tell me, then, if you did not come here to speak to me face to face. What could you possibly have expected to find in my halls? Surely you are not here in some... official capacity. We are quite outside your jurisdiction, I should think.”

Nicole swallowed down a lump of anxiety and chose to believe that Mikael had told his sister about her job, and not that Loretta was spying on her. The last thing she needed was more supernatural heavyweights watching her.

“No, Lady,” Nicole said, and stood a little straighter, her hands at her back. “I merely hoped to speak with you.”

“Without knowing I was here? You mean to say that you came all this way to place a phone call?” Loretta laughed. “What on earth could be so important?”

Sometimes, even to the most blunt and cavalier, one can feel the gravitas of a statement before it’s given voice. The words feel heavier somehow, weighted as if with concrete blocks. This, for Nicole, was one such moment. It hit her like a breeze, sudden and whisper-quick, that the words at the tip of her tongue might change things, warp events and fate into unrecognizable snarls. She stood at the crossroads of a choice, but to her, there was only one option.

“Lady Loretta,” Nicole said, though she said it with a little care, and a little more slowly than she might have otherwise. “When did you last speak with your brother?”

Loretta’s smile wavered, just a fraction.

“I beg your pardon?”

Nicole stood her ground, though she could feel ripples of tension making her whole body tremble. “I’ve been trying to reach Lord Mikael by phone for several days,” she explained. “I was hoping you knew where he was.”

Loretta’s violet gaze turned absolutely arctic and the force of her in the room sucked the breath from Nicole’s lungs. She took an involuntary step back.

“You have neither the gall nor the spine to play tricks,” Loretta mused, her eyes narrowed almost
to slits. “And neither the experience nor the face to tell lies. So I must presume, wolf, that you tell me this in good faith.”

“I do,” Nicole said, and it was a struggle not to gasp the words like a prayer.

Loretta turned aside to look out over the dance floor of her club and Nicole staggered forward a step at the sudden absence, like a kite when the wind suddenly dies, and fell to one knee.

For a minute, maybe two, Nicole focused on breathing silent, haggard breaths, and Loretta stared out over the sea of grinding, mindless bodies below. She cast no reflection in the glass, but Nicole could see the play of colored light over her face and bare shoulders.

“When last I heard from him,” Loretta said, “He was heading north, to the wildlands, to see the Night Mare for advice.” She didn’t turn back to face Nicole, but looked over her shoulder, her visible eye glowing faintly where the lights from beyond threw Loretta partially into shadow. “Do you know what it means, wolf, to hold my title?”

Nicole watched her for a moment, frowning. She spoke slowly, weighing her words against Loretta’s expression, watching for minute shifts that might tell her she was on the wrong track.

“It means that... you have other courtiers to consider. That there are people—other vampires in particular—watching what you say, and what you do.”

“And?” Loretta prompted, her eyebrow rising.

“And,” Nicole echoed, thinking as fast as she could. “And if they saw what was going on...” She sighed, pretty sure she understood. “If Lord Mikael is gone, some will try to take his spot. If he isn’t but they see you rushing off to help him, they’ll take it as proof that one or both of you are weak. Which means I need to handle this. Without your help.”

“Perhaps you are what my brother says you are,” Loretta mused. “Let us hope that is enough.”
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It didn’t take long for Nicole to turn her living room into something that belonged on a tv set. At Waverly’s suggestion she’d hung a cork board on the wall across from her couch so they could pin up a map of everything north of the Ghost River Triangle, in particular the wildlands Loretta had mentioned. The map was almost entirely obscured by notes, pages from ancient texts that Waverly had duplicated by borrowing Jeremy’s special scanner, and even a few newspaper clippings. A complex web of string connected pushpins to each other, an elaborate three-dimensional map of data that even continued across the room. Waverly had pinned a clothesline across to the wall by the kitchen and had clipped up more pages along it. Closer to the other wall there was even a small tapestry that looked like it belonged in a museum.

“Baby,” Nicole said, running a finger along a red string that connected two pages that looked an awful lot like BBD case files. “What’s this?”

Waverly looked up from the book she was sifting through and blinked a few times while her eyes refocused. She was bundled up in one of Nicole’s old university hoodies and a mug of coffee sat beside her, still steaming.

“Red’s the more reliable accounts,” Waverly said.

“No I remember,” Nicole said, pointing elsewhere on the board. “And blue means it’s local research or eyewitness—the stuff we probably shouldn’t trust. But this looks like BBD stuff. How’d you get this?”

“Oh!” Waverly said, and grinned, leaning her chin in her hand and beaming with pride. “Borrowed them from Jeremy.”

Nicole glanced over at her, one eyebrow raised. “Borrowed, huh.”

Waverly winked.

“Honestly,” Nicole said, grinning. “Where’s the tv police procedural about us?”

Waverly laughed and sipped from her coffee. “Well I’m clearly the hot brainiac one.”

Nicole set a hand to her chest and gasped as if offended.

“No no, it’s perfect! You’re the world-weary veteran who’s seen it all and I’m the new recruit who’s all gadgets and technology while you do it the old-fashioned way.”

“What old-fashioned way?” Nicole laughed. “I’m the most tech-savvy officer Nedley’s got.”

“Well obviously it’s a metaphor,” Waverly said, and sniffed. “Besides, the title is super obvious.”

“Oh?” Nicole said, moving to stand in front of Waverly and perching her hands on her hips. “Do tell.”

“Hm, well there’s two,” Waverly mused, and tucked a finger into one of Nicole’s belt loops. “*Haught to Trot* or *CSI: K9.*”
“Oh my god, Waverly!” Nicole laughed, though she didn’t exactly fight as Waverly pulled her down, tugging at her shirt to get her into range for a kiss. She’d forgotten how nice this stage of a relationship could be. The part where it was a miracle they got anything done with their hands so inclined to wander along skin and clothing alike. Where it was a wonder they hadn’t both passed out from oxygen deprivation. Where Waverly still surprised her with her interest and her eagerness to experience everything Nicole had to show her. Waverly’s lips found hers and held her like a tether, her mouth warm and familiar and soft against her own, her teeth catching Nicole’s lip and tugging, teasing.

Waverly’s kiss, bitter aftertaste or not, was a drug all its own—sweet and intoxicating and never quite enough to satisfy her.

So much so in fact it took her a moment to realize Waverly had stopped kissing her to say something.

“What? Sorry.”

Waverly laughed, musical and so very much like wind chimes that Nicole felt dazzled by it for a moment.

“I said I think I have a lead,” she said, and shifted to one side of her chair, patting the space beside her for Nicole to sit. She did, wrapping herself around Waverly in the process, since the armchair wasn’t really big enough for them both. Waverly didn’t seem to mind, and she and her wolf didn’t either, a pleased little rumble picking up deep in her chest as she set her chin on Waverly’s shoulder and looked over her shoulder at the folder of notes and newspaper clippings she was holding.

“So these are all from...” Waverly pulled a smaller copy of the map out and traced a loose circle around a wide patch of forest. “This region. Accounts of a strange equine figure in the trees,” she noted, flipping through the clippings, “As well as a high concentration of supernatural phenomena in the nearby towns. BBD even took out a coven of witches up there in 1958, and then a nest of harpies in ‘96. Looks like everything else was small-fry enough that BBD didn’t bother, but it looks like they investigated a couple other times.”

“Hotspot,” Nicole said, nodding. “Think the Night Mare is attracting it?”

“Probably. If this Night Mare is especially powerful, it might attract followers, or it might just put out a strong enough aura that other things are attracted to it. Sort of like magnets.”

Nicole nodded. “Loretta said Mikael went to the Night Mare for advice. If it’s reliable or strong enough that he picked it, we’re definitely looking at something that packs a hefty supernatural punch.”

“I agree. So I think you should start up here,” she said, tapping the map again. “People in town might have local myths or legends, too, that didn’t really get shared elsewhere.”

Nicole glanced down at her, surprised. “You don’t want to come?”

“I figured you’d tell me I couldn’t,” Waverly said, shrugging one shoulder.

Nicole chewed on her lip. “I mean, it will be dangerous. If Mikael went out that way and he went missing...”

Waverly made a derisive noise and Nicole flinched at the bite in it. Inexplicably the wolf bristled at it too, but when she turned her head to look at Waverly’s face, Waverly just sighed and leaned
against her chest, inadvertently blocking Nicole from seeing her.

“Sorry. Just starting to get a little tired of being boxed out.”

“Hey,” Nicole said, and kissed the top of her head. “You know I’d take you in a heartbeat if I could. But since I can’t bring BBD, the fewer the better. Besides. Wynonna would definitely shoot me if I brought you so far outside the Triangle for something like this.”


“Just for now,” Nicole said, and stroked a hand through her girlfriend’s hair, trying not to think about the fact that part of why she wanted to talk to Mikael in the first place was her lingering uncertainty about Waverly’s safety. She couldn’t very well ask Mikael hey so if someone’s taste suddenly changes and then they exhibit weird personality fluctuations that’s normal right when Waverly was in the same room.

Provided Mikael is even still alive, she thought, and immediately shoved that down. He was definitely fine. Definitely.

Nicole had to take off work and rent a car—Waverly offered the use of her Jeep but that would invite all kinds of questions she wasn’t really interested in answering—and drove up to the region Waverly had marked on the map. It took the better part of the day, and it was mid-afternoon when she arrived. The sky was a blanket of heavy grey clouds threatening gloom, but a sniff of the air made her think there weren’t any significant storms coming. That, at least, was a relief. The last thing she needed was to get snowed in some six hours from home.

She’d booked lodgings a bit south of the wildlands in a suburban sprawl that was halfway between glorified road stop and actual town. There were a few shops and a handful of chain restaurants in town, as well as a local diner. That was where she went first, walking down the block from her motel. The streets were sheeted in half-melted snow and she placed her feet deliberately to avoid slipping. It was cold enough that even with the wolf’s insulation her trousers felt bitterly cold against her skin, and she found herself wishing she’d kept at least one proper parka rather than just the fur-lined denim jacket she’d brought.

When she opened the diner’s front door, she realized she’d been so focused on where she was going and her footing that she’d missed something of particular interest.

The inside of the place reeked of the unique energy and scent of non-humans.

The customers all looked relatively ordinary at first glance, of course, but when she looked a little closer, let her eyes go a little more gold, she noted interesting little details, some of which were hidden under minor glamours. The host behind the cash register was a changeling, with just a little of the lingering scent of faerie on him. An entwined couple in the booth nearest the door looked like a pair of retirees in their early 50s but were actually jackalopes. She might not have caught it except they smelled like rabbits, and when she glanced their way they watched her with beady eyes and twitchy little noses, and she noticed the man’s hat was floating just slightly above his head, suspended on short antlers.

A few tables away from them was a tapir-looking young man in a long coat and a wide-brimmed hat that she could have sworn was a baku. There were a handful of young men with whiskers, cat ears, and letterman jackets sitting in a booth further back, who were engaged in the most casual fry-flinging foodfight she’d ever witnessed. One of the waitresses passed by and flashed Nicole a
professionally warm smile and a wink, and Nicole spotted the glint of scale mail under her uniform. Nicole watched her for a moment, looking for reasons to believe the woman’s decidedly Slavic features, imperious gaze, and armor meant something other than an honest to god Valkyrie.

She dipped her head politely to the jackalope couple, hoping she looked relatively nonthreatening, and approached the host first. There was something about him the wolf felt kinship with, and he perked up a little as she approached, showing a bright-eyed enthusiasm that reminded her of a puppy.

“Hey there!” he said, extending a hand. His nametag read *Hi! My name’s Peter!* “Don’t recognize ya. New in town? Almost thought I was gonna have to engage the repulsers.”

“The what?”

“Magic,” he explained, with a grin that showed very slight fangs, small enough that he could probably pass for human if he needed to. “Makes outsiders feel uncomfortable here and move on.”

“Ahh,” she said, and grinned right back at him. “Nice trick.”

“Helps keep out the normies,” he said. “So! What can I getcha? Special today is Maxwell’s silver meatloaf. No actual silver, of course!”

“That sounds great,” she said, and leaned her elbows on the counter next to the register. “And Peter, I’ve got a question for you, if you don’t mind.”

He shrugged. “Don’t mind ya askin’ ma’am, that’s for sure!”

“Great,” she said, and leaned a little closer. “A friend of mine might’ve come through here sometime in the last few weeks. A vampire. He might’ve been on his way through to chat with the Night Mare. Did you see him?”

The diner around her went quiet. Not in the idle, slow way of a group of people distracted by activity outside or falling into order, but in the haphazard, clattering way that one would expect to follow a mug shattering or an unexpected scream of pain.

She tensed, but didn’t take her eyes away from Peter. His heartrate and breathing had very suddenly sped up, his eyes wide and very round.

The Valkyrie waitress thumped a heavy hand down on her shoulder and Nicole turned to look at her.

“You should go,” the woman said. More she mouthed it, barely a whisper escaping her lips. “Now.”

Nicole narrowed her eyes. “I need to find my friend.”

“Go north,” the Valkyrie said, marching her back to the door as she did. “Follow 63 and go through the woods to the river. There you will find the Night Mare.”

Nicole set her feet when she reached the doorway and narrowed her eyes. “And why should I trust you? You’re awful quick to share.”

The Valkyrie winced and glanced back and forth as if looking for witnesses. Nicole scanned the room again and noticed the jackalopes had taken great and sudden interest in their coffees, and the letterman panthers were suddenly very absorbed in their fries. The baku had disappeared, a few
crumpled bills and a handful of coins sitting at the edge of his table.

“Listen, they’re not really interested in ‘chat first, stab later’ policies, so the less it seems like we helped outsiders, the better.”

Nicole frowned as the Valkyrie shoved her back out the door of the diner.

“What the hell is they?”

The door slammed in her face and she sighed, turning back toward the motel. Maybe she could find something halfway decent to eat at one of the fast food joints, but she wasn’t exactly holding her breath.

Chapter End Notes

ughhh okay guys I'm sorry if this isn't my best work--I tried to hold off taking cold medicine till I'd posted this so we'll see.

Update schedule this week might be weird. Tomorrow (Sunday) to Thursday is my last week of work at this job, but since apparently my body decided NOW was the time to let a rhinovirus throw a house party, I have a feeling I'll be sleeping a lot more and a bit loopy on meds. Which are. Not exactly winner qualities where writing is concerned. WHOOPS. I'll try to get something up later this week, but we'll see.
“And then she kicked me out of the diner!” Nicole complained. She sat against a small horde of pillows heaped up against the headboard in her motel room. It wasn’t anything special, but she’d slept in worse after Mikael helped her get away from Shae. Waverly laughed and shook her head a little at Nicole’s antics, and when Nicole saw her on her phone screen, she huffed out a little breath, pretending to be more annoyed than she actually was. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m not, baby, I’m not,” Waverly said, though she was still laughing. “It’s just cute when you get all huffy like that. Like a grumpy puppy.”

Nicole grumbled, but settled into the pillows and smiled a little when she caught Waverly watching.

“How’s the search going otherwise, baby.”

Nicole gave a faint grunt of disapproval and settled down against her pillows more, making a comfortable little nest of them. “No other leads, so... I guess I’ll be following it. It’s a place to start, at least. Though I’ll leave tomorrow. She didn’t say how far up the highway it is, and I don’t think it’s that far, but if this all goes sideways the way it seems like it will, I want to be able to bail. For now though, gonna do some more research on this Night Mare thing. You sent me some files while I was on the road, right?”

Waverly nodded and smiled at the camera. “Good thinking. Yeah, there should be a few in your email right now. Let me know if you don’t have them, I can resend it.”

Exhaustion didn’t hit her like a wall—rather it crept up behind her like a thief and smacked her across the back of the head. Nicole yawned, the sound a little squeaky at the end, like a puppy, and she half-expected Waverly to call her out on it.

“Nicole,” Waverly said instead, concern drawing out the syllables. “It’s like. Two in the afternoon.”

“Been on the road all morning,” Nicole muttered, waving a hand vaguely.

“Yeah, but you said when you first got on the call that you had too much coffee at the restaurant.” Nicole hummed, to show she was listening. “You said you were gonna read what I sent you until you were actually tired enough to fall asleep. You haven’t even opened your eyes in like a minute.”

Nicole tried to do so, just to prove she could, but they just seemed so heavy. “It’s fine,” she muttered, and lowered her arm, getting comfortable against the pillows. She’d just nap for a few minutes. It’d be all right.

“Babe–”

“S’fine,” she said. “S’fine, just gonna nap for a minute.”

“Nicole—”
She was dreaming. Huh. That was fast.

It wasn’t a good dream though, and it had happened awful fast for this to be a nightmare. And yet, here she was. It was her father’s basement again. The summoning circle was there, the one with the imperfect binding from when she’d been 18. But this time there was something in the basement with her—not the ghostly figure, but something *darker*, something *hungry*. Her senses felt dulled by sleep, maybe, or maybe just by being human, because this was before the bite. Before so much had changed.

She could hear voices.

The first was her father’s, low and commanding.

The second was her own, higher, more frantic, more alarmed than she’d usually been when she spent time in the basement, but this was different. This was scary in a way that all her father’s other work hadn’t been. (This wasn’t right, he’d done the binding wrong, it was going to get loose, it could *hurt* someone; *this isn’t okay*, Dad, *what are you doing*, Dad, *what have you done*.)

The third voice was the creature, speaking in riddle and rhyme, in the ghostly, rasping voice of a thousand cicadas singing all at once as her father asked it questions and god, *god*, it just kept *answering*, it kept speaking, offering an oracle’s mad prophecy in answer.

“Where does the lord sleep? How do we free him?” Her father asked and it babbled a nonsense answer. It was garbage, it was complete gibberish, but god, her father listened to every word as if it were gospel and that scared her almost as much as the creature’s voice itself.

*He sleeps in Limbo: he is in Limbo as he sleeps. Wall of stone binds him as much as wall of bone, guarded by dying phoenixes. The dead are his keeper and he keeps the dead; dancing until the end of time, they dance, in fire and in floodplain. Bullet for a bullet, daughter after son! He cannot wake. He shall not wake, not till the shackles of iron and silver are cracked open and all the earth cries out.*

The creature sang to her father and he *listened*. And here the memory and the nightmare diverged.

In the memory, she had just stood by, watching, in horror and in awe, frozen with fear and with confusion. But in the dream. God, in the dream she was in multiple places at once.

She was standing behind her father, listening.

She was her father. Standing before the creature, listening, memorizing. His—no, her—hands were stained with blood and dried flowers and spices. Sage and jasmine and nettles ground into a powder, mixing with the blood on his—her—fingers until it became almost like a paint across his—her—skin.

And she was on the floor beneath the ghostly figure, dying, pouring out blood onto the concrete floor where her father had carved open tendon and artery for his horrible spell.

And she was the spirit, flickering and burning. Hot and cold, suffering and in ecstasy. She was high, she was crashing to earth. She was flying, she was falling. She was all things, and nothing.

The beginning and the end.

She was also a wolf, 12 feet tall and ebony black, lurking in the shadows.

In the memory, there had been only her father’s voice, and hers, and the spirit’s.
But now there was a fourth voice. A familiar voice.

The spirit vanished and that part of Nicole’s awareness went with it. The body on the floor choked, convulsed, died, and it took a little more of her away too. The version of her that was 18 fled the room, and that took just a bit more of her.

But she was still her father, bloodstained and high on power.

She was still the wolf.

Her father turned from the improper circle to the werewolf in the corner and said *do it, we need her contained.*

The new voice spoke in a throaty purr she remembered all too well from rock climbing, from hotel rooms, from post-op recovery rooms.

*Yes. Your daughter, caged in wolf’s fur and steel, as you command.*

A different voice cut in. Waverly’s, but darker, harder, sharper at the edges and carrying another sound underneath, like static, like reverb.

*“Nicole Haught. You will wake.”*

She jerked, contorting on a full-bodied convulsion that left her sitting upright, bewildered and off-balance. The wolf was snarling, furious, but they didn’t have a target, there was no identifiable source to blame or maim, and that futile rage just boiled and bubbled with nowhere to go.

Nicole sat for a moment, panting and wiping cold sweat from her forehead.

*“Nicole?”* Waverly said again, sounding perfectly ordinary. Nicole fumbled for her phone, patting across the quilt for it until she could pull it out from under a pillow and look at the display. Waverly’s eyes were wide as discs. “Oh my god, baby, what happened?”

“I dunno,” Nicole muttered, running a hand through her hair and patting down her chest as if checking for a wire. “I dunno, I just... I just passed out, and god, that dream...”

“Dream?” Waverly said, confused.

“It was awful, it was—” She stopped short, understanding slapping her across the face, and she twisted her mouth up into a scowl. “It was that baku from the diner,” she growled, and her wolf *chafed* at the realization, snarling and pacing inside the cage of her ribs. “That little *shit.*”

“A baku?” Waverly asked, still lost. “I thought they *eat* bad dreams. They’re supposed to be good, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, holding her phone out so she’d still be visible as she stood and started gathering up her coat and her boots. “But I bet it wouldn’t be too hard for one to get its Linda Blair on if he had enough incentive.”

“What do you mean, incentive?”

Nicole shoved her feet back into her boots, leaving the laces partially untied so she could slip out of them if she had to shift in a hurry, and frowned at her phone screen.
“Say if they’re working for some shady group that has an entire town’s small supernatural community shaking in their collective boots?” Nicole said, frowning.

Waverly was no slouch—she mulled that over, then wrinkled her nose, mirroring Nicole’s frown. “Damn. Off to the Night Mare then?”

Nicole bobbed her head in a nod and sighed. “Yeah. Looks like I don’t have as much time as I hoped. I’ll take my car as far as I can and then just hike it the rest of the way. Shift if I have to, once I’m off the...” She waved a hand.

“Beaten path,” Waverly provided, and nodded. “Okay, well... text me when you’re back out, okay? I’m gonna worry about you till I hear from you.”

“Promise,” Nicole said. Despite everything, she smiled, and blew a kiss to her phone’s camera. “See you soon, baby.”

Waverly beamed. “You too.”

The roads weren’t great, but she managed to find the wildlands the Valkyrie had told her about without too much trouble, and parked her rented car just off the highway where it wasn’t immediately visible from the road. The woods yawned out around her, ominous and silent in the snowy gloom of an overcast afternoon at the end of January. Once she got under the canopy, even more so.

The darkness fell around her like a cloak dropped from overhead, heavy and dismal. She smelled damp earth and dying trees, but no squirrels, no rabbits. Nothing moved in the distance, except the occasional waggle of bare branches as a north wind swept through. She pulled her coat a little tighter around her to ward off the chill and forged deeper into the wildlands, heading west toward the river.

She’d been walking for an hour when she heard a sound she had not expected, even knowing what she was looking for.

A dry dying branch snapped with an audible pop and she froze behind a tree, immediately abandoning human guise to bring up wolf’s ears and a thick, black-tipped nose, her eyes sharpening to gold.

There was a faint swishing sound and then a voice. A woman’s voice, lurking out from the woods around her, soft and somehow coming from everywhere, so that Nicole couldn’t triangulate the speaker’s position, even with better hearing.

“Come out, shifter. We must speak, you and I.”

Nicole growled once, half warning, half alarm.

“I know you’ve come. I always know.”

Nicole lurked forward a step, scanning the treeline again, but she didn’t have to look far. Before her, in a pocket of empty ground amidst the thick trunks of oak trees, stood a creature even Nicole had never seen outside movies. The body of a horse, except from the shoulders curled the upper body of a woman, wild-haired and bare-chested.

A centaur. Nicole gaped, and didn’t even bother to hide it, her mouth hanging open as she stared in
something like awe.

The centaur’s skin was dark, almost black in the afternoon’s poor light, and the horsehair looked grey—maybe a blue roan. She wore nothing other than a leather harness, from which a handful of javelins hung over her human back and across the shoulders of the horse, but parts of her body were concealed with bloodstained bandaging. The massive left thigh was heavily bandaged, with a matching blow across the thick left shoulder. Her right eye was entirely covered in a bloodied makeshift eyepatch, and there was something like a splint around the forearm of her human arm, fashioned from branches and maybe a bit of old tin siding, bent by human hands, albeit using inhuman strength.

The centaur watched her, waiting, with the kind of patience that could sit and watch the end of the world.

“You...” Nicole worked her mouth once, then again. “You’re the Night Mare.”

“Of course.”

“I figured you were a horse;” she said. “Or... something like it. A demon maybe, but. Still. Like. An actual horse.”

“Obviously.”

“But you’re...” Nicole gestured uselessly at her. “You’re the Night Mare.”

“Yes.” One of the enormous hooves—the front right, which so far as Nicole could tell was one of the few uninjured legs—pawed at the earth, digging a long furrow into the dirt. “If you are quite done gawking, perhaps we might do something useful.”

Nicole shut her mouth with an audible little click. “Right.”

“You have come for answers,” the Night Mare said. “As do all.”

“I did. I– I mean I do!” Nicole stepped forward, spreading her hands in what she hoped looked like polite supplication. “Did Mikael von Holstein come here? Where is he? Is he all right?”

“I am an arbiter of fate, when fate deigns to be controlled,” the centaur said, her eyes hard, her voice like chips of ice, cold but transient, echoing on the dying trees around them. “I speak truths, when there are truths to be spoken. I see that which lies before, and that which lies behind. I answer questions, when it is right for me to answer.”

Nicole chewed on the inside of her cheek to avoid badgering her with more questions. The woman’s strength and age and aura was strong. Not as heavy as Loretta’s, but powerful all the same.

The Night Mare watched her with that terrible patience again, for long, aching seconds, then turned, gesturing into the woods. “Follow,” she said.

Nicole obeyed, and as she walked behind the enormous centaur, she consulted the wolf. It was relatively docile, so soon after the new moon, and only interested in what was going on in the most vague sense. It seemed a bit uncertain, but if it was worried about anything that was happening, it wasn’t piercing through the beast’s general and cyclical languor.

So... not very helpful.
“Should I take this to mean he’s alive?” Nicole asked.

The horsetail before her swished back and forth as if dispelling something annoying, like a fly, but the Night Mare said nothing.

“Of course,” Nicole grumbled. “You’re an oracle. Which means you’re basically allergic to giving straight answers.”

The Night Mare gave a derisive little snort, glancing over her shoulder, but still she said nothing.

They walked for something like half an hour, plodding through the brush with Nicole drifting along behind the centaur in the path she formed simply by walking, dodging the occasional broken branch. As they neared their target she could hear the nearby chatter of a partially frozen river—the creaking of ice floes and the babbling of active water. The wind swept west, coming from behind her, but just before they emerged from the treeline, Nicole smelled... something. Something inhuman.

She froze. “Wait.”

The centaur stopped, hooves tapping the hard earth.

“What is it.”

Nicole turned halfway around, scanning the trees. “Something following us.”

“We have little time,” the Night Mare said.

“Shh,” Nicole snapped, holding a hand out behind her to bid the creature for silence.

Somewhere before her she heard movement, as of something lurking and settling in to wait. It was a patient hunter. She heard the centaur shifting behind her, the creak of leather as the Night Mare drew a javelin from her harness.

And then the sharp tip of a spearhead touched the bare skin at the back of Nicole’s neck, angling down past the collar of her coat. It burned against her skin and she tensed as the discordant notes of silver jangled across her senses like an afterthought. The metal drifted away, just enough to avoid burning, but still more than close enough to be threatening.

Nicole slowly raised her hands, then turned her head, just enough to see the hard, cold face of the Night Mare beyond the butt of the javelin. Her hands were firm on the haft of the weapon, even the splinted one, and there was no hint of mercy or compassion in her dark face. The wolf stirred now, lethargic but growing more and more concerned as it woke and grasped their predicament.

“I thought oracles were supposed to be impartial,” she said, keeping her voice as level as she could.

“We are,” the Night Mare said. “And there was a time when impartial meant that one was willing to sacrifice oneself to maintain that neutrality.”

“But times change?” Nicole suggested.

“Indeed, shifter. Indeed.”

“Where is Mikael?”

The Night Mare made a faint sound of disapproval, maybe at herself. One of her hands moved down to curl into the back of Nicole’s coat—the javelin remained near at hand, poised to drive
deep into her heart if she so much as moved. She turned, starting to march Nicole out toward the river.

“Turned to ash a fortnight hence, after he came to me. The Watchers in the Dark ensured his destruction.”

Nicole walked, obedient, her hands still raised. “And why did he come here?”

“He sought advice about keeping safe the Three Seals of the Demon that lie within the Sanctuary.”

Nicole tracked the riverbank as they emerged from the forest onto open ground. Five figures, all wearing heavy black robes that shrouded their bodies and faces alike, stood at the points of a pentacle that had been carved into the frozen mud. A sixth, also in robes, stood just a bit distant from the circle, waiting, with a heavy knife in one hand.

“I don’t suppose you feel like sharing what you told him?” Nicole said.

“I hardly see how it matters,” the Night Mare said, and released her coat collar. “You won’t have time to share what he learned.”

“Please don’t say ‘because you’ll be dead,’” Nicole said with a groan, though she kept her hands about level with her shoulders. “Please. It’s just so tired.”

The sixth robed figure chuckled, the sound familiar to her, as if she’d heard it many years ago and almost forgotten it.

“We’re not here to kill you, Nicky. We’re just going to bind you to a higher purpose and bring you home.”

Chapter End Notes

I am officially unemployed! Hurray! And mostly back up out of this cold. I haven't taken meds for it since yesterday afternoon and I'm doing okay so far, so, fingers crossed I'm out of the woods.

And man, if you think YOU'RE surprised by this cliffhanger, you ain't the only one. I didn't see it coming either and I'm writing the damn thing.
Chapter 35

For a moment, Nicole’s heart stopped beating, and her mouth dropped open. She lowered her hands a few more inches.

“Dad?”

The figure in robes spread his hands—the knife still in his right—and she could hear the smile in his voice.

“Nicky. It’s good to see you.”

“I wish I could say the same,” she said, and a growl rose up in her throat. “How are you— I called the cops. You couldn’t have... I mean you shouldn’t have had time to—”

Her father laughed. Not a villainous laugh, but his laugh. The same paternal chuckle that she’d heard after every tasteless joke he’d ever told. The one she’d heard at every summer block party while he was manning the grill.

She almost would’ve preferred the maniacal cackle.

“Honey,” he said, all warmth. She might as well have been five years old, for the way he said it. “Did you think we had Henry and Marsha over for dinner twice a month because they used the same pharmacy we did?”

Nicole felt her stomach twist up into icy knots. “Officer Thornton,” she whispered. “He’s in your... He’s in on it? All of it?”

One of the other robed figures, the one standing at the water point of the pentacle, lifted a gloved hand in greeting.

“Hey Nicole.”

“Hush, Brother Henry,” her father said, turning to wave a placating hand, but he sounded like he was trying not to laugh as he did it.

The Night Mare stomped a hoof against the riverbank, interrupting. Nicole jumped at the sound—she’d almost forgotten about the other woman behind her.

“I have fulfilled my bargain,” she announced, and slammed the javelin tip-first into the earth, letting the haft tremble like a struck guitar string. “It is time you fulfill yours.”

Nicole glanced over her shoulder. The centaur did not look at her. She kept her dark, unknowable eyes trained on the cult’s leader.

Her father dipped his head in what she supposed was some sort of magnanimous bow, and the Night Mare turned aside, heading north along the riverbank. In the distance Nicole could almost make out the shape of a structure, maybe a small house. She listened to the clopping of hooves and turned back to face her father as he stepped closer to her, one hand extended.

“Come, Nicky. We can leash the wolf for you. We can help.”

“What?” she asked, lowering her hands all the way. “How?”
She couldn’t see her father’s face, but she could hear the smile in his voice as he kept his arm outstretched, an offer of aid if she just took his hand.

“It’s a demon, of course, just like any other. We can bind it with blood and power. I know you’re tired, Nicole. It will always fight you, always. Even if the two of you could agree on a goal, you’d never agree on the method. That’s what being a lycanthrope means. An eternal fight between man and beast. But we can ease your burden, Nicky. We can force it to bend. It just takes a little blood.”  
He showed her the knife, like a promise. Like playing poker open-handed with a child as they learn the rules. See, I’m not hiding anything from you, was what that one little gesture meant. I’m telling you the truth.

Her wolf was quiet. So quiet it was almost odd. It offered no rebuttals, no protests. It just waited, and let her think. And god, what he offered was tempting. To stop fighting, to be able to master the beast in full? To not need a cage? To break the power the moon held over her by tipping the scales in her favor, so that the wolf never won, because it never even tried to take control?

But everything her father said was couched in lies. She thought of Waverly, unharmed, unbitten even after a night spent within arm’s reach of the wolf, a night she couldn’t remember because she hadn’t even been there for it. She thought of Shae, laughing at her because all of this had been orchestrated, all of it.

She thought of Mikael’s soft, musical voice in her ear.

You are not of hell.

The wolf was dangerous, it was violent, it was always going to want to be in control of their shared body, but it was no demon. The only thing her father meant to bind was her.

Maybe he sensed it, the moment where she decided not to go willingly. He tensed, just a little, and pulled his hand back a few inches. The wolf came to her slowly, in pieces, because the moon was at its darkest, but it still came. The ears it had loaned her before twitched. She gained a few inches in height, her claws sharp and lethal-dark. She took a step back, out of her boots, and her bare feet were heavy on the frozen mud. Her nails grew longer, darker, digging into the earth for traction as she let out a terrible, ripping snarl. Her teeth lengthened, sharpening to cruel white points.

“No more lies, Dad,” she growled. “I’m done.”

He stepped back, closer to the pentacle and the other five cultists. She heard motion in the trees behind her again.

Her father shouted something, a name maybe. She reached back, yanking from the earth the javelin the Night Mare had left (had left for her, because even in the modern day impartial didn’t mean aligning with evil, not even for survival) and spun. She braced the butt of it against the earth with a snarl and something—something furry and vicious but too small to be a lycanthrope—struck it dead center, the silver spear-head puncturing its chest. Its momentum carried it forward another foot and a half along the wooden haft of the weapon until it was in striking range, and it flailed out with its claws, yowling like a fiend.

Impossibly sharp nails struck her face and shoulders, its claws splitting open her left shoulder and the better part of that side of her face. She felt chunks of her hair fall away in wet clumps, soaked in blood where the creature’s claws had snipped through it as easily and as cleanly as a pair of scissors. Its thrashing made it sink another few inches onto the javelin, until she could see the silver spearhead rising up out of its back, and she watched golden blood turn to smoke where it touched the gleaming metal.
The creature’s face, which was reminiscent of a hyena, blocky and heavy and full of too-long teeth, went slack then, its crimson eyes wide in shock as the creature’s mind caught up to what its body was telling it: it had suffered a mortal wound, and was actively dying.

It let out a terrible, choked whine of fear, and Nicole stood, flipping the javelin over so that the creature—which was a bit bigger than a bobcat—slid off the shaft and crumpled to the ground, twitching and still smoking from the contact with silver. Nicole turned back around, still clutching the javelin, to find four of the robed figures running down the riverbank away from her. The two that remained were drawing guns from beneath their robes, and it hit her, like a slap in the face, that her father was thorough. Worse, he was smart.

The odds that their guns were loaded with silver was entirely too high to ignore.

She moved almost without thinking, borrowing a little of the wolf’s speed and instincts. Her shoulder ached horrendously, even as it started to stitch back together, and she could feel blood gushing out through her wounds, soaking down her back and chest and into her ruined hair, but she drove the spear through the throat of one of her opponents. She shoved her other hand into the hood of the second gunman until her claws met skin, then pulled, ripping away skin and muscle alike in a spray of blood that earned her a frantic, high pitched scream as her target collapsed in a heap of fabric.

A woman’s scream. God, who was she even fighting?

The wolf didn’t think in words, but it didn’t need to, because she was thinking the same thing: no time. She yanked the javelin out of her first target, earning a tiny gurgling noise, and bolted after the other four. Two were piling into a pickup truck, the others climbing up into the truck’s bed and positioning themselves behind what looked terrifyingly like automatic rifles mounted over the rear tires.

She cast back to her track and field training in phys-ed and hefted the javelin in one hand, tossing it up once to learn the weight and balance. She braced her back foot and hurled it full-bodied toward the truck, taking one of the cultists in the shoulder. The man—and she knew it was a man, based on the deep bellow of pain that he made on impact—twisted under the blow and toppled out of the truck to the ground as the engine coughed and caught.

The remaining gunman settled into position and Nicole froze for the space of a breath, panicking, scanning the ground around her for anything remotely like cover as the rifle’s muzzle tracked up toward her.

A thumping of hooves came up behind her and she dove out of the way as the rifle started chattering, spitting bullets for a terrifying ten seconds. Too many of the bullets found a target—she could hear the meaty thuds of rounds hitting flesh, then a grunt of effort. A woman’s fragile scream echoed across the landscape, and then there was a crunch of a body hitting earth.

The rifle stopped firing but the truck’s engine roared, kicking up earth and gravel as it tore out along the riverbank and into the woods, then out of sight.

Nicole looked behind her as the Night Mare fell to the ground, knees buckling and body twisting, as the centaur toppled over onto her side. Her human torso sprawled across the mud. Nicole went to her first, but even before the Night Mare spoke she knew there was precious little to be done.

“Don’t bother,” the Night Mare coughed. Every breath sent spurts of blood out of a dozen or more bullet holes. “Make sure the others are dead.”
Nicole hissed in frustration, but obeyed. She checked the two gunmen first—Henry and Marsha, she found, when she pulled their hoods back to check their pulses—and when she was satisfied they had breathed their last, she checked the other two she had taken out first. Her father was not among the dead.

The wounds in her shoulder and across her cheek were slowly stitching back together and it burned uncomfortably as she crouched in front of the dying centaur.

The woman offered a hand, and Nicole took it, gripping it tight.

“Thank you,” she said.

“We are even?” the centaur asked.

Nicole sighed, almost a laugh, and shook her head. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.”

“Good.” The centaur’s breath was a deep, terrible rattle in equine lungs.

“Please,” Nicole said. “What did you tell Mikael?”

“The seals will break,” the Night Mare whispered, weaker now as her body failed. “There is no stopping it. There is an evil loose in the sanctuary that will have its way. There is only the effort to be made, and the choice.”

“What choice?” Nicole asked.

“Choose to fight,” the Night Mare said, “Or to flee. Find your family, or abandon it. Each of you will choose, in your own way. What will you choose, shifter? Who will you choose?”

The grip on Nicole’s hand slackened, her gaze unfocused, and Nicole sat on the frozen earth, watching as the pulses of blood from open wounds faltered, sluggish, and then slowly changed to more of a trickle, a side effect, rather than a symptom.

Nicole wasn’t sure how long she sat there, but it couldn’t have been more than an hour. When she regained a sense of time, she realized her blood was drying on the inside of her coat, and there were dead humans around her. She braved the icy river to rinse her healed skin, and got the majority of the blood out of her coat before hanging it on a tree as she went around gathering up the dead and heaping them together to burn. This far out she really didn’t anticipate anyone finding the scene any time soon, but... well. Better safe than sorry.

She took her battered, bloodied, beaten self back to her car, swapping her bloodstained clothing for what she’d brought in her backpack. She sat in the driver’s seat for long, horrible minutes while she waited for the cabin to heat up a bit and chase off the lingering, frigid feeling of failure.

Mikael was gone, and she hadn’t even learned anything particularly useful, either, other than a dying oracle’s cryptic promises that nothing would stop the inevitable.

And to add insult to injury, when she peered in the rear-view mirror she realized a third of her hair was chopped short where that strange bobcat creature had slashed across her face. There were angry pink lines of healing cuts across her jaw and shoulder and the side of her neck, but the wolf couldn’t do much for hair. Suddenly “go and actually get a haircut like she’d told Waverly she might” jumped to the top of her to-do list for when she got back to town.
She went to the diner first, and didn’t even care that she looked like an unholy mess. Peter was still
working the counter, and when she walked in, her hair matted with blood and her t-shirt not doing
much to hide the healing scars the creature had given her, he met her with a deeply uncomfortable
smile.

“H-hello ma’am,” he said. “Would you um. Like a menu?”

“No,” she snarled, letting the wolf scratch its way into her voice without even a moment’s second
thought. She slammed her hands down on the counter and he jumped. “I want a coffee for the road
and I want to leave a message for that baku that was in here before.”

Peter gulped and relayed her order to the Valkyrie. “What’s um. What’s the message?”

She leaned closer over the bar and bared her fangs. “Tell him that if I find out he’s still running
with the Watchers, I know his scent. I will find him.”

“R-right.”

The Valkyrie set down her coffee in a to-go cup and Nicole dropped some coins on the counter for
Peter.

“And tell him that the nightmare he used was a cheap shot. It’ll take a lot more than that to scare
me.”

“Right,” Peter whispered, though it was clear he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Keep the change,” she told him, nodded to the Valkyrie, and went back out to her rental car. She
scowled, sipping her coffee—it needed sugar desperately but she couldn’t exactly go back inside
after that melodramatic exit—and texted Waverly as she’d promised.

Made it out alive. Am heading home.

Waverly’s reply came almost immediately. You okay?

No.

She had just pulled up the route home on her phone when it pinged again. A call, rather than
another text message.

She accepted the call and sighed into the receiver.

Waverly’s voice was soft and felt like home. “I’m sorry baby.”

Nicole leaned her head against the driver-side window, letting it chill her forehead. The glass
fogged around the point of contact. She was running entirely too warm with the wolf still working
on the lingering damage in her shoulder.

“Thanks.”

“It’s six hours to home, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll meet you at your place tonight. I was gonna be over to feed CJ anyway.”

It occurred to her to tell Waverly not to come, to lie, to push her off, to tell her she was too tired, or
too hurt, or too... something. She still didn’t know what might be wrong with her, and now she’d never know.

But when it came down to it, she didn’t want to be alone.

“Unless you don’t want me there,” Waverly said, slow, like it hurt to admit that might be the case.

“No,” Nicole said, and sighed. “Waverly, I... I’d like to see you.”

“Yeah?”

The hope and happiness in her voice made a small smile crack through the layers of Nicole’s pain and frustration.

“Yeah.”

“Cool. Well, then, I guess you better get on the road.”

“Yeah,” she said, and started to reach for the gear shift. “Actually.”

“Hm?”

“Any chance you’ve got experience cutting hair?”

Waverly was quiet for an almost comically long moment.

“Um. A little? Why?”

“Could you bring scissors with you?”

Nicole could practically hear the confused blinking through the phone.

“Uh. Sure. I’m a bit worried, but, yes?”

“I’ll send you a picture,” Nicole said, chuckling.

“Okay,” Waverly said, a bit slow. “I’ll see you soon baby.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and smiled more genuinely. “Soon.”

“Drive safe.”

“I will.”

She hung up and took a photo of her hair, trying to angle the camera so the damage to her shoulder was less visible.

Waverly’s response was almost immediate, and full of a handful of teary-eyed emojis.

Oh my god! Your face! I mean also your hair, but still! Baby! Don’t worry, I’ll fix it right up. <3

Nicole laughed, and when she pulled away from the diner’s parking lot, she found she was in a considerably better mood than when she’d pulled in.
Chapter 36

It wasn’t that Nicole had been worried Waverly wouldn’t like her hair so short, but she wasn’t not worried, either. On some level she knew that was silly. For some reason that she couldn’t quite wrap her head around, Waverly liked her even when she was twelve feet tall, covered in fur, and had a tendency to start slobbering, so it wasn’t like something as minor as a haircut was going to bother her.

Still, it was a balm to her ego and her pride that even after she’d finished fixing it, Waverly couldn’t seem to keep her hands out of Nicole’s hair. Waverly got done working on it close to midnight, and then they sat on the couch together, Calamity Jane in her lap and Waverly’s fingers threading through her hair as it dried into wavy curls. There they sat, for maybe ten minutes, until Nicole couldn’t bear to keep looking at the conspiracy-map hanging around the living room.

“I’ll take it down for you tomorrow, baby,” Waverly murmured, as they moved to Nicole’s bedroom.

Unprompted, Waverly pulled Nicole’s shirt off her, running her fingers over the now-faded lines where just hours ago had been open wounds and a frankly alarming amount of blood. She said nothing as she examined the healed skin, though Nicole half-expected her to ask questions or demand explanations. Something. But she didn’t. She stripped Nicole down to her jeans so she wouldn’t overheat, tugged her into bed, and then tangled them together like a pair of headphones fished out from the bottom of a bag.

Waverly rested her head on the pillow and let Nicole decide where to put herself. If she thought it strange that Nicole ducked her head down until her forehead was against Waverly’s chest, she didn’t say so. Waverly just rested her chin on the top of Nicole’s head and looped her arms around her big lycanthrope girlfriend, and held her.

Every now and then, Nicole remembered Waverly’s promise that the whole home base thing actually was a mutual arrangement.

Waverly’s hand ran idle patterns up and down Nicole’s back, tracing her spine, her shoulder blades, drawing nonsense patterns that were probably some sort of ancient hieroglyphs that Nicole didn’t recognize. Her other hand was entwined in Nicole’s hair, fingernails scratching at the base of her neck until a low, rumbling burr picked up in Nicole’s chest.

Still, even with all the physical comforts, the day started to crawl back into her thoughts, harder than ever to ignore.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” Nicole said, and damn it, but her voice cracked, just at the end. “That’s it, just. He’s dust, and I didn’t even get to say goodbye or... or anything.”

Waverly didn’t say anything, just held her a little tighter and kissed the top of her head.

“I sort of figured he’d always be there, you know?” Nicole sighed and pressed her face against Waverly’s chest. Words got a little harder, her throat trying to close around them, hoarding her pain for herself. “I guess everybody says that when someone dies. He was just so old, I just. I figured, y’know, you don’t get to be something like four hundred years old without being crazy powerful. I figured he was invincible. Or as close to it as he could get.”

“I know,” Waverly said, and the hand in Nicole’s hair slid to cradle her head, holding tight. “It’s
okay, baby.”

Sometimes the worst thing in the world you could receive was permission. The jumbled-up confusion of feelings in her chest welled up at Waverly’s words, until there was nothing for it to do but spill over. She hid her face and curled her fingers into the back of Waverly’s sweater but she couldn’t stop the tears or the haggard sobs that followed. At some point, she wasn’t sure when, the wolf joined in, adding its quiet, whimpering whine to the noises she was making, letting its grief mix with hers.

Somehow that was even harder. Grieving twice for a single person.

Waverly never moved, except to scoop up a box of tissues from Nicole’s side-table to put them in easier reach. She lost track of time, but Waverly never complained, and once she had wrangled down both herself and her wolf she groaned. Her whole face hurt. And there was something like a headache trying to form between her eyes.

“My dad was there.”

Waverly tensed, but not with anger. Interest, maybe. It occurred to her, in the back of her mind somewhere, that she’d never talked about her family with Waverly before.

So there, Shae, she thought, with the acrid taste of hatred in her mouth. I didn’t even have to get drunk this time.

“Oh yeah,” Nicole said, and it came out more bitter than she’d intended. “He knows entirely too much. How to bind demons, how to ritually slaughter humans to summon creatures that tell you basically how to bring about the end of the world...”

“Oh, Nicole,” Waverly said, and to Nicole’s great surprise, it didn’t feel like pity.

“I haven’t seen him in almost ten years,” Nicole said. “Him or his cult. I thought. I thought I’d gotten out, I thought I’d finally lost them when I came here to Purgatory.”

Part of her knew she was throwing a lot of wrenches at Waverly all at once. But Waverly had grown up an Earp, no matter what the DNA tests might come back with, and she took it all in stride.

“But here they are anyway, dogging my every step. Sending people to harass me on the solstice, hurting people I—” She stopped and flinched at Waverly’s sharp inhale.

“That’s why, after the station?” Waverly said. “You never told me how you got hurt. You fought someone from your dad’s cult?”

She nodded. For a moment Waverly didn’t say anything, maybe thinking it all through. She didn’t push, but she did hold Nicole a little closer and kiss the top of her head again.

“They were waiting for him, Waves.” She let out a shaking breath that was one step removed from another sob. “They knew where to find him and they staked him, or... or dragged him into the sun, I don’t know.”

“I’m so sorry, Nicole.”

“And then they waited for me to come looking for him. They knew I’d go, so they knew at least
that much about us, that we were still talking. God, they must’ve known we were working together against them. So they knew eventually I’d go to Loretta—oh god. Loretta. What am I going to tell her.”

“We’ll think about that later,” Waverly said, gentle but unyielding. “Do you think they’ll follow you here?”

“I’m not sure they can,” Nicole said. “Or... at least there’s a lot of limits. Any of them that aren’t mostly human can’t cross the boundary, for one. That’s why that thing always tries on the solstice.”

Waverly was very quiet, very still.

“But Wynonna took care of it, you said. So at least we know that’s not in play. But the rest of the cult...” She sighed. “I’m not sure. And now I can’t ask—” She cut off with a sharp little sound, and Waverly held her closer. Her sweater smelled like wildflowers. “I’m on my own. Dolls is in the woods somewhere, Lucado runs local BBD, and Mikael is.” Waverly stroked her fingers through Nicole’s hair and she forced herself to say it. “And Mikael is gone.”

“You still have me,” Waverly reminded her. “And Wynonna. And that’s not nothing.”

“Yeah,” she said. Tears burned in her eyes and trailed fire across her skin where they slipped free. Her face still hurt. “Yeah, you’re right.”

A couple days before Homecoming she went looking for Dolls again. She tried the cave, and then scouted around for the cabin he’d mentioned, but she found nothing. Rather, she did find the cabin, but it was empty. That by itself wasn’t too alarming—it’d been almost three weeks since the ambush, and in the middle of winter, Dolls’ scent wasn’t exactly going to just hang out and party until she could come pick it up, like a teenager waiting for their mom.

She arrived for work still smelling like pine needles and motor oil, and Henry hesitated in the hallway as he passed her.

“Officer Haught,” he mused, reaching on instinct for a hat he still hadn’t replaced, even as his eyes roamed over her, looking for something, some clue as to where she’d been.

“Henry,” she said in return, narrowing her eyes in question.

Something occurred to him, and he walked with her a little ways, until they were out of the shadow of BBD’s closed door. “Say, Officer Haught, I do not suppose you might have a moment to spare? I know your schedule is quite busy.”

She eyed him, then frowned. “I might,” she allowed. “What is it you want?”

He flashed her that roguish smile of his, the one that had won over Wynonna and Waverly alike. “I seem to recall you saying you have quite the set of ears on you.”

“The better to hear you with,” she said, without thinking. He raised an eyebrow and she grimaced, immediately regretting it.

“Right,” he said, drawing it out. “Well, I was wondering if by chance you had ah... heard anything about our mutual friend.”
She frowned at him and he raised his hands, peaceful as you please. She nodded toward the hallway and led him back outside into the cold February air. He walked with her, his boots thumping a drumroll as they went, and only when they were outside and a few meters from the doors did she look at him and gesture for him to continue.

“If your ears are as good as you say,” he said, his voice very, very quiet. “I would presume to believe that you can hear a liar’s heart poundin’ away in his chest.”

She grinned at him, in lieu of answer. There was a lot more to sussing out a lie than that, but she didn’t need to tell him that.

“Then I hope you will know that I am bein’ quite honest with you, Officer, when I say that I am attemptin’ something moderately dangerous on his behalf. But I am comin’ rather close to when I would be needing to make the drop and I am pattin’ my pockets and comin’ up mostly empty.”

Nicole inhaled, slow. “I did,” she admitted. “Find him. But that was on the full moon. I lost track of him after that.”

“And I suppose you losin’ him has nothing to do with that little errand you were just runnin’ recently?”

“I don’t think I like your tone, Doc,” she said, letting her own voice go arctic and a little rough with leashed anger. “I helped him take care of the second team your boss sent, and then dealt with some personal business. It seems pretty clear you can understand what that might be like.”

He watched her, shrewd eyes tracking her face, looking for her tell, and she had no doubt he found it. The infamous Doc Holliday had been playing poker for a hundred some years and she’d never been very good. She’d hardly hold up against him.

Mikael probably could’ve though.

The thought made her falter. She broke eye contact with him, hissing out a frustrated breath. She shut her eyes and forced back the grief.

“I see I have overstepped,” Doc murmured, and he set a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently, as if she were a favored daughter. As if she were one of the Earps. The Night Mare’s ominous prophecy rattled around her brain like loose ball bearings.

*Find your family, or abandon it. What will you choose?*

“It’s fine,” she lied, and he patted her face once with his other hand.

“Lost far too many friends to not know the look,” he said. He squeezed her shoulder one more time and then let go. “But it is only the fear of the same that leads to me puttin’ my foot in my mouth like this. If you happen to uh, hear anythin’ else, may I count on you to tell me?”

She chewed on her lip. “Yeah. I will.”

“Thank you kindly, Officer Haught.” He gestured by his forehead again in what should’ve been a slight tip of his hat. “Damn.”

She chuckled and watched him go down the first few steps down to the sidewalk. “It’s Nicole, to my friends,” she offered.

He looked up at her, pensive for a moment, before his face split in a grin. “Nicole it is, then.” She
smiled at him, and he took a couple steps away, then stopped and turned back. “Oh, and Nicole?”

“Yeah?”

He gestured to his head, to indicate his meaning, then gave an approving little nod. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Doc,” she said. At first every time she saw herself in the mirror it brought up memories of lethal little claws, but bit by bit in the last couple days she’d been replacing them with the sensation of Waverly’s fingers tangling in her hair. Replacing the look on Peter’s face with comments like Doc’s.

When she got to her desk, she had a text on her phone from Waverly.

_Hey, Friday you should come by the Homestead. Got a little surprise for you before work._

A surprise, it turned out, that involved a close-fitted blue top with logo letters across it and a skirt so short it ought to be criminal. If only so Nicole had an excuse to press Waverly to the wall and rumble half-hearted threats of handcuffs in her ear.

_Down, girl_, she thought, for the millionth time.

Waverly didn’t offer much of an explanation when Nicole walked in and stopped dead in the entryway. She didn’t say a word, just raised her eyebrow until Nicole reached back, blindly pawing for the door until she could get it to close behind her.

“Stay right there,” Waverly murmured, and Nicole tucked her thumbs into her belt to keep them safe, swallowing hard and standing where she’d been told to stand.

Waverly winked, tapped a button on her phone to start up some music, and picked up a pair of silvery-blue pom-poms.

And for about a minute, Nicole wasn’t sure how fast time was moving. She was hyper-aware of everything, every step, every skip, every flex and roll and snap. She—and the wolf too, if she were honest with herself—were watching in awe, their shared mouth hanging open.

Waverly ended the routine with a cheer, as if to remind them both what the premise of this whole thing was, but Nicole wasn’t even sure she’d registered what team it was for.

It took her another handful of seconds to realize that Waverly was watching her, grinning, and waiting for a response.

_“Wow,”_ she said, just to have said _something_, but it felt stupid even as it was coming out of her mouth.

Waverly bit at her lip and turned to stash the pom-poms on a chair.

“I– I didn’t know if it was your thing,” she hedged.

Nicole shook her head, trying to clear out thoughts (were they hers, or were they the wolf’s, she wasn’t sure and for the first time she was having trouble finding the line between them) of Waverly moving in a similar but distinctly different way somewhere a little more private and with less clothing involved.
“Uh,” she said, struggling for something at least vaguely eloquent to say. “Baby, that’s... that’s everybody’s thing.”

“Yeah?” Waverly said, grinning and tugging at the back of her skirt, looking so small and shy and vulnerable Nicole couldn’t tell if she wanted to reassure her or just pin her to the wall and eat her up.

Okay, that one was probably the wolf’s.

Maybe.

“Yeah,” she said, and looked down along the length of her girlfriend’s body again. In that outfit it was easy to remember how young Waverly was, how recently she might have been dancing in that uniform at Purgatory High games.

Which brought on a surge of jealousy and wolf-like possessiveness so violent and sudden that it almost knocked her over.

“Yeah,” she added, struggling not to growl audibly. “The cross-eyed hooligans at the Homecoming game are...” She forced herself to smile and swallowed down the acidic fury that was definitely only partially wolf, no matter how much she wanted to believe otherwise. “Gonna love it.”

“No, silly,” Waverly said, almost purring the words as she stepped closer, her hands brushing Nicole’s before sliding up to her elbows. “No, this is a private show. For you.” She let her mouth twist in a slight pout that made Nicole smile, mostly because they both knew it wasn’t totally genuine. “Before you have to go off on patrol.”

She was a little embarrassed to admit that the realization Waverly had no intention of putting on the uniform for anyone but her immediately soothed her. Even the wolf seemed satisfied with that as a compromise.

“Ah, well, Nedley figures the streets will be awash with booze and urine all weekend, so,” Nicole grinned and watched Waverly keep up the fake pout. “It’s all hands on deck.”

“Hm,” Waverly allowed, pretending to look thoughtful. “You guys need to get some more hands. So that yours can stay right here,” she said, sliding one hand up to curl around the back of Nicole’s neck, her fingers twining into her hair. “On me.”

It was a good thing Waverly’s mouth found hers in that next moment—it muffled the faint sound of desperation and need Nicole made against her lips. Waverly pulled back with a soft laugh.

“Okay,” she said, pulling back, and Nicole let her hands follow Waverly’s until she was out of reach. “Ready?”

No, but I sure don’t intend to stop you.

Waverly bobbed her hips back and tucked her hands together, and Nicole didn’t hear boots on the front porch or a hand on the doorknob until it was entirely too late. “Time for: one more cheer,” she chanted, and spun, launching into a high kick that showed Nicole that maybe the dance routine wasn’t the actual surprise Waverly had planned. “Come on boys, from here to there—!”

“Girl!” Wynonna shrieked, and Nicole leapt back a step, the rush of guilt, fear, and lust all mixing together into a confusing and dangerous cocktail as she tried not to look directly at the elder Earp. “Put on some underwear.”
“Hah. Wynonna,” Waverly said, her voice shaking with a mixture of guilt and embarrassment. “Hi,” she added, tugging at the hem of her skirt.

“Hullo,” Wynonna said. “Just. Passing through.” She turned and shut the door, and Nicole glanced to Waverly, looking for cues. “You guys can resume your... panty-less roleplay.”

“You know what,” Nicole said, a little too fast, “I gotta get to work. So.” She ducked around Wynonna and grabbed her coat. “You gonna come by?”

“Hanging from afar while my lady works?” Waverly asked, and clicked her tongue, miming finger guns. “That’s my jam.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, on a long, uncomfortable exhale. She looked to Wynonna, who glanced up at her and gave her an equally uncomfortable smile. “Yep,” she said, and promptly let herself outside. Waverly cast her a brief wink and she returned a somewhat guilty grin, then pulled the door shut with a click behind her.

“So, now that I know your whole situation,” she heard Wynonna saying, as she stepped off the front porch and beat a hasty retreat to her cruiser. “Should we institute a knickers-on-the-doorknob policy? Since you’re not using yours?”

Whoops.
Nedley stopped in the doorway between BBD’s door and the bullpen smelling like stress and burnt coffee. “Wynonna,” he said, as the Earp went to slip down the hall toward the kitchen. “Haught.” Nicole looked up, trying not to imagine her ears twitching up to listen like a German Shepherd’s. It was a week to the next moon, and the wolf was starting to get antsy again, more alert than it had been the week prior. “Got a scene for you.”

“Both of us?” Wynonna asked, almost whining.

Nicole rolled her eyes and gathered her gear, grabbing her coat as an afterthought. Most Purgatory SD officers don’t walk out into February without one, after all.

“Yes, both of you. School gymnasium. Earp, you’re riding with me.”

He headed out to the front doors and Wynonna shot Nicole a look that was two parts bored for every one part frustrated. Nicole shrugged, spreading her hands to indicate ‘hell if I know’ and headed out after him to her own cruiser.

It was a Friday, but the school administration had blocked off the hall in question, and the place was deserted, their footsteps echoing off lowest-bidder’s tile floors and interior brick. Hundreds of students’ hopes and dreams had come here to die, and she could feel it in the air as they walked inside—the ghosts of students past.

As soon as they entered, Nicole smelled blood, sweat, and fear, and for a moment she wasn’t sure if that was the crime scene or just high school. She thought of Shae, teenage werewolf, coming to terms with the changes and the advanced senses in a place like this, and Nicole almost felt a little bad for her. At least being bitten as an adult, she’d never had to deal with pubescent bullying, prom dates, and studying for midterms all while also resisting the urge to very literally bite off the faces of anyone who looked at you crosswise.

“Over here,” Nedley said, waving them in past the trophy case to where a man in his 20s was lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood, his bloodied hand resting on his chest holding what looked and smelled suspiciously like his own liver. His eyes were half-open, fixed on the central hockey championship trophy behind the glass, and there was an almost-empty bottle of whiskey sitting next to the case, as if he’d set it there before being attacked. Or... whatever it was that had happened to him. Even now, hours after he’d died, he stank of booze and blood and decay and drunken terror. She wrinkled up her nose as she pulled on gloves and moved to crouch beside him, carefully extracting his wallet from his pants pocket. Wynonna stood off to the side, munching on a donut and, as far as Nicole could tell, texting.

“I’ll check his ID,” she announced as she rose to her feet, flipping his wallet open.

Nedley looped around behind her, interrupting before she could even find the victim’s driver’s license.

“Bryce Cooper,” he noted. “Star right wing of the ’07 champs. The last Purgatory High School team to not only win the cup, but a single game.” He looked at Nicole. “I’m gonna pass this off.”

Nicole glanced past him, noting Wynonna still lounging against the brick. It was too far to the moon to blame her surliness on the wolf, but something about the whole situation chafed. Dolls’ reassurances and everything that had happened since the botched rescue mission had helped put to
rest her insecurities, but giving over a case to Lucado just because it smelled a little funny felt like giving up, somehow. Revenants or no, Purgatory crime was still Purgatory first.

“To Black Badge?” she asked. She frowned at Nedley, trying to figure out how to convey just because this seems unnatural doesn’t mean I can’t solve it to him without saying anything, well, particularly incriminating. “This is straight up homicide. It’s ours.”

“No,” he said, looking up at her for a moment before fixing his eyes back on Bryce Cooper. “We’ve got people coming home from all over for the game. This news gets out, it’ll be pandemonium. Just examine the scene, then scrub it.”

“You mean cover it up,” she said, shooting him an absolutely incredulous look. The thought she’d had weeks prior, that maybe Nedley was in on the supernatural and running interference to keep the normal folks from finding out, came back with friends.

“Tomato, potato,” he told her, and turned to Wynonna. “Earp?”

Wynonna snapped a few shots of the body on her phone, and with each one it made an absolutely gaudy shutter-clicking sound. She met Nicole’s eyes and smiled, indulgent, maybe a little smug, and at the sheriff’s direction, she headed for the door, snapping a few more shots on the way.

Nicole tapped the wallet against her hand, to quell the urge to chuck it at a wall, and set about gathering everything she could before calling in a team to move the body and wipe down the scene. She lingered, helping where she could, and let her mind wander as she worked.

That was a mistake—the wandering led her back a scene so horrifyingly similar to this, and yet so very different. A full moon’s day, now, what, a year ago? She and Shae had gotten separated sometime during the night. She’d woken up in the woods in the snow, alone, with long, brutal cuts across her chest, as if Shae’s wolf had taken a swing at her to put her in her place. When she’d found her way back to her clothes and her phone she found two texts: an SOS and a set of coordinates.

She’d arrived at a cabin in the woods. Shae was sitting on the front porch in a robe that wasn’t hers, picking at her teeth with a toothpick and waiting for Nicole.

The inside of the cabin was a nightmare. Blood was splattered on the walls and there was a half-eaten corpse of something Nicole had refused to let herself identify as human in one corner. Shae’s eyes were cold, but hiding a little fear as she followed Nicole inside and leaned against the wall.

I fucked up, she’d admitted. Will you help?

Shae hadn’t verbally threatened that she’d take Nicole down with her if Nicole didn’t help her, but there was a cruel, jagged edge to her request. Nicole had learned the hard way not to assume she understood Shae at all, and so she agreed, hating it every second.

It had taken her months to go anywhere near a bottle of bleach without the smell making her physically ill.

When the gym looked clean and smelled like ammonia and industrial disinfectants she nodded to the rest of the team, trashed her gloves with the rest of the medical waste, and headed back to her cruiser, feeling like a stormcloud in human skin. She headed back to the station and knocked on BBD’s door, the weight of three months of memories perching on her shoulders like crows.

“Oh... come in?”
Nicole let herself inside, the folder of notes and photos tucked under her arm, and then looked around, frowning around the room. She could only catch traces of Lucado’s scent—when was the last time she was even here?—and the Earps and Doc were in short supply as well.

Jeremy poked his head out from behind a filing cabinet. “Oh hey! Um. Over here, sorry.”

Nicole pressed her lips together and made her way across the room, noting the layout had changed substantially since the change in command.

“Hey,” Jeremy said, hastily stashing whatever he was working on and closing some folders to hide their contents. “You’re Officer Haught, right?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, trying not to roll her eyes as she did. “That’s me.”

“Oh,” Jeremy said, and motioned for the folder she was holding. “Is this that homicide thing we’re picking up?”

Nicole blinked, then looked around again. Wynonna had not been here since the day prior, and Nedley probably hadn’t been in here in weeks. So who the hell had told him BBD was going to pick up the case? “Yeah,” she said, slowly, and eyed him. “Didn’t think you left your little cave here.” He looked at her, tilting his head slightly, and she sighed, handing over the folder. “Vic’s Bryce Cooper.”

Jeremy nodded, taking the folder, and for a moment she thought his eyes unfocused, almost like he was listening to something far away. “Aha, the ’07 championship team, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, and this time she did roll her eyes. Did everyone know more about Purgatory’s one lucky year than she did? “Didn’t think you cared about sports, Jeremy.”

He beamed, like he hadn’t expected her to know his name. Oh if only you knew.

“Oh I don’t really care that much,” he admitted, “But it’s on the Purgatory High School website. Guess it was a good year, huh.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh huh,” he said, not really listening as he started flipping through the folder. He got to one of the photos and grimaced. “Yikes.”

“Yeah. Pretty ugly scene,” she said, leaning over to look at the photos in his hands. He was looking a little green, and she bit down the urge to smirk at him. “Field work not your cup of tea, huh?”

He pressed his mouth into a line and glanced up at her. “If that was everything, Officer Haught...?”

“Yeah, that’s all,” she said, and spun on her heel. “Have fun.”

“Note to self,” she heard Jeremy muttering as she headed for the door. “Ask Wynonna if Officer Haught is usually like that or if I need to be staying out of Waverly’s way for a few days.”

Security detail for the pre-game bash was not exactly high on Nicole’s bucket list, but even so, she found herself making idle loops of the room, generally being a visible peacekeeper presence as players, players’ families, and fans milled about, laughing and chatting and snacking on carnival fare. To think that just hours ago this place had been a grisly crime scene made Nicole’s stomach
churn, but at least with all the foot traffic and crowded halls, the place didn’t still stink of ammonia. Even for her, that might’ve been too much. And she really didn’t want to be here as it was.

Nor did her wolf, if the way it chafed and itched at her was any indication. Ever since the solstice crowds had not exactly been a favorite pastime for either of them, the wolf in particular, and it was coming to a head now. She kept to the walls, watching and making small talk only if someone singled her out for conversation.

Which is exactly what she’d been doing, when she heard the click of heels behind her and then felt a finger tapping her shoulder. She caught the scent of wildflowers and leather and turned around, smiling at Waverly. And promptly blinked, bewildered, as a blob of pink cotton candy smacked into her face.

“Boop!” Waverly said, grinning, and Nicole fought the wolf’s urge to sneeze and paw sugar off her nose.

“Waverly, um,” she said. There was a part of her that was 17 again, standing in a high school hallway with her girlfriend. That part really wanted to just haul her off into a broom closet and blow off work. The rest of her, the part that was 27 and had at least a lick of sense in her head, held Waverly at arm’s length and bit the rest down, offering her a slight smile as a consolation prize. “As we speak, Shorty’s crowd is staggering over here for sports-yelling and down-falling.” She scanned the crowd, and Waverly looked back also, her gaze focusing for a moment on the trophy case. “Look, baby, I’m off in a couple hours,” she said, more quietly. “Can’t you...” She looked for the words. “Entertain yourself?”

Waverly turned back around, her expression intense and almost frightening. She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Nicole to tangle fingers into the back of her jacket. She pinned Nicole at arm’s length and bit the rest down, offering her a slight smile as a consolation prize. “As we speak, Shorty’s crowd is staggering over here for sports-yelling and down-falling.” She scanned the crowd, and Waverly looked back also, her gaze focusing for a moment on the trophy case. “Look, baby, I’m off in a couple hours,” she said, more quietly. “Can’t you...” She looked for the words. “Entertain yourself?”

Waverly turned back around, her expression intense and almost frightening. She stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Nicole to tangle fingers into the back of her jacket. She pinned Nicole against a snack table, forcing Nicole to rock back on her hip and thus bringing her down to the same height. Nicole grabbed at her arms, but Waverly was surprisingly strong, her grip bruising. She tasted like lipstick and something awful, something dark and bitter and caustic that sent the wolf into a fury. It scratched and clawed at Nicole’s thoughts, wrestling free in tiny ways as Nicole tried to fight both the wolf and her girlfriend. Waverly’s tongue pressed against Nicole’s lips, demanding and unyielding, until she could lick along Nicole’s teeth and find the sharp edges of her fangs.

Nicole pushed her back, scrambling through her thoughts.

“Wave,” she whispered, frantic, angry, forcing the wolf back down. Nedley walked up in her peripheral vision and she wanted to curse the timing, curse the circumstances, curse everything. “Not in uniform, okay? Not in public.”

“Not good enough,” Waverly told her, sharp-edged and dismissive and so patently unlike Waverly it made her angry all over again. Nedley walked by them, feigning disinterest, and Nicole watched him, then looked to Waverly, searching for compassion, for some measure of understanding that would tell her Waverly understood what she’d just done.

Her gaze slid past Waverly to a young man, sitting on a bench. A couple of the Purgatory High cheerleaders were standing above and behind him, next to the trophy case, and he was smiling, his gaze unfocused as he held his phone back behind him.

The wolf was still howling rage and uncoordinated frustration in the back of her mind but she couldn’t bear to bring its strength against Waverly. She re-focused and strode past her to man on the bench, radiating anger and aggression.
“Hey,” she called, pulling up the mantle of a peace officer like a cape as she walked up in front of him. “Gimme your phone.”

“You must be new,” he drawled, and twisted his phone around to face Nicole instead.

“If I find upskirts on there,” she said, trailing the words off into a threat as Waverly slipped up beside her, wringing her hands.

“You might,” he said, and rose from the bench. He was a little taller than her, and the wolf snarled at it, that she had to look up to make eye contact with him. He flicked the phone in his hand to draw her attention. “Also the video of you and Waverly making out. I don’t think that’s allowed.”

“Okay,” Nicole bit out, reaching for her handcuffs.

“No, let him go,” Waverly said. “It’s not– It’s not worth it.”

“Excuse me?” Nicole said, and the effort not to growl at her girlfriend was downright Herculean.

“It’s Tucker,” Waverly explained. “He’s a Gardner.”

“I don’t care what he does,” Nicole snapped, for a moment genuinely not understanding what his career choice might have to do with avoiding arrest. She looked at the young man again—Tucker, who was grinning at them like their fight was the funniest thing he’d seen all day—and leaned forward. “Give me your damn phone.”

She reached for it and his fingers went slack. When she made contact he let it drop limply out of his hand to clatter on the floor.

“If that’s broken you’ll pay for it,” he said, with the ghost of a smile still dancing around his mouth like dust motes.

“Okay, you know what?” she snapped, and reached for his wrist again. “You’re under arrest for obstructing a peace officer.”

“What?” he said, raising his voice so that the crowd would hear him—building a case for himself, even now. “Why?” She shoved him around to get to his other wrist as he called out, unhurt but playing it up, “Ow. Ow!” She turned him around again and marched him toward the door. “She’s hurting me. Waverly!” he called, still in that even, almost bored tone.

“Nicole,” Waverly said, raising her voice to follow them without actually moving. “Nicole you don’t wanna do this!”

Nicole turned around with a snarl in her chest and fury on her face and barely, barely, managed to keep her voice to a human level.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job!”

Tucker complained and whined all the way to her cruiser, though he, thankfully, shut his mouth when they got into the car. He sat in the back, radiating smugness but wearing only a slight frown, as if this was little more than a mild inconvenience on his day.

Nedley found them as she was booking him, and she had never seen Nedley look so much like a disappointed father.

“Sit,” he commanded, pointing to a table. Against her preference, she sat.
And sat. And sat, waiting, as he made a phone call. She waited as he stood by the front desk until a woman in a frankly childish braid arrived. She waited as Nedley brought the woman into his office, chatting with her for a few minutes as he sifted through a desk drawer full of confiscated electronics. She strained, trying to listen, but it was mostly just apologies on Nedley’s part while the woman feigned patience and offered fake laughter.

When Nedley emerged from his office with a ring of keys, Nicole finally got up and went to his side, frowning. “Who is that?”

“Hm?” He looked up at her, still sifting through the keyring. “Oh, that’s one of Tucker’s older sisters, Beth Gardner.”

*Gardner, not gardener,* she thought, grumbling to herself.

“You’re letting her bail him out?” she asked, keeping her voice down but trying to inject her words with all the disapproval she could muster.

“There’s no *bail* required,” Nedley reminded her. “He’s not being charged.”

“Wha—!” she squeaked, following a step behind him as he headed for the holding cell. “He was taking photos of *teenage girls.* His phone was practically up their hoo-has.”

“Ooh!” Nedley exclaimed, shooting her a look of supreme disapproval. “*Language.*” She forced her mouth shut and stood still as he turned to look at her. “Nicole, you are a Sheriff’s deputy.” He sighed. “Not gonna win Cop of the Year, mind you, with that public display of *gal-pal-itis.*”

“I’m really sorry about Waverly,” she said, following behind him again as he went to unlock Tucker’s cell. “But those photos are—”

“Love the initiative,” Nedley told her, as she lingered at the doorway. “But the Gardners,” he said, and she suddenly remembered she was in a small town. A small town where a single wealthy family might start a legacy of corruption, even by mistake. “Tucker’s parents were good people,” he said, as he opened the cell door. As if that excused the derangements or the vices of a brat. Not quite mature enough to be a man, too old to be a child. “*Important* people to this town.” Nedley stepped back out of the room and Nicole thought that she heard self-loathing and disapproval in his voice as he offered, “Boys will be boys.”

“*Whoa,*” she gasped, moving to keep pace with him. “I’m sorry, did I...” She waved her hands, trying to capture the breadth of the stupidity she was facing. “*Hit my head,* and wake up in Patriarchal Bullshit Land?”

“No,” Nedley said, his tone betraying just the faintest trace of his sarcasm. “It looks fine to me.” In her peripheral vision she saw Tucker emerge from the holding cell, and Beth handed him his phone. “That reminds me though,” Nedley continued, his voice loud enough for the Gardners to hear. “The first aid kit needs restocking.”

Nicole bit down disbelieving, spluttering remarks about sexist nurse stereotypes as Tucker looked her up and down.

“I want her charged with harassment,” he told Beth.

“Oh you have not seen *harassment,*” Nicole muttered under her breath, earning another disapproving-dad look from Nedley.
“Such a nasty woman,” Tucker mused, as Beth led him around the two officers toward the door.

“I know, baby, I know,” Beth said, and Nicole had to suppress her gag reflex.

“Look,” Nedley said, as they moved out of earshot. “You cool your heels while you take a chunk out of those reports in there.”

“You’re putting me on paperwork?” Nicole protested.

“They’re the Gardners,” Nedley said, his tone brooking absolutely zero argument as he leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice. “Nicole, keep your head in the game,” he said, and for a moment she wondered if he was referring to her spontaneous trip out of town. Had she been off, since she got back? Maybe that was reasonable, but she couldn’t exactly request bereavement time for the 400-year-old vampire friend she’d known for less than a year, either. “You’ll learn how this town works,” he told her, turning aside. “It only took me 30 years.”

For a moment she just stood in the hallway, trying not to audibly growl.

Fine. If she was going to be saddled with paperwork, she’d do it. Even though she desperately wanted to claw something’s eyes out. The last thing she needed was coffee—more caffeine was probably not the answer here—but it would give her something to do. So she headed for the kitchen first.

And found Wynonna fiddling with the coffee machine, jabbing buttons.

“It’s probably out of water,” Nicole noted, pulling out the reservoir.

“One of the two ingredients in coffee?” Wynonna quipped. “That’s a fail.”

Nicole went to the sink, focusing on what she was doing. If she just could keep her brain on the tasks—turn on sink, fill tank, replace—she could keep her emotions out of play for a few minutes longer.

But Wynonna was still in the room. So all bets were off.

“Yes,” Wynonna noted, as if she needed to justify her presence in the station. She didn’t, she worked here, but maybe the silence bothered her. “Just came by to get some books for Waverly.” She patted her hands against the covers to prove it.

“So she wouldn’t have to come herself,” Nicole translated, and looked over her shoulder. “And risk running into me.”

Thoughts rushed back. Waverly, kissing her so hard it knocked her backward. Waverly’s mouth tasting of hate and ichor and way too much lipstick.

“Oh, I mean, she didn’t— didn’t say that, so...”

Fill tank. Shut off sink. Replace reservoir in coffee machine. Don’t think about Waverly, don’t think about whatever’s wrong with her, don’t think about any answers Mikael could have given dead and turned to dust along with him. Don’t think about how much she missed the sweet taste of Waverly’s kisses that weren’t saturated with toothpaste to cover up evil aftertastes.


“Wynonna,” Nicole said, and finally turned around. Wynonna pivoted back around to face her,
eyes narrowed. “Have you noticed any...” She searched for the words. “Like. Changes? In Waverly, lately?”

Wynonna’s expression could’ve curdled milk. She set the books down on the table and rested a hand on them. “Are you hoping for some?”

“No,” Nicole insisted, immediately. “It’s just um.” She looked around, then stepped closer, keeping her voice down. “Ever since Willa was... sent down, she’s been acting not-herself.”

“Hmm,” Wynonna said. “Well, one sister kills the other, might rattle your cage a bit.”

“No, of course,” Nicole said, trying to be gentle with the way she chose her words. “It’s just, what I really love about Waverly is...” She thought of Waverly’s voice, hard and edged with malice. Not good enough. “It’s like it’s sometimes missing. You know, the sweetness. And she’s become hard.” She frowned, looking away. “Cruel, almost. More like—”

“Like me?” Wynonna suggested, and scoffed.

The words died on the tip of her tongue. Like me. Moon-sick and ravenous and desperate for death and blood and all the things I can’t get.

“Is this because she kept you out of Black Badge?” Wynonna continued.

“You know what,” Nicole said, feeling hot and cold all at once. “Forget it.”

“I think we both know I won’t,” Wynonna said, snatching up the books and leaving the room.

“Awesome day,” Nicole growled, after she couldn’t hear the clicking of Wynonna’s heels in the hall. “Perfect.”
Chapter 38

True to her word, she sat at her desk and worked through a backlog of paperwork for Nedley.

For hours.

Sometime during that grinding monotony an officer came in with Skip Morgan to stash him in the drunk tank until his wife could come by to get him. Nicole had smelled him long before she saw him—whiskey and tequila and the sharp, coppery smell of drying blood—and shot the arresting officer an absolutely bewildered look when he frog-marched Skip in. The man was still in his Blue Devils sweater, though with the addition of a splotchy red stain roughly level with his stomach, and his left hand was coated in blood. There was a symbol drawn on his forehead that smelled—she sniffed at the air as he went by—like rabbit’s blood?

“Okay,” she muttered, as Skip mumbled and complained in slurred, disorganized sentences to his arresting officer, “This day just keeps getting more and more stupid.” As the officer walked by she nodded at Skip. “What’s his problem?”

“What isn’t,” the officer said with a chuckle, and handed over a few forms. “Sorry, no time to chat. It’s a madhouse out there. Got a call about the hockey team starting a brawl with an adult in the school halls again.”

She shook her head, but waved him on, flipping through the citation the officer had written. “Seriously?” she muttered, leaning back in her chair to look at Skip, who was sitting on the bench in the holding cell and muttering to himself, rubbing occasionally at the blood-mark on his head.

For a few minutes he was quiet, but then he got up again, leaning against the bars, hollering incoherently.

“I have to get out of here!”

“You stole a vehicle and ruined a perfectly good oak,” she reminded him, collating forms together. “While under the influence.”

“That tree came right at me!” he protested, smacking a hand into the bars for emphasis.

She leaned back in her chair so she could see him, trying not to roll her eyes. “Sure Skip. Okay.”

“Officer please,” he said, his tone shifting to something more earnest, not asking now but actually begging. “It’ll hurt my wife. Anyone near me.”

“Look, dude, the straw man argument?” she said, leaning back in her chair again. “Just. Is really not gonna work on me. So.”

He looked past her, his eyes wide and fear coming off him in palpable waves.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, as she flipped through the next case file.

She looked up as she finished a page and found him standing, stock still, his mouth hanging open slightly.

“Skip,” she called, frustration rising in her chest. “Are you gonna puke?”

He snapped his hand up, bloodied fingers trembling as if he were struggling against some great
“Skip,” she called again, and sniffed at the air. There was something else here, she thought. But it didn’t quite smell like one of the officers. Her wolf seemed... confused, searching just as much as she was.

Skip slammed his hand into his gut and screamed.

A voice came from behind her, hollow and decrepit, terrible and ancient and unthinkable.

“I come for what’s mine!”

Nicole looked over her shoulder to find the shadowy outline of a humanoid figure behind the frosted glass door. She leapt from her chair, yanking her sidearm up to follow, and locked it on the glass window.

“Hands on your head!” she shouted. “Now!”

The creature turned slightly, looking at her. She couldn’t make out features. There didn’t seem to be any hair, but it also didn’t seem to have ears.

“Move or die.”

She firmed up her grip on the gun, wishing she were not in the station, not in front of a civilian, because she really didn’t expect regular 9mms to do anything against whatever was behind the door.

But when it came down to it, she wasn’t just a werewolf, she was a cop.

“I am a Purgatory Sheriff’s Deputy,” she shouted, and kept her pistol trained on the figure as it moved from one door to another. “And if you think you can come in here in my office and mess with one of my citizens, you are underestimating the day I’ve had!”

The creature emerged into an open doorway and for the first time she got a good look at it. It seemed mostly in the shape of a human, but where its head should have been was just a burlap grain sack, with thick stitching across the dark hollows where its eyes and mouth should be. Insects crawled constantly in and out of the sack, buzzing and chirping as they crept along the surface of the creature’s face.

Demon scarecrow, she thought, somewhere in the back of her mind. Right.

It snapped up its hand to point at her with long, burlap fingers that ended in sharp pointed nails, and her wolf snarled in challenge... but she couldn’t move. She could feel its will, its power, curling around her body like strings, like the stitching that marked out its face, binding her in place. It wasn’t hellfire, not exactly, but it burned like ice, tearing into her and crawling into her soul like maggots and the wolf howled in fury and pain, the creature’s strength sapping out something of her, pulling at whatever made her... her.

The creature jerked its hand like a tennis player in a backhand swing and she flew backward, thrown bodily from the ground. Nicole tumbled across a table, knocking aside two boxes, and hit the floor behind it shoulder-first. She slid a few more feet on sheer momentum, tucking her head in close to her body to try to shield her skull with her arm.

It hurt to move, it hurt to breathe, and part of her wished she’d never come to Purgatory, because there was just so much here, there was so much going on, and she was a goddamn puppy in the pressure.
face of all this power being flung around like confetti by supernatural heavyweights.

She pushed herself up on her hands, panting, and peered out around the table to look at the creature.

“Oh,” she muttered, if only to fill the ominous silence with something comforting, specifically the sound of her own voice. “We did not cover this at the Academy.”

It growled as she stood, bracing her feet and reaching for her holster. She patted a hand across it, realizing her pistol had fallen elsewhere when she’d flown halfway across the room, and she tried to track distances, trying to guess how fast she could possibly move. If she shifted, could she reach the demon? Setting aside the possibility that Skip would see (and did it really matter, because chances were he was too drunk to remember anyway), she wasn’t sure she could reach it before it could attack her again.

Or maybe it didn’t even matter, because just as she was trying to gauge the speed she’d need to clear the table and engage with the creature, it grabbed her with its power again and pulled her to the right. She screamed and stumbled across the floor until she went head-first into Nedley’s office door, pulled about by the creature like she were a marionette and it some deranged puppet-master. The glass shattered around her, collapsing to the ground in huge shards, and she hit the floor again, grunting and growling as she struggled back to her hands and knees.

The creature moved toward her and she bared her fangs at it, hoping to at least give it pause, but if it noticed her challenge it ignored it, and came closer still, its burlap feet padding silently across the tile and the broken glass.

Her ears were still ringing, both with the demon’s low growling and the sound of glass shattering, and she didn’t hear footsteps coming, but a firearm boomed like a tiny cannon, and the demon jerked as a round slammed into its shoulder. It grunted, roaring, and threw itself into the next room, rolling over the counter as it went, and Doc stood in the doorway behind it, pulling the hammer back on his revolver to ready another shot.

Wynonna ran in behind him, lugging the giant hockey trophy from the gym, along with some man she recognized dimly as Perry Crofte.

“Are we too late?” Wynonna asked Doc, then her eyes lit on Nicole and she inhaled, sharp and genuinely alarmed. “You okay?”

“I had him,” she mumbled, dragging herself up to her feet on the table. “Right where I wanted him.”

“Where is he?” Wynonna asked, and Doc gestured with the revolver.

“Holed up.”

Crofte darted around the counter to the next room as Wynonna struggled after him.

“Hey! Perry! No!” she growled, sounding a bit like a mother chasing a toddler that had gotten loose with an uncapped sharpie.

“You sure can pick ‘em,” Doc noted, holstering his revolver.

“Shut up,” Wynonna groaned, going after Perry as Doc moved to grab Nicole’s arm, helping her along into the next room. She felt clumsy and a little cold, like she’d given blood. Like the demon had sapped out something vital and inherently her. The wolf grumbled, as if it were unconcerned by the damage, but simply impatient for recovery.
In general, she was inclined to agree.

Wynonna made her way to the BBD office door, still holding the trophy, with Doc and Nicole just behind her. She banged on the door with her free hand, shouting through the glass.

“Perry! Open the door! Let me in, dum-dum!” She turned back as Doc and Nicole caught up, frowning at them. “Where are the keys?”

“I’ve got this!” Perry shouted from the other side of the door, and Nicole leaned on Doc, fumbling through her utility belt to get to her keyring.

Beyond the door Perry was chanting, something old, something Nicole thought sounded vaguely reminiscent of Mikael talking to himself as he played poker, but different.

They burst in a few moments later, and Nicole was still leaning on Doc, getting increasingly frustrated with her sluggish recovery time. Wynonna stood a few steps behind Perry, frowning at him.

“What are you doing?”

“A spell,” he said, interrupting the chanting. “In Old High German... I think.”

Wynonna sighed. “Where’s Waverly when you need her.”

“I thought she was with you,” Nicole panted, a flash of fear running through her chest at the thought of Waverly on her own somewhere while this thing had been running around.

She refused to consider the other frightening thought that crossed her mind: what could Waverly be doing while alone and unsupervised.

The creature extended a hand toward Perry and Nicole growled in useless warning, the sound lost amidst the demon’s rumbling noises and Perry’s aborted incantation. Well. Mostly lost. Doc shot her an alarmed frown, even as he continued to hold her up.

Perry staggered back a couple steps, his hand turning inward, digging the talisman in his hand into his chest.

“Hey!” Wynonna lurched forward. “No! Mm-mm!” She held up the trophy, clearly trying to figure out how to do... whatever it was she was trying to do. Which with Wynonna, was a pretty mixed bag.

“Uh,” she said, motioning to the trophy in what could only be described as an after you gesture. “There’s no place like home!”

“I shall have my pound of flesh!” the demon roared, still clutching one hand to its injured shoulder. It waved its other hand, and Perry dug the talisman harder into his chest, screaming in pain.

“Deal’s off, homie,” Wynonna snapped, cocking the hammer back on Peacemaker.

“Wynonna!” Doc warned, even as the barrel of the Colt began to glow with orange sigils.

She hesitated, and the demon lowered its hand.

“Spare me, and I shall grant you what you most desire. Anything.”

Wynonna didn’t move, but Nicole thought her gun hand might have dropped half an inch.
“Doc, there are other demons.”

“And ours is dang near out of time,” Doc insisted.

Nicole looked up at him, confusion giving way to understanding, and then to alarm. *Dolls.*

“You know what I wish?” Wynonna said, a little more quietly, and finally lowered her gun. “I wish you’d get back in the *goddamn* trophy.”

Without another word the demon turned into a swarm of flies and swept back into the trophy. The tension on Perry’s arm lapsed and he jerked the talisman free of his chest, panting, but alive. Doc patted his arm, then turned away from him, helping Nicole keep her feet and holstering his revolver.

“You alright?” he asked, his voice soft, so soft she didn’t think even Wynonna would have heard. It was a remark meant only for her.

She grimaced and leaned back against the wall as Wynonna headed for the door, Perry only a few steps behind her.

“No,” she admitted, wincing. She fluttered a hand over her chest and shoulder, looking for where to put pressure to alleviate some of the lingering ache of the demon’s attack, but it wasn’t localized anywhere, it wasn’t precise. It was bone-deep. No, maybe soul-deep. “But I think it’ll pass.”

He looked her over and glanced aside to where Wynonna had let the door close behind them.

“Good. Sounds like I have got some things to get to lookin’ after, but you take care of yourself. That cough sounded pretty bad.”

She jerked her head down from the wall to look at him, chewing on the inside of her cheek. He didn’t seem to be pulling her leg or leading her along, but he was one of the Old West’s most famous gamblers... “Right. I’ll. Be sure to do that, Doc. Thanks.”

He nodded and slipped out to follow Wynonna, and she, after another minute of leaning against the wall and generally feeling sorry for herself, went back out to face the music.

And in particular, to roll up her sleeves and start cleaning up the bullpen.

Nedley found her a little while later with coffee in hand and a folder under his arm. She looked up when she heard his stride skip a step, and saw him pausing in the doorway, taking in the aftermath of the fight with an expression of mild alarm.

“Looks like you had a little trouble with the paperwork,” he mused.

“Look, I’ll clean up the mess,” she said, sweeping glass into a dustpan. “And file the report.”

He was quiet for a moment, then leaned down and offered her one of the coffees he was carrying.

“You wanna know how Purgatory really works?”

She looked up, surprised to see the cup hovering a foot from her head, and took it, gingerly pushing herself back upright, her whole body stiff and aching.

“Okay,” he said, and settled against the table as she dusted off her pants and tucked hair behind her ear. He let out a deep, tired sigh, which she echoed before she could really stop herself, and he met her gaze. “Everyone pretends the whole goddamn town isn’t overrun by demons.”
She knew her complete disappointment showed on her face, and she glared at him.

“That’s it?” she asked. “That’s the big secret?”

“The people who choose to live here,” he continued, as if she had not sassed him, “They want a simple life in a small town with a shitty hockey team and a view of the Rockies. And some of us feel that’s worth ignoring the occasional mermaid poltergeist.”

“Okay,” she said, almost laughing. “Yeah, now I’m– I’m sure. I’ve hit my head.”

“I sure hope not,” he said, watching her face. “You graduated top of your class in the big city, and I need someone smart to take over when I retire.”

She blinked at him, startled. “You... want me to be Sheriff?”

“Why do you think I worked so hard to recruit you?” he asked, and it occurred to her that while she had gone through her own back channels to get her name on Nedley’s desk, it had been surprisingly easy to get hired once she did. Maybe it wasn’t just luck or Purgatory being desperate. Maybe Nedley had actually wanted her. Really wanted her.

“Look,” he continued. “I know that Black Badge seems like a hot-shit covert operation.”

“And they don’t have to wear khakis,” she pointed out, mostly to cover up her moment of hesitation. Well. That and she was really tired of trying to wash blood out of tan pants. Being a werewolf and a Purgatory cop both seemed to invite an awful lot of contact with massive blood loss, whether it was hers or someone else’s.

“But who’s gonna keep the drunks off the road?” he asked, and she shut her mouth. “Who will referee the neighborhood feuds? Who will keep the ordinary, everyday, non- werewolf citizens of Purgatory safe, Officer Haught?”

She froze, and for a second she would’ve sworn even her wolf was holding its breath. But he just watched her, waiting, and she realized he was actually expecting an answer.

“We... we need more manpower, okay?” she told him. “And we have– we’ve gotta work with BBD to stop pretending there is nothing paranormal goin’ on around here.”

He sighed. “Okay. You got permission to intervene on the wacky stuff when it’s necessary. The Lord knows they could use your instincts.”

She eyed him for a moment, and decided to press her luck.

“And the khakis?”

He sniffed. “They’re a classic trouser.”

She glowered at him.

“Fine. Fine. Just... be a good cop. It matters.”

She nodded. “Yeah,” she said, her voice coming out hoarse and a bit too thin. “Yes,” she said, more firmly. “It does.”

“And Nicole,” he said, and took the folder out from under his arm, handing it to her. She eyed the cover, noting Tucker’s name. “It’s called a long game. I’ve been playing one for a while.”
Something like glee and vicious excitement for the hunt coiled in her chest, but that got her thinking. Nedley started toward his office, but she turned to him, clearing her throat.

“Uh. Sir.”

He turned, sipping his coffee. “Hm.”


“I remember.”

“We...” She hesitated, looking for words. “Purgatory, I mean. Do we have any?”

“A few.” Nedley noted, leaning against the frame of his door, his expression turning thoughtful. “Ten, maybe twelve years ago we had this young couple. Nice folks. Lived out in the suburbs.”

“Oh,” she said, trying for conversational and ending up with something strained and palpably uncomfortable.

“They weren’t here too long though. Skipped town after a few years. Think they had family up in Winnipeg.”

“Oh,” she said again, and this time might have sounded a bit disappointed.

“Been a while,” he said. “Haven’t thought about them in years.” He shook his head. “Now we’ve just got the one.”

A chill swept into her gut like a winter breeze sneaking in through a cracked window.

“Oh?” she said, her voice squeaking just a little. “Which one’s that?”

He smiled, and so fast she almost missed it, he winked, raising his coffee cup to his lips.

“Just the one that can’t take night shifts for me once a month.”

Thoughts raced through her mind like rabbits—the surprising ease of making schedule requests, Nedley’s efforts to keep her away from BBD, even the way he looked at her now and then when she was getting particularly agitated and growl-y.

“But, sir.”

“Hm?”

“You...” She stepped a little closer, glancing around even though she knew no one was anywhere nearby. “You know? And you still— you still want me to be sheriff.”

He looked at her, reading her face for a moment. Whatever he saw made up his mind, because he sighed and looked her in the eye.

“Like I said, I need somebody smart, and I need somebody reliable, and I need somebody who’s a damn good cop.” Her eyes burned and she looked down, and she could feel the moment the wolf’s opinion of Nedley switched from potential inconvenience to pack. “Maybe I’m just some small-town sheriff, but I know smart, reliable, and good cop when I see one. I don’t care about the rest.”

She nodded, clearing her throat when it was too tight to speak.
“Okay,” she said.

“Go on, Haught. I’ll see you tomorrow. And we’ll talk about the khakis.”

She grinned, and ducked her head. “Yes sir.”

“I think I’m going crazy.”

Nicole stiffened, fingers stalling where they were stroking through Waverly’s hair. They were curled up on her couch together, Waverly lying on top so that her head was resting on Nicole’s chest, their legs twined together and Nicole’s arms looped around Waverly’s shoulders. It was one of Waverly’s favorite positions to be in, because it let her listen to Nicole’s heartbeat.

She wasn’t sure why, but sitting that way, with Waverly’s warm body weighing her down... it pushed the lingering ache of the demon’s attack away, the simple contact a balm on Nicole’s very soul.

“How do you say that, baby.”

Waverly sighed and shook her head, the gesture tucking her nose in against Nicole’s shirt. “I dunno, I just... I’m losing time. Like there’s holes in my memory, as if I was asleep, and I’ll wake up somewhere else, in the middle of doing something.”

Nicole thought of the coffee left on her counter, thought of Waverly being so aggressive at the school, but said nothing. She curled her hand around the back of Waverly’s neck, warm and solid, a reminder that she was there.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” Her voice cracked. “I don’t even remember filling out the forms you gave me but they’re gone too, like, I must’ve mailed them? I’ve even got the receipt from the post office but... I don’t remember doing it.”

Nicole sighed and kissed the top of her head, thinking. She hadn’t thought about the forms. The whole not-an-Earp thing shouldn’t have changed her taste, she didn’t think, but then again, how much did she really know about the connection between that and a person’s health? Mental health was still health—wasn’t it possible that these weird fugue states were causing biological changes? Or vice versa. No one else would have noticed. It was just a fluke that Nicole could pick up on them. Maybe that’s all that was off?

Now that she thought about it in those terms, that could explain a lot. The wolf felt irritated, unconvincing, but without verbal communication, they couldn’t do much more than grumble and growl at each other.

“Maybe it’s just stress,” she suggested. “I mean, you’ve been through so much in the last two months, Waves. Willa, and... and Bobo, and everything with Black Badge. Maybe it’s just too much.”

“Yeah,” Waverly whispered, and sighed. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Tell you what,” Nicole said, and leaned her head back, twisting to look at Waverly’s face, waiting until she looked up. “Let’s get out of the Triangle for a bit. Soon. Just, like, a weekend trip or something.”

“Nicole, the full moon’s like. This coming weekend.”
Nicole wrinkled her nose. “Shit. Okay, well, the weekend after. How’s that sound. We can get out of here for a while, just... hit the road. You and me. Go somewhere nice, and just not be.” She waved a hand. “Here. In the thick of everything. Just for a bit.”

Waverly’s expression softened, a small smile curling her mouth.

“That sounds nice.”

“Yeah?” Nicole said, smiling.

“Yeah.”

“Want me to plan it?” Nicole said, teasing, and Waverly slapped her hand gently against the side of Nicole’s face.

“Oh shut up!” Still, it got her laughing. “I’m never going to live that down, am I.”

“Nope,” Nicole chirped, and slid a finger under her chin, pulling Waverly up to kiss her.

Waverly didn’t stay long, maybe only till 11, since Wynonna was expecting her back at the Homestead. After she left, Nicole went about tidying up her home and getting ready for bed, but just as she was heading toward her hallway, she heard a soft scraping sound, like a window being wedged open. She turned, frowning, and surveyed her living room, sniffing at the air. She didn’t smell anything out of the ordinary at first, but just as she took a step, following the sound of a cold breeze where it was leaking in through a window, she realized what she was smelling. It was the absence of scent, a hole in reality where she couldn’t smell anything at all—something actively, and presumably magically, blocking her senses.

“Who’s—” she shouted, but was interrupted when something small, maybe about the size of one of her fingers, hit her solidly in the neck. She cursed and yanked it out, but even as she examined the tiny cylindrical syringe and the short needle extending from it, her vision was blurring. She was dimly aware of her knees hitting the ground, and then she flopped to her side, the dart rolling away from her fingers.

“Shit,” she mumbled, as two pairs of heavy boots moved across her living room floor. A blurry man-shaped blob leaned down and rolled her onto her back, sticking something into her mouth, maybe to make sure she didn’t choke on her own tongue. His cufflinks glinted under the lights, and it was the last thing she saw before a dark hood was pulled over her head.

“Should’ve had a Rottweiler ‘stead of a cat,” she slurred, and the man in the suit made a faint noise that she thought was a stifled laugh.

“Let’s move,” someone said, and several hands hefted her up off the floor so that she was vaguely upright on her feet. They half-walked, half-carried her outside, and she finally really lost track of what was going on when she was placed in the back of a car, her head lolling back against a seat cushion.

“Drive,” said a rough, low voice, and then she let her mind drift off.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

I made a point of calling out the violence in the Dolls chapter but here, again, like. If y'all are here with me so far I figure you're on board for some blood and agony, but, fyi, there's some more in here today. Love and kisses~

“She’s waking up.”

To accelerate the process a bucket of water was poured over the top of her head, and Nicole coughed and spluttered, squinting through rivulets of cool water dripping down across her eyes. The room she was in was fairly large, the distant walls layered with soundproofing that dulled the thumping sound of club music. In keeping with the theme, the space was lit with a scant handful of red lights, leaving much of the room in shadow. Nicole looked around, becoming aware that she was sitting in a chair, her hands tied together behind her back. She tugged at the bindings once, then a second time with more of her strength, but even with the wolf’s help she couldn’t get the metal cuffs to budge.

Nicole forced herself to settle, to calm. Panicking wouldn’t help. She needed to know more. For one, she needed to know how much time had passed. She looked around again, for anything out of place, then closed her eyes, breathing in deep gulps of air. It smelled stale, unused. A storage room, maybe? She could smell humans standing behind her, two, in rich suits and leather shoes that stank of high-end boot polish.

She also smelled blood. Not strong, not like someone was bleeding, but still cloying and noticeable.

Nicole let her vision tint gold, let the shadows quail back from her improved sight, and caught the silhouette of a woman just beyond the edge of the furthest lamp. A vision of loveliness, all slink and saunter.

Loretta von Holstein stepped into the light. This time she wore a tight black skirt that stopped just above her knees and a crimson blouse that was missing half its buttons. The outfit left a generous portion of her chest and her long, svelte legs on display, her creamy white skin and long blonde curls more at home on a runway than in a storage room of a nightclub.

Fear—real, honest fear—curled up in Nicole’s chest like a cat around a favorite toy.

“Lady von Holstein,” she said, shifting in her chair again. She was suddenly glad she hadn’t actually changed into pajamas yet—the last thing she needed was to be dragged before Loretta in a tank top and old sweats.

As it was, barefoot and wearing jeans and a plaid shirt that had seen better days, both of which were now sticking to her and dripping with water, did not exactly a befitting outfit make. She shook her head, trying to flick sopping wet hair out of her face.

“How good of you to accept my invitation,” Loretta said, her voice a purr that was as much sultry heat as it was lethal threat.
Nicole gritted her teeth and turned her head, finding two men in suits standing a few meters behind her. One of them smirked at her.

“Yeah,” Nicole muttered. “I guess Evites aren’t really your style.”

“I would have come in person,” Loretta mused, twirling her long fingers through the air as she spoke. “But, well. That pesky sanctuary keeps me out.” She gestured to the men standing behind Nicole. “My pets, though. They suffer no such restrictions.”

“I see,” Nicole noted, trying to maintain an air of courtesy. “Lady Loretta. Please. Let’s just, uh, talk. Ideally without the, you know.” She struggled against the cuffs so that the metal jangled and clinked to illustrate her point.

Loretta moved, so fast Nicole almost didn’t see it. One second she was at the far edge of the light, then she was right in front of Nicole’s knees. She didn’t touch Nicole, perhaps didn’t deign to make physical contact with a lowly *werewolf*, but she didn’t have to. The raw force of her will, her anger, her innate power, was as strong and as crippling as if the furious vampire had wrapped her cold pale fingers around Nicole’s throat. She felt like she couldn’t breathe, like Loretta’s will was bearing down on her, pinning her into the chair. She felt, irrationally, incomprehensibly, like a butterfly pinned into a frame, on display and vulnerable.

“Do not play at parley with me, moonsinger,” Loretta said. She sneered, her lip pulling back from her teeth, baring long, pearlescent fangs. Nicole and her wolf both pulled back, as much as they could under the weight of Loretta’s strength, until she was pressed back against the chair, trying to hide in it. “I will not hear it. Not from your *ruinous* mouth.”

“Lady Loretta, *please,*” Nicole said, her eyes searching Loretta’s. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I was going to, I swear—!”

Loretta slapped her, letting her nails slash red lines open across the side of Nicole’s face. For a moment, she was surprised that Loretta had actually touched her, had actually struck her herself instead of having one of her goons do it. But it occurred to her, a moment after, that if one of the goons did it, Nicole would heal. If Shae and the demons she’d fought were any indicator of pattern, Loretta’s attacks would be worth a lot more than anything one of her human pets could dish out.

“Do not dare to come into *my* presence,” Loretta hissed, “And make excuses.”

“Please,” Nicole said, and the wolf surged in her thoughts, not angry, but protective. Fur grew in little tufts at the sides of her face, along her hands, and along her arms beneath her shirt sleeves. “I had no idea they had gotten to him until I got to the Night Mare’s home. Loretta, you have to believe me.”

“You are the one who led the demon’s Watchers to Purgatory. You are the one who involved *my* brother in your family’s petty feuds!” She grabbed Nicole’s hair and yanked her head back, forcing Nicole to bare her throat, and for a single, terrifying moment Nicole was sure Loretta was about to bite her. “And it is *you* and your friends who released the demon’s fell wives to stalk the Triangle. If you had not dragged my brother into that hellscape, he would still be alive!”

Nicole’s throat worked, searching for words. They came to the tip of her tongue, and stalled. Mikael was the one who chose to help. It was Mikael who had consulted ancient texts, who had gone out seeking the Night Mare’s prophecies. It had been *his* choice to help Nicole. His choice to help her escape Shae, to help her hide from her family’s cult, to help her enter the Triangle and make Purgatory her home. He had chosen for himself at every step.
But when she searched for blame, for denial, she couldn’t find it. She was the one who had asked him for help. She was the one who had called him with the issues that she ran into in the Triangle. She was the one he’d put his neck out for. She let Loretta hold her head back, her vision blurring as tears burned in her eyes.

“I know,” she whispered, more to the ceiling than to Loretta.

“No. You don’t,” Loretta spat, leaning closer. Her breath came in hot gusts against Nicole’s neck and she shuddered at the sensation. “You have no idea. Your feeble mind cannot even grasp the scale of what has been lost. Can you even attempt to imagine it? The worlds we saw together? The empires that rose and fell as we danced across the ashes of history? The people we knew? The places we saw, the moments we shared? Four hundred years. Four hundred years, thrown away for a wolf.”

“I’m sorry,” Nicole whispered, sucking in a breath that wanted desperately to turn into a sob. “Loretta, I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, shh, shh, darling. You have to make me believe it,” Loretta said, and released some of the pressure on Nicole’s hair, letting her head tip forward slightly. Loretta’s eyes found hers, glinting dangerous and mad in the dark. Lithe fingers found the buttons of her shirt, and began slowly undoing them. Nicole blinked, looking down as Loretta opened her shirt, pushing the wet cloth down off her shoulders until it gathered around her elbows. Loretta reached behind her back, but as Nicole tried to see what Loretta had picked up, the vampire held her gaze, twisting the hand in Nicole’s hair to keep her from looking down.

“Convince me. That you understand.”

Nicole barely had time to process the threat for what it was before Loretta had moved again, dragging a small, short blade across Nicole’s bare chest with exaggerated slowness, the blade lingering a centimeter deep within her skin. Silver seared across her senses, burning along every inch of the cut, and she howled, the shock of it forcing the wolf’s voice out through her mouth.

Loretta pulled the knife out again and Nicole sagged against the chair, gulping in breaths of air. The silver burned even after it was gone, but the cut was so shallow that it was bearable. She yanked her head up, her vision golden, her fangs digging into her lips as she struggled to speak. The wolf was struggling, pushing against the imagined wall between them, and she had the oddest sensation it was trying to wrap its paws around her and shelter her under itself.

“Loretta, please. This won’t bring him back.”

Loretta cut at her again, leaving a mirrored line across the left side of her chest, from her collarbone to the edge of her bra, and Nicole screamed. Her cuffs jangled as she writhed and thrashed, trying to get away from the knife. Loretta set the blade flat against her stomach, letting the silver burn her skin, and curled her free hand around Nicole’s throat, squeezing. Nicole couldn’t tell the difference between the sensations—her skin burned where the silver touched it, and her lungs burned with lack of oxygen, struggling to inhale. Loretta kept the blade there for what felt like an age, and then it was gone, and so was her hand, and Nicole coughed, wheezing in desperate, frantic breaths.

“You have no idea what this world lost when you allowed my brother to oppose the Watchers,” Loretta said, her voice calm. Casual, even. She might as well have been talking about the stock market. “When you allowed the Night Mare to be drawn into this web of terror and despair. The Night Mare, a centaur older than the fall of Rome, and my brother, slain, and yet here you are. Alive.”
“You say that like I got out easy,” Nicole bit out, between desperate, ragged breaths. It hurt to speak, her throat aching. She could still feel the phantoms of Loretta’s fingers crushing her windpipe. “You say that like I don’t care that Mikael is dead.”

“You?” She laughed. “You mourn like a dog when its master is gone. You are transient. A speck on a timeline that even my kind can only hope to master.”

Loretta raised the knife and slammed it down into Nicole’s thigh, scraping bone, and Nicole screamed, her voice hoarse from overuse, cracking and splintering like dry wood. For a heartbeat, then two, then three, Loretta left the knife in her, fire scorching across every inch of the entry wound and the blade where it was buried into her muscle. Then Loretta pulled it back out, languid, slow. She released Nicole’s hair and her head slumped forward. She sobbed, too tired to care or feel any shame for it. Pain licked through her whole body, the silver eating at her body and her wolf’s resolve.

“Hm.”

Nicole lifted her head, feeling very much like it was made of lead, and watched as Loretta eyed the blade, licked the edge, and smacked her lips once. Nicole hung her head again, and missed Loretta gesturing to one of the goons.

“Chin up, dog,” Loretta said, and Nicole struggled to look up again. She was holding another bucket of water, and just as Nicole dragged her eyes up to the level of Loretta’s shoulders, the woman splashed the bucket against her, letting it splatter over her lap and her bare chest.

She’d only encountered moonwater once, when Shae was trying to prove a point, but the sensation was hard to forget. It felt so cold it burned, made her teeth chatter and her fur stand on end, the sterilizing feeling of it chasing away the silver burn. It left a hollow emptiness in its wake, like a lake after a storm’s finally moved out of range. Like the silence that follows an earthquake. It felt like aftermath. It ached, and it probably would for a few more days, but at least she didn’t feel quite so much like she wanted to die.

“Why?” she asked, feeling sluggish and slow-witted with the pain.

Loretta leaned forward, her face very close to Nicole’s.

“Why what, why offer a balm?” With effort Nicole nodded her head. “Because no matter how much I hate you, my brother loved you,” she said. “We are even now, shifter. Do not speak to me. Do not seek me out. If you come anywhere near me or one of my clubs again, I will kill you and mail what’s left of you back to your precious little girlfriend in a martini glass. Have I made myself clear.”

Nicole inhaled, and even the wolf was quiet, almost meek.

“Yes, Lady.”

“Good,” Loretta said, dropping back to a business-like, matter of fact tone. “Luke, darling, won’t you unlock this wretch and take her home. Samuel, a towel please. Let’s not have her bleeding and dripping all over the car.”

The goons sprang into motion like clockwork dolls, and within a few seconds the cuffs had been unlocked from her wrists. She was promptly wrapped up in a towel and ushered away, and she didn’t spare a glance back at Loretta. She didn’t really feel like finding out the hard way that Loretta’s command took effect immediately.
She was not hooded for the ride back to Purgatory, thankfully. She checked her phone, alarmed to find that it was about 2 in the morning on Monday. She’d been gone more than 48 hours.

“Hey,” she said, though it lacked some of the venom she was hoping for, since she was slumped in the back of a sedan, her head resting on the window. The driver grunted, to let her know he was listening. “I’ve been gone two days?”

“Your employer was contacted,” he reported, sounding bored. “Death in the family.”

She fiddled with her phone and found an email from Nedley. It was written the way only a 50+ father would write an email, mostly talking about paid time off and an offer to check on Calamity Jane for her, but even through the filter of bad letter-writing she recognized that he was concerned, both by her sudden disappearance and by whatever he’d been told by Loretta’s goons. Nicole knew he was aware she wasn’t on good terms with her family, so there was no way he wouldn’t have thought that explanation was fishy. Rather than his usual signoff he ended his email with a single message: Will move if I don’t hear from you for 36.

Apparently hers weren’t the only instincts BBD needed.

Nicole debated replying to his email, then decided he’d mistrust something so easily faked. She’d call in the morning.

She spent the rest of the drive back to Purgatory trying to figure out how to phrase a text to Waverly to let her know what had happened, but in the end, she decided not to say anything. If this whole weird behavior thing was just stress, the last thing she needed was for Nicole to add more on.

Besides. This Loretta thing was resolved now. No point dredging it up.

Right?

Loretta’s men dropped her off at her house, and as she started up the front walk, she frowned, sensing... something. She turned around as the goon squad left her driveway, and found a red sedan she didn’t recognize sitting on the other side of the road. She tilted her head, frowning at the out-of-place vehicle, and a moment later, the driver-side door opened. Doc stepped out, shutting the door behind him and crossing the street, dipping his head in greeting.

“Nedley?” she asked.

“Indeed,” he said, and tucked his hands into his pockets. “The Sheriff asked me to keep an eye on your place, just in case.”

“Surprised Wynonna was okay with that,” she said, and rubbed a hand down her face.

“Oh she does not know,” he said, with an easy grin. “Sheriff figured she and Waverly would go all rampagin’ angel on the issue if they found out before he was sure it was something you could not handle.” She grunted, satisfied with Nedley’s assessment. “Nicole,” Doc said, his voice turning pensive. “I suppose I do not know much about modern funerals, but I am reasonably certain they do not involve knife-fights. And I should think most folks do not go to them barefoot.”

She blinked, then looked down at herself. She hadn’t had the energy to close her shirt, and besides which, the left thigh of her jeans was soaked in blood, standing out starkly in the glare of a nearby street lamp. Truth be told she didn’t have the energy for it now either, but she had to do something.
“Oh,” she said, and frowned. “Right. Maybe... you should come inside.”

“I believe I shall,” he said, and followed her as she led him indoors. Her door, she found, had been left unlocked—just as well, since she hadn’t exactly had her keys when she was taken—and she waved a hand for him to follow her. She headed for her bathroom, fishing out her first aid kit, and set about cleaning herself up. The moonwater had helped clear out the worst of the silver, but her wolf was noticeably lethargic, and it would take hours, maybe even a whole day, before it could start healing with any real power.

“Fuckin’ vampires,” she muttered under her breath as she dabbed hydrogen peroxide on her chest and hissed at the burn of it.

“Beg your pardon?” Doc asked, leaning against the wall so that he could hear but not see her. The man sure did put a lot of stock in propriety.

She heaved a sigh and lay gauze down over the mirrored cuts, taping them in place.

“Doc, it’s... probably time I tell you something.”

“Oh I reckon so, grandmother.”

She blinked and leaned her head out through the doorway. “Uh. What?”

He grinned at her. “I may have been down in a well for a hundred-some years, Nicole, but I feel I should remind you that Little Red Riding Hood is an old, old story.”

She cleared her throat and ducked back into the bathroom, reaching for aloe for the burn on her stomach.

“Right. Um. Well, then, I guess... do you have any questions?”

“Not too many,” he mused. “I presume the Earps already know, given some things they have done and said, and Dolls too, seein’ as while he may be an asshole, he is a clever asshole, and I figure he would have had you pegged for a good while now.”

“Correct on all counts,” she said, and stripped out of her jeans to treat the deeper wound on her leg.

“Which,” he continued, “Tells me that you are not the grandmother-eatin’ variety of wolf, elsewise neither Dolls nor Wynonna would abide you wanderin’ ‘round Purgatory as you are.”

“No,” she said, and snorted a laugh that turned into a pained hiss as she wrapped up her thigh. “No grandmothers for me.”

“It has taken me a good long while to give any of my trust to the Earps,” Doc admitted, waiting as she put on a pair of sweats. She hung her drying shirt up over the shower rod, slipping into an old t-shirt instead. “But I do trust them, and their judgement. Waverly’s in particular.” He met her eye when she re-emerged from her bathroom, and he stood away from the wall, filling the hallway. She looked at him, really looked at him, and saw, maybe for the first time, that he was a lot more than just an Old West gambler and pistolero transplanted into modern day by a fluke. He was lean, scrappy, and while he talked a good game of only looking out for his own skin, there was good in him. The kind that was liable to get him killed protecting someone he deemed one of his.

It was a little like looking into a mirror, really.

“So if Waverly believes that you are one of the good hounds, well.” He winked. “Then I will put
out some steak for ya and call it good.”

She ducked her head, trying to hide a chuckle. “Thank you. Just... so long as Lucado doesn’t find out.”

Doc grinned and offered her his hand to shake. “Oh trust me, Nicole, if a day comes that I tell Lucado somethin’ she actually would want to know, hell will freeze right up.”
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Nicole woke up Monday morning, her wolf felt... well, the only way to put it was “passed the fuck out in the back of her mind.” Her face mostly just looked like maybe Calamity Jane had gotten particularly exuberant asking for breakfast and when she checked the cuts on her chest, it looked like she was healing at a rate you would expect from a human. Which was about what she’d expected, but still a little bit frustrating. There was visible bruising on her neck where Loretta had choked her, which took a few extra minutes and a healthy amount of concealer to hide before she changed the bandages and dressed for work.

She shot a text to Waverly to say hello, which got a muted, idle hey in response after a couple minutes. Nothing else, though. She frowned, but decided not to push it, and headed in a little early so she could check in with the sheriff before her shift started.

If she hadn’t already known Nedley cared, the blatant relief on his face would’ve reassured her. She smiled a little as she shut his door (with newly replaced glass) behind her, and sat across from his desk. His gaze tracked her as she sat down, noticing when she winced, the wound on her thigh aching at the use.

“Death in the family, huh.”

She grimaced. “Someone’s idea of a joke, I think. Sir, I’m—”

“Uh-uh,” he said, raising a hand, “I don’t need to hear it, so I don’t want to hear it. All I need to know is if it’s gonna happen again and if I should be concerned.”

She gave him a thin little smile and ducked her head. “No, and no. One-time deal. It’s been resolved.” For a moment he just watched her, and she raised her hands. “No, um. Not like that. Just. She’s said her piece. So.”

“Good,” he said, and nodded. “G’awn then, git.”

She grinned and let herself out of the office, and for a few hours, she just worked, like a normal person, doing a normal job. With a normal lunch schedule.

She went to the kitchen on instinct, but having been gone for two days, the only thing she had in the station fridge was a box of microwaveable pizza that bore a post-it with her name on it.

“What?” she muttered, looking the box over. She didn’t remember buying it. She sniffed at the box, but she didn’t smell anything terribly wrong about it. Though, then again, her wolf was still so out of it she wasn’t really able to use its senses. Just for a second she smelled jasmine, like Shae’s perfume, but the scent was gone as soon as she thought it, and she made a face. There was a tiny part of her that wanted to believe it had been Shae, planting some kind of poison or... something. Trouble is, the human mind is so damn open to suggestion. All it would take is the idea.

When the microwave beeped she pulled a bit of the cheese off with her fingers, taste-testing it, and wrinkled up her nose. She heard footsteps in the kitchen, though she’d heard nothing ahead of time in the hall. It was weird, having human senses again. Nice, but weird. She hadn’t realized just how much she’d been using them lately. More than that: she hadn’t realized how much she’d been relying on them.
“Dude,” Wynonna said, disapproving, and leaned over to eye the plate. “That s’posed to resemble a pizza?”

Nicole turned around, paper towel in hand, and chuckled. “Yeah, it gets worse. It’s gluten-free.”

Wynonna set a mug next to the coffee-maker and tapped idle, nervous fingers across the top. “I’m sorry.”

“Eh, it’s okay,” Nicole said, eyeing the pizza with renewed skepticism. “It *almost* tastes like real cheese.”

“No,” Wynonna said, and sighed. “I’m. Sorry. That *weirdness* in Waverly, you were trying to...” Nicole sobered, concerned. If it was bad enough Wynonna was noticing, it must be getting worse. The weekend after the full moon couldn’t come fast enough. “Yeah. Kinda finally noticing now,” Wynonna said, pouring coffee.

She thought of Waverly’s voice, cracking and afraid, and of forms in the mail to a handful of government agencies.

“I can’t betray her trust,” Nicole said.

“I.” Wynonna shrugged, reaching for the cup of sugar. “I would never ask you to.”

“But,” Nicole said, weighing her words. “Yeah. Waverly is... struggling a little with. Who she is.”

“That struggle is gonna get her hurt,” Wynonna said, and Nicole frowned. “I mean, going undercover for Lucado?”

Nicole’s eyes widened and she leaned closer, setting her hands on the table. “What?”

“Mmhmm,” Wynonna said, shaking her head. “Not to mention the... the short decisions, rash tempers, sleepwalking...” She scanned the table, then moved to the counter, opening drawers.

“Sleepwalking?” Nicole echoed, turning to keep Wynonna in her line of sight. “In the winter. From Ms. Four Blankets, *Plus* a Bonus Blankie.”

“This morning, there she was,” Wynonna said, waving her hands for emphasis. “Traipsing through the snow in nothing but a nightgown.”

Nicole frowned, adding that to her own tally of weird things she’d seen Waverly do. For a second she actually reached across the mental barriers that separated her and the wolf, looking for its weigh-in on the issue, but it was too lethargic and unfocused to understand the question. Frustrated, she grabbed the pizza and headed for the door. She needed to start writing this all down, try to piece things together the old-fashioned way.

“Look, I’d *maim a duck* for a spoon right now,” Wynonna said.

“Oh, yeah, good luck,” Nicole said, turning when she was almost to the door. “All of the cutlery has gone missing, *including* the fork with only one tine.”

Wynonna’s expression went a little blank, like she’d just put something together, and she reached into her coat pocket, producing a slender knife.

Nicole blinked at her. “You?” she asked.

Wynonna shook her head. “Waverly.”
Nicole frowned, and Wynonna set down the silverware, checking her other pocket. She pulled out a pair of dog tags, squinting at them to read the engraving.

“Oh,” she said, the sound almost more like a muted little moan of fear, which was so unlike Wynonna that Nicole stood up a little straighter and paid attention. “My god.”

Shit, she thought, as Wynonna ran past her into the hallway. Dolls.

Armed with new knowledge, she sent Waverly another text when she reached her desk. Hello? And within a minute, she got back a simple Hi.

Wanna hang out tonight? she sent back, but Waverly must have set down her phone, because nothing else came through. Nicole rubbed her face and forced herself to eat some of the pizza, praying that whatever it was that Lucado needed Waverly for, it would turn out all right. She’d been temporarily demoted to normal mundane cop, which rendered her slightly less than useful where assisting BBD was concerned. At this point, if Waverly got into much trouble, Wynonna would be way more useful than she would.

Since going off half-cocked searching for Wynonna or Lucado would A: not help Waverly and B: probably get her a chewing out by Nedley, especially so soon after their heart-to-heart and Nicole’s unplanned weekend getaway, she stayed in the station. The afternoon was fairly quiet for Purgatory, and she spent the better part of her shift poring over Nedley’s file on Tucker Gardner.

Who, as it turned out, had a rather substantial list of prior, mysteriously dropped charges, up to and including a breaking and entering case from four years ago.

And who, evidently, could be summoned by the power of thought. She looked up from the file as Tucker entered, scanning the room for an officer with the lost, interested look of a dog trying to figure out who it could bite.

“And I thought that pizza sucked,” she muttered under her breath, as his gaze swept the room and stalled on her. She leaned forward in her chair and raised her voice, as polite as she could stomach. “Tucker Gardner. How can I help you.”

“My sisters,” he said, and even without the wolf’s senses she noticed his shifting gaze, his tense shoulders. He was the walking posterboy for white privilege: even with all his prior run-ins with Purgatory law enforcement, something spooked him and he came straight here, so confident that his status and his wealth would protect him from any backlash that he had no fear of crossing willingly into enemy territory. He possessed unshaken faith in a system that promised to protect him from people exactly like him. “Acting weird.”

“Well,” Nicole drawled, getting up from her chair, taking great effort not to wince or limp as she walked toward him. “I mean, I’d take the weird? Because they saved you from being charged.”

He approached the counter, wearing a heavy denim jacket and a striped shirt with a cat on it that looked almost comical on his lean, boyish frame. The thought that he might shop at thrift stores for the novelty, rather than the need, crossed her mind, followed almost immediately by the thought that maybe it was some Asian brand she had never heard of. That seemed like something Tucker would be into.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and against all sense, she thought maybe he meant it. At least insomuch as it got him what he wanted: her ear.

She raised her eyebrows, easing a bit closer to keep their conversation somewhere in the
neighborhood of private.

“Did you apologize to the girls you were photographing?”

“You’re Waverly’s...” He paused, as if looking for the word. “Friend.”

She let ice creep into her tone, her gaze hard and locked on his.

“That’s not super relevant.”

“She’s been acting weird too, hasn’t she?” he asked, and a chill ran down her spine. She swallowed, and she watched his eyes track it—she really didn’t have anything like a poker face. “One minute dear sweet Waverly, the next...” His gaze was inscrutable, empty. “She nearly choked me to death,” he said, gesturing to his throat, where days-old bruises lingered on his skin in the shape of fingers. She narrowed her eyes, gauging the color of the marks. There was no way Waverly could have exerted that much pressure on a man Tucker’s size.

“Nice try,” she said, her voice a bit raspy and strange without the wolf’s growls to back it up.

“I figure that’s why you’re so angry,” Tucker said, as she headed back to her desk. She turned back at his words, glaring. “Because she’s been acting strange around you too.”

A man as scummy as Tucker really had no business being that damn intuitive.

“I think you should get out of here.”

“I don’t wanna cause trouble,” he insisted, but there was the ghost of a smile around his mouth as he said it that made it oh so hard to believe him. “But if our Waverly’s dangerous, it’s a town issue, don’t you think?”

The way he said our Waverly made her skin itch and she knew if the wolf had been coherent for this it would’ve been snarling, but instead she just felt hollowed out, empty, with ordinary, human rage bubbling into the gaps, filling in the holes the wolf left behind. It was just a temporary fix, and it felt wrong. Like a cheap knockoff of the real thing.

“I could always talk to her for you,” Tucker said.

“I said get out.”

“I’m trying to help,” he said, with that smug little smile still on his face. “I’m not a bad person. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stop treating me like one.”

He stepped back and left the room, and she let out a breath she didn’t fully realize she’d been holding.

Around 8 Waverly finally texted her.

OMG, how did I miss this? I’m sorry!!!

Nicole frowned, reading the message over and over. Tucker’s words echoed on loop in her head. One minute, dear sweet Waverly, the next?

She tapped out a response, discarded it. Then another, which she discarded again. Then a third.
Finally she wrinkled up her nose and forced herself to finish a damn answer and send it without second-guessing it.

*It's okay Waves. Talk tomorrow?*

*Definitely!*

**Chapter End Notes**

hnmmng okay this is a little shorter than I was hoping it would turn out but HERE IS WHAT IS UP MY DUDES

I am in the final stages of a Really Big Move that involves junking/donating like half of all my worldly possessions and packing up the rest to move across the country in a two-stage drive. I'm gonna lose most of this weekend to packing and final social gatherings with people out here, so I probably won't be able to get any real writing done for like. Several days. Probably closer to a week. (Trust me, I am as sad as you guys!)

I am hoping to be back late next week with the resolution to the Mictian arc but... we are gonna see how this plays out. Not a great place to have to break, I know, but sometimes that's just how it plays.

I love and appreciate you guys so so so so much and words really do not do it justice. I'll catch you on the flip side, my friends, and in the meantime if you want dumb jokes and probably travel/progress photos, hit me up on Twitter (@lexraevision)!
Life without the wolf was strange, but as her evening wore on it started to swing around into uncomfortable. When she checked back in mentally she was lying on her couch, a bit listless, staring at the ceiling. Calamity Jane lay curled up in a little ginger loop on her stomach, her rumbling purr startlingly loud where it vibrated through Nicole’s ribcage.

“Didn’t think I’d miss it,” she told the cat, frowning at the ceiling. Her cat just purred a little harder. If someone had told her, two months after Shae bit her, that there’d come a time where she was wishing the wolf would come back faster, she’d have laughed herself stupid. And yet, here she was, one hand resting over one of the bandaged cuts on her chest and wishing there was some way to make the cuts heal faster. To wake the wolf up from its silver-induced coma.

Maybe, she thought idly, this was what Shae was trying to teach her back at the start. Days after their first moon together Shae had cut her arm with a silvered knife, her own hand wrapped in a thick scarf to do it.

To teach you what it feels like, is what Shae had said as she poured moonwater over the open gash and stroked her fingers along Nicole’s sweat-soaked cheek, as if that touch was meant to ease the deep, pained lines carved into Nicole’s face at the sheer physical agony of the silver burning in her skin.

But maybe it wasn’t just about the silver. Maybe it was supposed to teach her to appreciate it, to grasp what she’d been given, once it was taken away. You never know what you have until it’s gone, right?

But Shae had always moved too fast, when it came to things like this. Sometimes it was impossible to forget that she had been turned as a teenager. Nicole could almost imagine it—Shae, brilliant but still too young for medical school, maybe in pre-med prep programs, twisting to see bite marks on her hip in the mirror. Shae not as she would become, but rash, impulsive, maybe adjusting to the wolf at an intense speed, because after all, what better way to arm a 15 year old girl against the world but to share her body with the soul of an ancient, hungry, powerful hunter? There would be no stories of Shae cornered in locker rooms or dragged beneath bleachers by boys full of enough testosterone to kill nearby plantlife. No, anyone who tried to take Shae somewhere she didn’t want to be or do something she didn’t want to do would find out the hard way that Shae seemed cool and calm but was a pot seconds from boiling.

She was power and strength and fire, and at 15, maybe she reveled in it.

But Nicole was not 15. Bitten at 26, with her whole life ahead of her, she’d never been ready for this, and it had been Shae’s biggest mistake to demand that she be okay with it within mere weeks.

It had been what had forced Shae to tip her hand. Her father was impatient for results, and Shae didn’t know how to win Nicole over slowly, not anymore.

But that was a year ago. Now, Nicole had adjusted. Had learned more, knew more. She and the wolf were... she wasn’t sure what they were, but they weren’t quite rivals anymore. It wasn’t as clean as that. It was fledgling and hard to define, but it was something else, now. Something more like partnership.
And now the wolf was asleep, and she had to just wait, until it was ready to wake up. And it chafed her.

Someone knocked on her door, two heavy thuds, and Nicole jerked up off the couch, a snarl too pitifully human to be anything like threatening catching in her throat. Calamity Jane leapt to the back of the couch, her tail all bottlebrush and her back arched, just a little.

Nicole went for her gun first, holding it stiffly beside her hip as she headed for the door. Her guest knocked again, two more heavy thumps that would have raised her hackles if she’d been able to change. On instinct she paused behind the door, sniffing, but all she could smell was the room.

She cracked the door open, just an inch, then blinked.

“Dolls?”

He grinned, white teeth flashing against his skin, and shrugged a shoulder. “Hey.”

“Jesus,” she said, stepping back and opening the door all the way. She scanned behind him, but didn’t see anyone else, and closed the door as soon as he was inside, flipping the deadbolt with a quick twist of her hand.

He glanced down at the pistol she was holding and raised an eyebrow.

“Expecting company?”

“After the weekend I’ve had?” she muttered, returning the gun to its usual hiding spot. “I’m not sure what to expect.”

He frowned. “You’re not having trouble with Lucado?”


“Good,” he said, his shoulders sagging a little in relief. “Good. Well, not good that you’ve had trouble, but.”

“Yeah.” She hazarded a grin, and took a moment to survey him. She would’ve killed for the wolf’s senses, because he just seemed... himself. She couldn’t smell that lingering scent of butane he always gave off, or blood, but he seemed in relatively good shape. He was standing normally, if more relaxed than she was used to, and didn’t seem to be in any pain. “You look good.”

“Feel pretty good too,” he noted, then frowned, his eyes tracking her in much the way hers had just done him. She found herself wondering what he saw. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve got bandages under your shirt and you’re...” He waved a hand, as if he were looking for words. “Standing different. What happened.”

She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. “Long story,” she muttered. “Can I get you anything?”

“No,” he said. “Just give me the gist.”

She told him most of it. Mikael’s help, and disappearance, what she’d found in the wildlands, and Loretta’s personal vendetta.

“Did you ever get to ask him your question?” Dolls asked when she was done. They’d migrated
back to her couch, with him sitting on the trapdoor-hiding armchair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“No, I didn’t.”

“What were you going to ask him?”

Nicole considered refusing to answer, but it was Dolls. He was a friend, and besides, he knew more than any of them now that Mikael was gone.

“Waverly’s been acting... weird.”

He said nothing, but just for a second, she thought he tensed when she said it.

“I don’t know why, I just.” She rubbed her face with both hands. “She’s been strange and— and cold, and even Wynonna thinks maybe something’s different with her, and I don’t know if it’s just the stress of everything and Willa or something bigger or...”

“Hey,” Dolls said, and moved to crouch next to her. “Hey. You’ve been wounded, and you’ve been through a lot since I left. It’s okay.”

She looked at him for a moment, then let her head hang forward.

“I’m glad you’re back.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, and grinned. “Chances are I wouldn’t be if you hadn’t come to help up on that ridge. Tell you what.”

“Hm.”

He set a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Get some rest. Heal up. I’ll see if I can’t find anything out about what’s up with Waverly, and I’ll touch base with you tomorrow.”

Nicole looked up at him, not surprised exactly but grateful, and a little startled. He’d just gotten back to town, and judging by his behavior he’d just dosed back up, and yet the first thing he offered to do was help her? Sure, anything that helped Waverly helped her and Wynonna both, but even so, it felt big. Significant.

“Thanks, Dolls.”

He squeezed her shoulder again. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Haught.”

“Yeah,” she said.

“You sleep,” he said. “I’ll lock up on my way out.”

She smiled a little despite herself and nodded. “Okay.”

And with that he was gone. She listened to his boots as he left the room, listened to the door shut, listened to him scrabble around for the spare key, and then listened to the deadbolt slide.

The idea of having to get up off her couch in order to go to bed seemed somehow illogical, and she instead just wriggled out of her jeans and dragged one of the quilts Waverly had brought over on top of her to ward off the chill, now that she didn’t have the wolf’s heat to help.

Just before she lay down, she frowned, pawing at her phone.
“Hey Waverly it’s... me,” she said, rubbing at the back of her neck, but even the sound of Waverly’s voicemail message lifted her spirits somewhat. There was a brightness to it, a cheer she’d half-forgotten in the last two months. Armed with that and Dolls’ promise to investigate, she felt momentarily invincible. “I just wanted to say hi. ‘Kay, call me?”

In the morning she woke up a few minutes before her alarm in a state of confusion, tempered by warm drowsiness. It took her a minute to realize she was firstly, on the couch, and secondly, cocooned in a thick quilt that smelled, even to her human nose, like Waverly. She woke by degrees, remembering that she was supposed to go into work today, that she was probably going to be very stiff if she didn’t get up and shower soon to let the hot water work out any kinks she’d worked into her back by sleeping sprawled out on her sofa, and that she had talked with Dolls the night prior.

And then the alarm clock in her bedroom went off. It wasn’t terribly loud—after all, the wolf would hear it even if it wasn’t much louder than normal speaking volume—but she grumbled and dragged herself down the hall to her bedroom as a man and woman bickered about some huge storm. She stopped beside her bed, frowning and listening to them.

“Looks like we’re looking at an absolutely massive storm, Sandy, that big front coming down from the north is bringing a potential 4-6 inches of snow—”

“And where it meets that front coming up from Montana, John, we’re looking at thunder and lightning—”

“A thunder-snowstorm? Well you won’t catch me going outside tonight that’s for sure!”

Nicole clicked off the radio and went for her phone again, an idea starting to coalesce.

Hi! This is Waverly, leave a message!

“Hey! Me again. There’s a big storm comin’ tonight. And I was thinking,” she said, letting her voice turn soft, and maybe trying to be a little enticing. Since she was still half-asleep, she was pretty sure her voice sounded particularly warm and husky, which worked in her favor. “That you and I could hibernate, at my place.” She chuckled, feeling a little silly for trying to seduce a voicemail machine. “Okay, baby. Gimme a call.”

The roads were slick and icy as she headed into work, and for once she went out in gloves and her coat zipped up properly, and even then her ears felt like icicles and her fingers were stiff with the chill. It was downright unpleasant, actually, and she found herself wishing for the wolf all the more. As she drove by Shorty’s she spotted Dolls slipping out the back door toward what looked like a rental car. Though how he might have paid for one without BBD catching up to him, she wasn’t sure. He waved a hand to her in greeting, and she nodded in response. Hopefully he’d uncover something while she was at work.

To that end, when she parked her cruiser she tried Waverly’s phone one more time, but she got the voicemail again.

“Hey, uh, it’s me,” she noted, squinting through her windshield at the station. “Again. Um. I... I haven’t heard from you, so I just wanna make sure you– are you okay? How ‘bout tonight? Comin’ over? Uh, gimme a call.” She frowned, glancing at the clock on her dashboard. It was getting more
and more odd that she hadn’t heard *anything*, not even a text to let her know why she couldn’t call.

“Okay, bye.”

Nedley passed her on her way inside. The station felt... empty. Not just that there was hardly anyone inside, though that didn’t help. But it was quiet, calm. She couldn’t feel the buzz of energy in the place, couldn’t smell other people, couldn’t hear the pipes or the central heating or any but the loudest of the machinery inside. When Nedley caught her arm, pulling her back to talk to her on his way out, she could smell a little bit of the coffee on his breath, but nothing else. It was like he was still himself, but... *less*. She couldn’t smell his aftershave or his clothes or the last lingering scent of the sausage he ate for breakfast every morning. It was strangely hollow, even though Nedley himself was absolutely the same as he ever was.

“Nicole,” he rumbled.

She blinked away the feeling of strangeness and nodded. “Sir. What’s the situation?”

“Covered, mostly. Got a few officers on-scene, I’m heading out to oversee it. But I’ve got a puzzle I want your brain on.”

“All right,” she said, eyebrows rising. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’ve got a map of part of the county up on the easel and some reports from a few months back on the table that I want your eyeballs on. Truth is, I need a better plowin’ plan than the one we’ve got. You tested well in city plannin’, didn’t you?”

“I did, sir.” There was something about how he said it that made her think he wasn’t telling her everything, but she nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Good.” He nodded, settled his hat on his head, and slipped out past her toward his cruiser, leaving her in the station to puzzle through a short stack of paperwork and maps of varying levels of detail, some of which bore notes scrawled across the town in red ink.

Which is what she was doing when Wynonna sauntered into the bullpen an hour later with her hand halfway into her shirt.

“You know the last major storm we had in Purgatory?” Nicole noted, shaking her head, “The mayor’s street was plowed before the hospital.”

“Natural selection in action,” Wynonna quipped, an edge to her voice that Nicole knew all too well. Wynonna was still rooting around in her shirt, tugging at her bra and giving Nicole an eyeful, and Nicole raised an eyebrow, bemused.

“You okay there?”

“Underwire my ass,” Wynonna grumbled, “I swear this thing fit yesterday.”

“Hey did Waves uh,” Nicole said, biting the inside of her cheek, “Pop in without me seeing her?”

“She’s home sick,” Wynonna said, a bit icy, her eyes tracking Nicole.

“Really? Cuz I spoke to her last night, she sounded fine.”

Wynonna turned a slow, casual spin as she stepped closer, leaning back against the table, and Nicole pulled away, half-heartedly sniffing the air for a scent of whiskey. She got nothing, but that didn’t mean much.
“She’s a good faker,” Wynonna mentioned, a bit wild-eyed, her smile cruel and a little too broad. “Or hadn’t you noticed.”

“It’s– it’s just I left three messages, did she get them, or...”

“*Three* unreturned messages?” Wynonna murmured, pulling back to the end of the table. “Waverly needs *space*.”

A shred of unreasonable doubt curled up in Nicole’s chest like a stray cat, unwanted, unasked for, but somehow very real. Wynonna’s words shouldn’t have bothered her, but there was a weight in them, an edge, that made her stomach twist.

“She’s *dying* under the weight of your... expectations.”

Nicole fiddled with the marker in her hands, half-wishing for the wolf’s strength just so she could snap the stupid thing in frustration. But instead it was just her. Human weakness, against the cold march of Wynonna’s words. She watched Wynonna head to the counter, picking a pen out of the cup and clicking it twice.

“Waverly’s not the... white-picket-fence-in-Purgatory girl you want her to be anymore.”

“You know Wynonna,” Nicole said, and against all sense, her voice wavered. “You’re really mean, when you drink before noon.” Wynonna didn’t answer, though Nicole saw her head turn slightly, a good enough indicator she was listening. “And you drink before noon too often.”

Nicole snatched up her coat and headed for the door—she’d work on Nedley’s puzzle after Wynonna was gone. For now she’d take a walk.

“Hope your Tinder game’s solid,” Wynonna purred after her, and Nicole shoved back out through the door into the cold, the blast of sharp winter wind taking her breath away. She went to her cruiser, trying to figure out where she’d left her gloves, the cold biting into her fingers until she shoved them in her pockets.

Her radio crackled the moment she sat down in her cruiser and pawed through the front seat for her missing gloves.

“Haught. Officer Haught, come in.”

She frowned, pulling the receiver on her shoulder down to where she could speak into it. It wasn’t as easy to tell, without her better hearing, but she was pretty sure it was Nedley’s voice coming through.

“This is Haught, go.”

“Got something. 428 Cherry. Crime scene techs are wrapped up in the city, we’ll never get a team out in this weather.”

“On it, Sheriff,” she said. She went back inside for supplies, and discovered an oddity: a pen, standing on its tip by the sign for Reception. She frowned, investigating that first. It was a silver ballpoint, jammed so hard into the leather blotter that it was standing perfectly upright. There was a bit of drying blood on the pen, and sitting on the counter next to it was a pad of post-its. A single word was scrawled messily across the first slip.

*Possessed.*
"What the hell," she muttered, pocketing the whole notepad for further review when she had more time.

428 Cherry was a scene out of a horror movie. Two dead. Probably a married couple, given the photos on the walls and the mangled faces of the victims. Suddenly she was a little bit grateful for the wolf’s sleep—if she’d had full capacity to smell the blood and gore and death while she was alone in here... it wouldn’t have been pretty.

As it was, it was nightmarish. The stench of death wasn’t something only the wolf could smell, and it choked her until she could barely breathe. It also didn’t take the wolf’s senses to work out that there was a very particular reason Nedley had sent her on this case. It had supernatural influence written all over it, though what kind she wasn’t quite sure of yet. Based solely on her initial read, the victims had their throats slit, but then something with small hands and sharp little nails had torn open their throats all the way down to their torsos and filled up a bucket—which was sitting to one side—with blood. There was even a length of tubing nearby, soaked red, as if the killer had set up a siphon out of each of the victim’s chest cavities in order to fill the bucket. Or more likely, killers, plural. There were footprints all over the room, all of which were about the size of a large child’s, maybe ten years old, but she was reasonably certain there were at least two, maybe three sets of feet represented in the room.

There were dripmarks around the bucket, too, as if something had been dipped into the bucket and then wrung out and allowed, briefly anyway, to dry. The bodies were only a couple hours old, but without scent-tracking, she didn’t think she could follow the killers. The bloodied footprints stopped completely at the front door, as if the killers had stepped out the door and flown away like birds.

“Sheriff?” she said, pulling her radio down to speak into it. “This is Haught.”

“Go, Haught.”

“We can make do without a team but...” She looked around. “We’re definitely gonna need some cleanup on this.”

“How bad?”

“Real bad, sir. I’ll get on it, but this’ll take me hours. And I’m gonna have to partner with BBD on this.”

There was a long pause in which Nicole imagined he was cursing fluently in relative privacy. Finally her speaker clicked again and his voice came through, sounding exhausted.

“Understood, Haught. Take care of it.”

Chapter End Notes

I'M BACK BITCHES

I'm staying with family for the next ten days or so, so we'll see how well I can keep up my usual posting pace. Fingers crossed it's back to normal for a while, at least until we
start the second leg of the trip out of the west coast, awwww yeahhhhh. I missed you guys so much! Thank you for all your well-wishes! <3
Chapter 42

It was only an hour to true sunset by the time she made it to the Homestead, though the cloud cover made it look like the dead of night. She felt like she’d never wash off the stench of industrial cleaners, but in all the time she’d been at the Cherry Street crime scene, Waverly hadn’t been in touch. Then again, if Wynonna was to be believed and Waverly was home sick, that wasn’t surprising, but...

Nicole had picked up a carton of sweet and sour soup on her way there, along with a small jar of peanut butter—it was Waverly’s favorite, and probably, Nicole hoped, her go-to when she wasn’t feeling well. But when she stepped into the house, she nearly dropped the soup in shock. The front entryway was a mess of wood shards and overturned rugs. A handful of railings along the stairs had been smashed, and she hastily set down the food, drawing her sidearm as she crept through the house. The living room was a disaster—the big window into Wynonna’s room had been smashed inward like a wrecking ball had hit it—and the kitchen was a mess of sawdust and, god, even a shell casing?

She cleared the lower floor of the house, then crept upstairs, checking each room. All the rooms were empty, even Waverly’s. Hell, her bed was made. She’d clearly never gone to sleep last night, at least not in her room, but there was no quilt or pillows on the couch to indicate she’d slept there either. Even Wynonna’s bed seemed undisturbed, other than the glass shards and hunks of wood.

Nicole made another loop of the lower floor. One of the kitchen chairs had belts attached to the back, like a set of makeshift restraints. One loop was still closed, about the size of a human’s wrist. She slid her fingers through it, gauging the approximate size.

A woman’s might fit it. Small, delicate...

Waverly.

She growled, and this time it sounded better. The wolf stirred in her thoughts, half-awake, maybe roused by fear.

No, not fear. And not panic. It was slow, simmering anger, in its own way more dangerous than rage. Rage is fire and brimstone, but anger is slow, cold. Rage can’t be calculating and precise, and that’s what you really have to worry about.

She went back outside, keeping her pistol drawn. The only car in the driveway was hers. Which was odd, unless Wynonna had taken the Jeep this morning? She scanned the area, looking for outliers, looking for the things that were wrong. Finding nothing, she went to the barn, and stopped dead in the doorway. There was an elaborate monolith of steel and silver stretching from the floor to the roof. A monument of found objects that included silverware and metal tubing, even what looked like a drainpipe from a home improvement store. There was no one else in the barn, so she finally slid her pistol back into its holster.

The door creaked open as she set about examining the structure, and for a moment she didn’t even look back, too captivated by what she was looking at. It almost looked like some mad art student’s sculpture, more at home at some second-string museum than in a barn on Earp land. The door creaked shut and she turned her head, the wolf’s drowsy attention bringing her only a snatch of words as Waverly paused at the door.

“Oh, right. You.”
“Look, I know you need space, and I really tried to stay away, but,” Nicole said, though she didn’t move away from the steel contraption, “I got worried. And– and there’s signs of struggle in the house? And Waverly, what the hell is this thing?”

She grabbed at a bar shaker and some unidentifiable hand-tool and plucked them off the shelf they’d been sitting on, but Waverly ran toward her, grabbing at her with grasping, clawing fingers.

“Stop. Stop!”

“What?” Nicole asked, dropping the shaker as Waverly snatched the tool away and replaced it with a care and delicacy that belonged on a pastry chef. “Are you kidding? There is a thundersnowstorm coming, this thing is gonna attract lightning like crazy. The whole barn could go up in flames.”

Waverly gasped, covering her face with her hand, and ducked her face away from Nicole. Against all sense, she looked like she were on the verge of tears. She thought the wolf was trying to communicate something, but it was garbled, like words spoken underwater, and she focused her attention on her girlfriend.

“Baby,” she breathed, touching her shoulders and tugging her closer. Waverly ducked her head against Nicole’s shoulder, and she ran a hand down Waverly’s hair. “Baby, what is it?”

“It’s Wynonna,” Waverly said, her voice low, and curled her fingers into Nicole’s sleeve. “She’s possessed.” Nicole thought of the post-its in her pocket and felt her stomach twist. God, Wynonna had been trying to tell her and she’d completely missed it. “Like, ‘demon took over her body, trying to kill us all’ possessed.”

“Baby,” Nicole said, keeping her voice low as Waverly pulled back, keeping her face turned away like she couldn’t bear to even look at Nicole. “Did she hurt you?”

Waverly’s voice cracked. “Yeah.”

“Where is she?” Nicole asked, still trying to catch her girlfriend’s eye. “On the homestead?”

Waverly nodded, barely. “Yeah.”

Thunder rumbled overhead.

“I’ve got you now, okay?” Nicole said, guiding Waverly back to stand behind her, one arm holding Waverly in place as she swallowed and pulled her sidearm, letting her finger rest along the trigger guard. If this steel contraption was Wynonna’s doing, she’d be back before long, and Nicole would be ready for her. “I swear I’ve got you.”

Agonizingly long minutes passed before the barn door creaked open again and Wynonna stepped through.

“Step away from the lightning rod.”

“Stand back, Wynonna,” Nicole said. Her pistol’s sights dropped a little before she steadied her arm. “Waverly told me everything. You come forward and I’m...” She swallowed. The thought of putting a bullet in Wynonna, one of the few people in all of Purgatory to know her secret and accept her without question, made her whole body feel cold, made her gut twist into an icy knot, but if it meant stopping a demon and protecting everyone else? Maybe this is what Mikael had meant about werewolves being guardians. She took a deep breath, but it came out ragged, betraying her fear, and she only hoped Wynonna couldn’t hear it. “I’ll shoot.”
“Haught. Settle down.” Wynonna took a cautious step forward and showed Nicole an open steel flask. “The demon jumped into Waverly. She needs to drink this. Now.”

“Don’t trust her,” Waverly murmured.

“Yeah, flask,” Nicole said, though the tone in Waverly’s voice made the wolf stir and growl. “Demon did its homework.”

“Nicole,” Wynonna snapped. “You are not my sister’s keeper.”

Nicole felt that stray cat curl up in her chest again, doubt and a touch of insecurity that even now she didn’t want to admit she still had. “That’s the demon talking.”

“No, it’s me,” Wynonna insisted, raising her hands palms-out in a gesture of conciliation. “Listen, I’ll admit, you’re a bit... Queen Brisk of Bossy Town for my taste. But I know that you love her, and you know I love her too, and now that thing is trying to keep her.”

Doubt crept in, and though she kept her pistol on target, Nicole’s gaze flicked down to the flask, trying to do the math. Could the demon have moved? Was it why Waverly had been acting strange all this time, and it had moved, then moved back? Was that a thing it could even do?

“Ugh. Shoot her,” Waverly hissed. “It’s the only way.”

Nicole looked up at Wynonna’s face, aware her own eyes had gone very wide.

“Waverly Earp would never say something like that,” Nicole said, the words almost more exhale than word. Wynonna had let her hands drop, and was watching Nicole with a look that was half relief and half... pain, maybe. Nicole’s shock to hear such unadulterated hatred coming out of Waverly’s mouth was mirrored in Wynonna’s eyes. She turned, dropping the pistol to her side. “Never.”

Waverly met her gaze, but it wasn’t really Waverly. Not anymore. Her eyes were solid black, her expression hard and terrible. Waverly—no, the demon—scoffed at her.

“You’re weak,” it snarled, and it was Waverly’s voice, but different, layered with something hideous and dark, and Nicole recognized it from the rescue mission, when she’d heard the static over the radio. Not static, then. It had been the demon. Even then. God, this had been going on for weeks and she’d never noticed.

“Oh Waverly,” Nicole whispered, almost whimpering, and something in her chest cracked open. “Let her help you.”

Waverly grabbed her by the shoulder with a speed that was absolutely inhuman and flung her to one side, directly into a wooden barrel full of unused steel. Nicole felt her skull impact with the wood and she slumped down as her head rang, and for a moment she thought she felt the wolf grumbling to itself in exasperation.

She was inclined to agree with it, really—this was getting to be a habit she’d really like to kick.

“I know you’re in there,” Wynonna told Waverly, as Nicole struggled to get her head to stop spinning in drunken circles long enough for her to get back to her feet and help. “I know you can hear me. Look what you did to the woman you love.”

Thunder pealed again in the distance, and not-Waverly’s cruel little giggle split the air. “Oh... storm’s upon us,” she—it—murmured. “It’s time.”
“You’ve held off this tentacled shithead for weeks,” Wynonna said, ignoring the demon to speak to her sister. “Just give it one more push. Drink it.”

Nicole slid to the ground, breathing in hay and dirt and struggling to sort out what direction was up, what was happening above her, and what parts of her were awakening wolf and which parts were, well, her. She braced her arms under her and looked up at Waverly. Her girlfriend’s eyes were still black, but she tried to lean toward Wynonna, letting out a tiny, horrible whimper of effort.

“Fight it.”

“It... it,” she whispered, her voice her own again, fragile and soft and so very, very gentle. “It won’t— it won’t let me!”

“Waverly...” Wynonna’s voice was so soft, so lost, that Nicole felt an irrational urge to tuck her into a quilt with a cup of cocoa and a teddy bear. No one, child or grown woman, should have to live Wynonna’s life, to suffer Wynonna’s losses.

“Wynonna,” Waverly choked out, looking up. “Remember when you made me drink grape soda ’til it came out of my nose?”

Wynonna’s sharp gasp of recognition was like a thunderclap of its own. “Yeah!”

And without any other warning, she punched Waverly in the stomach, grabbed her by the shoulder when Waverly bent over, and flipped her, letting her slam bodily into the ground. The impact stunned her long enough that Wynonna could crawl over top of her and sit astride her stomach.

Nicole sat up, leaning against the barrel, crouched on one knee so that she could move if they needed her.

“Open your mouth,” Wynonna snapped, pinching her fingers around Waverly’s nose. “Open it!” Waverly obeyed with a gasp and Wynonna dumped the contents of the flask into Waverly’s mouth, ignoring the faint gurgling noises her sister was making. She dropped the flask aside and covered Waverly’s mouth with her free hand.

“Drink,” she said, waiting as Waverly—or perhaps the demon—groaned and choked out muffled complaints. “Drink it, come on. Swallow!” Waverly made a faint noise and Wynonna grinned. “Okay!”

She slid off Waverly immediately as the girl thrashed and writhed on the floor. Something, maybe the wolf’s intuition, made Nicole edge back, keeping out of the way as Waverly suddenly sat upright and released a flood of black goo, collapsing backward with a groan as Wynonna stood and drew Peacemaker.

There was some kind of horrible worm-thing lurked in the corner, hissing at Wynonna and her gun. The demon. Nicole snarled at it, as an afterthought, baring fangs even as Wynonna moved a step forward and raised her humming, glowing revolver.

“Mictian, I’d say make your peace, but I hope you never find any.”

The gun boomed and the demon howled, vanishing into a handful of hellfire-tinted sparks.

Nicole crawled to Waverly, taking hold of her wrist and shoulder to lever her up to sitting.

“Oh Wave,” she whispered, as Waverly groaned, half-conscious. “Get up. Shh, shh...”
“Whoa,” Waverly moaned, as Nicole got her arms around Waverly and held her up off the ground. “That was so New Years’ 2012.” Nicole chuckled, despite herself, and Waverly woozily made eye contact with her, looking as though she was having some trouble keeping her head upright. “I can’t believe I ordered you to shoot her.”

“I almost did it, too,” Nicole told her, her eyes burning with tears. The thought of losing Waverly, especially so soon after Mikael, caught up to her now that the immediate danger was past, choking and clawing its way up her throat. Her breath hitched and her voice shook like a leaf in a high wind. “I would shoot anybody for you.”

Waverly smiled, almost laughing, as if she saw the absurdity of that promise just as much as Nicole did. “That’s really sweet,” she said, lifting her hand to tuck strands of hair behind Nicole’s ear. Nicole turned her head into Waverly’s palm, desperate for that simple, small touch, and Waverly pulled her in close, kissing her, sharing comfort and reassurance and maybe something like love with that one point of contact.

She’d lost and regained friends this week, had an extremely bloody new case on her desk, and had almost lost Waverly, but the heat and familiarity of Waverly’s lips on hers pushed it all back to the background. For a moment, just a moment, nothing else was real. Nothing else was urgent, not now. Not here.

Until, that is, Wynonna cleared her throat, and Waverly pulled back with a shy smile directed at her sister.

“Come on,” Wynonna said, but there was no heat in it. “Let’s get her in the house.”

“Thank you,” Nicole said, glancing up once before looking back down at Waverly, reading exhaustion in the set of her face and the lines around her eyes. “For saving our girl.”

“That thing took Willa,” Wynonna said, with a calm she clearly didn’t really feel. “Wasn’t letting it get Waverly.”

“I knew you’d rescue me,” Waverly murmured, teasing maybe as Wynonna crouched down to get a shoulder under Waverly’s arm, so that the two of them could get Waverly up to her feet.

“All I did was bring a flask,” she noted. “It’s just Standard Earp Operating Procedure.”

“Yeah,” Nicole noted, as Wynonna started toward the door with her sister. “You said some nasty things.”

Wynonna hesitated, then shrugged the shoulder not supporting Waverly. “Well that was the demon talking. I don’t believe all of it.”

Nicole paused, lingering behind them. “What– what do you mean, all of it?”

“Please,” Waverly said, though she was laughing. “Not now, guys?”

“Fine, fine,” Wynonna said, and paused until Nicole could hurry around them and open the barn door for them. “Truce. I guess.”

Nicole grumbled, but followed alongside them to open the next door as well. “Fine.”

Wynonna headed inside and set Waverly down on the couch. Dolls and Doc followed them inside, and Dolls gave Waverly a once-over, but seemed satisfied with what he saw, nodding as he decided she wasn’t going to suffer any long-term effects from the tincture Wynonna had forced her to
drink. He had the grace not to say anything about the fact that Nicole spent the whole time hovering over his shoulder, half-listening to Wynonna and Doc talking in the entryway.

“And they just left?” she asked.

“Mmhm. Soon as the skies cleared, off they went.”

“Well at least they’re out of our hair for now.”

“That may be true, but as it stands, now they have that plate.”

“Well we don’t even know what it’s for yet, so that’s, y’know. Whatever,” Wynonna said, heaving a frustrated sigh. “Besides, if they want to babysit the creepy plate that has the demon mob after it, you know what, better them than us.”

Nicole stopped listening, partially because Waverly had slumped against the back of the couch and was drifting somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, and partially because she’d forgotten how confusing and slightly stressful it was to listen to BBD chatter.

“Dolls,” she said, sitting next to Waverly on the couch. “Listen, I’ve got a lead, also.”

“Seriously?” he asked, rubbing the back of his head with one hand. “No rest for the wicked, huh.”

Wynonna slid over, as if called by Dolls’ comment.

“What’s going on?”

“Got a crime scene today that I think has BBD written all over it,” Nicole muttered, keeping her voice down and looping an arm around Waverly’s shoulders when she nuzzled closer and ducked her face against Nicole’s neck. The wolf made a low, pleased rumbling noise in her thoughts, finally mostly awake. “I’ve got some photos and details, but I’d like to talk in the morning with everyone.”

“Sure,” Dolls said, and nodded. “Meet us at the office.” Nicole opened her mouth to protest and his expression twisted with distaste. “Lucado’s kinda. Well. Dead. So. No need to keep creeping around in the dark.”

“Hold up,” Wynonna muttered, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Lucado’s dead?”

“You chat,” Nicole noted, glancing down at Waverly. “I’ll take her upstairs.”

When no one protested Nicole scooped Waverly up in her arms and headed out of the room, picking her way carefully around the wreckage from the fight. She hoped, idly, that the demon had been lying to her, and that this had not, in fact, been collateral damage while a possessed Wynonna hurt Waverly. She didn’t seem injured, but then again, Nicole rarely showed signs of damage either—if the demon could heal its hosts’ bodies, maybe it would be impossible to tell.

Waverly stirred as Nicole lay her down on the bed and started taking off her boots, and pushed herself up to a sitting position, leaning on both hands.

“Nicole?” she mumbled, and Nicole smiled, leaning up to kiss the tip of her nose.

“Hey, baby. How are you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by a truck.” Waverly shrugged out of her coat with exaggerated slowness, so tired she could barely move. “Are you staying?”
Nicole’s heart broke a little more and she smiled, stroking her hand down Waverly’s cheek. “Do you want me to?”

“Always,” Waverly whispered, without hesitation.

“Then I’ll stay,” she said, her breath catching in her throat.

It was a team effort to get Waverly into proper nightclothes, but finally she was bundled up in her bed, curled up in a loose ball under the quilt. Nicole sat in a chair within arm’s reach, one hand resting on the bed under the corner of the quilt so that Waverly’s fingers could tangle into hers. The wolf kept up a low, rumbling burr in her chest, audible enough that Waverly smiled and let the sound lull her to sleep. She plucked at the bandaging on her chest with her other hand, finally removing it now that it wasn’t needed.

That was where Wynonna found her, a little less than an hour later, when the light coming in through Waverly’s window had dwindled to nothing but starlight.

“Hey,” Wynonna said, and Nicole looked up. “She out?”

“Like a light,” Nicole murmured, though she kept her voice low, just in case. “Been a bit of a day, I guess.”

“Almost two months,” Wynonna said, though she didn’t come closer than the end of Waverly’s bed. “I had it less than a day and let me tell you, that thing packs a punch.”

“Wynonna—”

“No, no, hold on.” Nicole shut her mouth. “I’m sorry. If I’d listened to you earlier...”

“Don’t. Just.” She shook her head, and Wynonna, to her surprise, actually did stop. “We both ignored warning signs. There’s been so much going on, and... and all of us were dealing with our own stuff. But you know she wouldn’t want us bickering over whose fault it is.”

“I’m trying to say it’s my fault,” Wynonna insisted.

“I know.” Nicole chuckled. “I know. And that’s exactly what she wouldn’t want, you know that.”

Wynonna heaved a sigh, but was quiet for a moment, her gaze on Waverly. “Yeah.”

For a moment, they simply existed together, watching over Waverly as she slept.

“Our girl, huh,” Wynonna noted.

Nicole cringed and looked down. “Oh, uh—”

“Relax, Nicole. She is, I mean. Ours.”

Nicole let out a breath and squeezed Waverly’s hand beneath the blanket. “Yeah.”

“I’m gonna kick the glass off my bed and get some sleep. You staying?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and Wynonna looked at her, maybe sensing that it meant a lot more than just one thing. “Yeah, I’m staying.”

Nicole growled and wrinkled her nose at the touch of a hand against her shoulder, and became aware of a few things all at once. Firstly, that she was sitting in a chair. Secondly, that her neck ached horrendously where her head had come to rest against the back of said chair. Thirdly, that Waverly’s hand was cupping her cheek, her thumb stroking a soft path up and down her skin.

Nicole groaned and half opened one eye, and Waverly leaned down to kiss her forehead.

“There you are.”

Nicole slowly raised her head and rubbed the back of her neck with a low hiss, and Waverly’s hand slid around to rub the stiff muscles instead.

“Mornin’,” Nicole mumbled.

Waverly chuckled. “Morning. Baby, when I said stay, I didn’t mean you had to stay in the chair all night.”

Nicole grunted and lifted one shoulder. “Made sense at the time?”

Waverly kissed her forehead, chuckling. “There’s something I need to go get in town, then chat with Wynonna, but we’ll meet up at BBD in a couple hours?”

There was a tiny, subvocal hitch in her breath, a bit of lingering tension, but after the night she’d had, that was hardly surprising.

“Sounds good,” Nicole said, rolling her head back and forth and earning a muted chorus of crackling sounds from her neck. “Ugh.”

“New bed’s supposed to come in today,” Waverly told her, and smiled. “So promise me there’ll be no more of this, okay?”

Nicole flashed her a weak grin and levered herself up out of the chair, stretching, groaning, then letting out a low, muted rumbling noise that was all wolf. “Promise,” she said, and kissed Waverly’s forehead. “See you in a bit.”

As she left, she found that the homestead was largely empty. Wynonna flashed her what seemed like a knowing grin—which didn’t make sense, but when did Wynonna ever make sense, really—and jerked a thumb at the fridge.

“Put your soup in.”

“Oh,” Nicole said, and chuckled. “Yeah. Thanks. It was for Waverly.”

“Oh trust me,” Wynonna said, laughing. “I could tell.”

Nicole grinned and gathered up her coat, though finally she didn’t really need it, and she headed to her cruiser to get back into town. The wolf was a warm, heavy presence in the back of her mind,
and for once, it really wasn’t unwanted. Just that small concession, it seemed, made it happy, as did Waverly’s recent demon eviction—she could feel the wolf rumbling contentedly and sprawling unobtrusively in the background of her thoughts, pleased that their pack was finally okay again.

*Other than Mikael, and the crime scene,* she thought, both to herself and in its general direction. It growled ineffectually at whoever had hurt people in their domain. As she headed back into town, she took comfort in the knowledge that soon enough, they’d work out what was going on. Nothing could stand against the combined strength of BBD, not now that they were all together again.

When she got to the station, showered and significantly less stiff than when she’d woken up, the Earps were nowhere to be seen, but she let herself into the BBD offices. Dolls and Doc were bent over a table, investigating something, together, which was even more odd, and Jeremy was flipping through a map and a set of files that looked older than she was. She paused in the doorway and cleared her throat, smirking when all three of the men jerked and stood up straighter.

“Hey,” she said, lifting her folder in greeting. “So, are we waiting on the Earps?”

Jeremy gave her an odd look, then looked to Dolls. The glare he got back made him raise both hands, palms out, shrugging. “Got it, got it, not my business, I know.”

Nicole frowned, shooting Dolls a slight glare of her own. Jeremy wasn’t exactly her favorite person, but she did feel a little bad that everyone seemed to be bossing him around.

“Probably worth waiting,” Dolls noted, but gestured to the conference table so that Nicole could lay out her files and get set up. “Waverly should probably hear this.”

Nicole nodded, laying out photos and a couple printouts the guys could peruse on the table but otherwise focusing on her own tasks in the interim. It didn’t take much longer for the final two to arrive, though when they did, Nicole could smell the tension and fear from across the room. Wynonna was wearing her usual impenetrable mask, but she was radiating strain, and Nicole frowned at her, glancing to Waverly when Wynonna’s expression gave her nothing to go on. Waverly pressed her lips together and shook her head a fraction, and Nicole nodded, the whole exchange taking less than a handful of seconds.

“So,” she said, before Dolls or, worse, Jeremy, could notice what she’d noticed and put their feet in their mouths. Waverly drifted closer until she was standing at Nicole’s side, leaning hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder. “Here’s what I’ve got.” She handed out printouts and glossy photo paper, grimacing a little. “Total bloodbath. Victims are Gareth and Portia Tremblay. Married for about five years, no children, minimal family.”

“That is a lot of blood,” Jeremy muttered, looking queasy before passing on the photos back to Nicole. She grimaced, taking them, and this time had no sassy comments for him.

“That is quite a lot of blood,” Doc noted, looking over Wynonna’s shoulder at the photo she was holding. “More particularly, it is a lot of blood that our little friends here seem to have collected.”

“That’s the part I can’t figure,” Nicole said, crossing her arms over her chest and picking up a staccato drumroll of fingers on elbows. “The small footprints would make me think something the size of a child, but beyond that...”

“How the hell’d they get out of the house.” Dolls inhaled, frowning at the photos. “Goblinoid would be my guess. Jeremy, run a check through the archives. Do we have anything of this size that flies?”
“Mmm,” Jeremy said, and scurried back to his computer.

Waverly made a faint sound of interest and grabbed at another photo, an overhead shot looking down at the bucket. She showed it to Wynonna, who gave her a blank look and shrugged her shoulder. “Doesn’t that look like when Gus helped us tie-dye shirts?”

“Oh my god,” Wynonna muttered, though it lacked some of her usual spark, and Nicole eyed her, concerned. She smelled... different. Not bad, not enough to really make her worry after yesterday’s demonic adventure, just, something was changing, maybe? “You wore that thing every night for like three years.”

“It was a comfortable shirt, okay?” Waverly protested, but then she refocused. “Okay but seriously. Jeremy, hold that thought.”

He looked up from his computer with the smallest of frowns. “What? Why?”

“I don’t think it flies,” she said, jogging over to a shelf of heavy books, some of which Nicole was pretty sure she’d seen Waverly using the last time she’d been present for a research stint. “I think that it’s...” She let one of the heavy tomes fall open on the table and flipped through the pages. “Aha!” She pointed to the page, which featured an elaborate ink drawing of a gnome-like creature in a sodden wet hat.

“Redcaps,” Dolls said, peering at the open book.

“Ohhh, of course!” Jeremy said, snapping his fingers.

“Redcaps?” Wynonna said, eyeing them all in turn. Doc shrugged as her gaze passed across him. “Listen, I’ve done the whole ‘bad trip’ thing, I’m good.”

Jeremy squinted at her, and Waverly looked very much like she was trying not to laugh. “No, Wynonna, Redcaps are like...”

“Some people would call them ground troops for the Sidhe,” Dolls said.

“Oh!” Nicole said. “No, wait, I think I’ve heard of those. They’re like, Faerie mercenaries basically, aren’t they?”

Dolls waved a hand in a sort of gesture, but nodded. “Close enough. Most myths describe them as being bloodthirsty little savages. Usually they’re held in check by Fae rules, but sometimes one or two will slip loose and cause some trouble.”

“Like, say, sneaking across the boundary to the Ghost River Triangle on the solstice?” Waverly suggested, wincing.

“Just like,” Dolls said. “Frankly, I’m surprised it’s taken us this long to catch wind of them. Could be they’ve been in the woods till now though.”

“All right,” Doc said, frowning at Wynonna, then Dolls, then Waverly. “Enlighten me. How did you work that out on just the bucket of blood.”

“Well,” Jeremy said, before Dolls or Waverly could answer. “They get their name because they dip their hats in the blood of their enemies, to dye the cloth red.”

Wynonna made an exaggerated gagging noise.
Nicole grimaced. “Okay, that’s horrifying. But how’d they get out? There was no sign of them outside the house. I did a full circuit of the place, but there was nothing.”

Dolls looked to Jeremy, who looked back toward the computer, then frowned. “There’s nothing I know of about Redcaps being able to fly. Maybe if they used some kind of gateway teleportation by tapping into the innate power of the house’s inherent portal—”

“English, mathlete,” Wynonna grumbled, and he sighed.

“The door? It’s possible they could have manipulated the front door in order to let them use its power, y’know, as a door—which is basically just a gateway between two realms—to jump to somewhere else.”

Wynonna groaned and hung her head backward. “Then how the hell are we gonna find them? They could be anywhere by now.”

Nicole looked to Waverly, who was flipping through the book again.

“Hm. Most accounts describe Redcaps being attracted to places where tyranny and wicked deeds have happened, especially bloodshed. That’s why they were said to dwell in old towers and castles. Especially in western Europe, where most of the myths started.”


“Courthouse?” Wynonna suggested.

Dolls shook his head. “Unlikely. Trials wouldn’t leave that kind of mark on a place, even with all the guilty verdicts.”

Doc narrowed his eyes. “The trailer park? It is certainly a place of tyranny and wicked deeds, and who knows what manner of creatures have taken up residence since the Revenants took to the winds.”

“You mean after that goo-monster got done with the place,” Wynonna muttered, earning a faint smile from Doc.

“That is true, yes.”

Waverly tapped a finger to her lips. “Maybe. Redcaps often like to murder travelers, and the trailer park is close to some major crossroads. Though if other monsters have taken up there, the Redcaps might have to fight them for territory.”

Jeremy shrugged, evidently satisfied to let others guess.

“The Wainwright,” Nicole suggested, and suddenly she had five sets of eyes on her. She grumbled, waving her hands for emphasis as she talked. “Just, you know. Bobo’s big plot would certainly count for the tyranny and wicked deeds part. Plus, bloodshed, if you count several dozen townsfolk trying to claw their own faces off. And it’s a popular spot, still in use as a hotel. Lots of travelers there.”

“Good call,” Dolls said, nodding. “We’ll want to move fast though. Hard to say when the Redcaps would’ve gotten there, depending how precise their mode of transportation is. Last thing we need is more bodies.”

“See?” Jeremy said, slapping a hand on Nicole’s shoulder. “I knew they were messing with me
when they said you weren’t part of the team! Super smart. Heckin’ good pupper. 13 out of 10.”

Nicole blinked at him, and the others slowly turned looks of confusion or alarm his way. Waverly in particular kept glancing between him and Nicole, chewing on her lip.

“Ohhh,” Jeremy said, more muted now. “Was I not supposed to know about the werewolf thing.”

Dolls was fighting a smile, but raised a hand. “Everyone except for Lucado knew, Jeremy, just, breathe.”

Nicole buried her face in one hand, mostly to keep from laughing, and Waverly blew out a bewildered breath.

“Jeremy,” Wynonna said, trailing off meaningfully.

“Yep,” Jeremy said, pulling his hand away. “Shutting up.”

Nicole patted his arm in return, and found herself grinning. He beamed. “No, it’s cool, Jeremy. It’s cool.”

They hit the Wainwright late that night. Dolls went ahead, ensuring that all guests and staff were accounted for. Jeremy stayed at the station and Doc, leaving the running of Shorty’s temporarily to Rosita’s watchful eye and abundantly capable hands, joined the main group of them around 10. They convened a few yards down from the Wainwright, by Dolls’ car, in the shadow of a busted streetlamp.

“All right,” Nicole rumbled, handing out earpieces and tucking her own into a bag like the one she’d used on the crocotta mission. The too-large outfit she’d chosen for the evening’s work fit a little better now that she’d partially shifted, her shoulders a little broader than usual and her face slightly distorted, to mask her profile. The last thing she needed was to be recognized by hotel staff. “Everyone wears one of these.”

“Remember,” Waverly said, looking from Doc, to Wynonna, to Nicole, and then to Dolls. “These things are Faerie, so we’ll need Peacemaker to put them down for good.”

“Which means the rest of us are on search and capture, people,” Dolls said, checking the action on his pistol before he holstered it. “If we can do this without general use of firearms that would be preferred, but Nedley knows what’s going on, and he’s touched base with the Wainwright staff to give us some time to work. But it would be ideal...” He turned, grabbing a duffel bag from the tailgate of his car, unzipping it, and handing out short iron clubs that looked like they might’ve been reworked from posts of a wrought iron fence. “To use these.”

Doc took the one handed to him, but gave Dolls a look of extreme skepticism. “And what, pray tell, is this for.”

“Iron,” Waverly explained. “Faerie hate it.” She looked at Nicole and gave her a sheepish smile. “It’s kinda like you and silver.”

Nicole nodded, hefting the club experimentally in one hand before tucking it into a strap over her right shoulder for easy access. She cracked her knuckles. “Let’s go then,” she said, earning a look from Doc that was just bordering on concerned.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side, Miss Haught.” She grinned, baring fangs at him, and
winked. He shivered. “What big teeth you have, indeed.”

When it came down to it though, the show for Doc had been just that. A show. As soon as she slipped through the back door of the Wainwright, her wolf picked up a low, displeased grumble that barely, just barely, made it out of her mouth. This was the last place it wanted to be, the memories of the solstice a little too fresh and a little too unsettling for comfort. The place was in so many ways exactly as it had been when they’d last been there. The scent of cleaning agents was the same, the lingering wisps of dinner were the same, the upholstery and the drapes were the same. The only thing missing was peach-scented champagne and a hundred-some people milling about.

“You’re sorta growling. Did you find something?”

She cleared her throat. “Sorry, no, just. Don’t really like being here.”

“You couldn’t mention that before we all crawled in through windows and shit?” Wynonna asked.

“Saved us all some trouble? In case anyone forgot, this is the second time the plan has involved me climbing in this particular second-story window.”

Nicole snorted a laugh and Waverly cut in, exasperated. “I told you you should go in on the ground floor, but you insisted, remember?”

Dolls’ voice came next as Nicole skirted around a prep room, checking under the furniture and moving on.

“I swear, both of you, quiet. Keep focused.”

Nicole caught Waverly’s eye when they both stepped out of their respective hidey-holes into the main lobby. Waverly gestured to the front desk, and Nicole nodded, turning toward it as Waverly headed into the next wing of the ground floor. Something in the wolf changed slightly, hesitating, and Nicole frowned. A careful sniff at the air brought her a new smell, one she didn’t recognize from the solstice, but it was hard to make sense of it, because inexplicably the smell reminded her of sardines.

She took a moment to scent the air and listen to the dim, steady gait of boots upstairs where Dolls and Wynonna were prowling about. Doc was headed for the third floor, out of her hearing, but somewhere above she heard tiny, pattering footsteps. Peacemaker barked once, and Wynonna’s voice lit up the communications channel with a shout of triumph, but in almost the same instant, Dolls’ voice came through again. He said no real words this time, just a low curse and then a grunt of effort. Nicole matched a distant thump of impact with a high-pitched wail of pain, followed by Dolls shouting something unintelligible and the odd, but strangely distinct sound of a small body running down a hallway in a series of short leaps. There was a faint but solid thump thump thump from the upstairs hallway as it made its getaway from Dolls, and then Nicole spotted a small creature, around the size and shape of a large child, bounding down the stairs toward the lobby.

It was an ugly thing, short and squat and reminiscent of goblins from an old animated film she’d seen as a kid, with big, froglike eyes and a flat nose that looked like it had run into a wall a few too many times. It was dressed in nothing but a pair of hideous bloodstained overalls made of ratty denim that looked like it had been cut off a scarecrow. True to its name, a floppy cap was pulled low on its head, the hem nearly as low as its eyebrows, and it had evidently not been dry when the
creature had put it on, because there were dried rivulets of blood where the fabric had dripped down its hair and face.

Nicole let out a full, deep snarl and drew her club. It saw her, its eyes bulging even wider as it realized it had been flanked, but it was too caught in its own momentum to stop. She heard Waverly rounding the corner to double back to the lobby as the Redcap cleared the halfway mark on the stairs.

“Nicole!” Waverly screamed, her voice duplicating in the receiver. Nicole flinched at the onslaught of sound, half-turning and raising her shoulders to cover her ears.

The third Redcap had crawled up onto the front desk while Nicole had her back turned, and took his chance to leap as Waverly raised her voice in warning. Its short blade, which looked like it had been made of sharpened fishbone, bit into Nicole’s shoulder, and she snarled, twisting to try to dislodge the nasty little creature. It clung onto the back of her hoodie with its scrabbling little nails and twisted the blade in her back, even as the first Redcap cleared the final few steps and barreled into her chest, taking both foe and ally alike to the ground in a heap. The two Redcaps scratched at her with their nails and stabbed at her with their knives as she let a little more of the wolf loose, growing a bit bigger and a bit furrier for her trouble. She couldn’t figure where she’d dropped her club, but she raked at them with her own claws, twisting and writhing around them as she tried to get loose. She felt them pulling at her clothes, fabric tearing and ripping into skin beneath, and their sodden caps slapped at her shoulders, her face, her back, smearing half-dried blood across her clothes and fur and hair.

An iron club slammed into her shoulder, wrenching a strangled yowl from her, and then another hit a Redcap in the back of the head, and it broke away from her with a terrible squeal and a stench of burning meat and hair.

“Get off of her!” Waverly shouted, beating the club down again and again on the crouching, wailing goblin, forcing it into a corner and brandishing her club at it to keep it from attempting another escape. Nicole was dimly aware of footsteps pounding down the stairs, and she tore free of the third Redcap just as Wynonna leapt the last few steps, landing hard on the ground and putting a bullet into the Faerie’s forehead. It collapsed into a heap of cracking, autumnal leaves, and blew away, and Wynonna rounded on the third, which Waverly was still threatening with her club. And also Nicole’s, she noticed, when she finally dragged herself upright and looked back, wincing and growling as her various scratches and puncture wounds started knitting shut.

“Waves,” Wynonna said, putting a hand on Waverly’s shoulder to pull her back. “That’s enough.”

“Right,” Waverly said, breathless from fear and exertion, and backed off a step, giving Wynonna clearance to ratchet Peacemaker’s hammer back for the third time. Her third shot left several handfuls’ worth of leaves and a single, elegantly carved bone knife in a heap on the floor. The knife Dolls promptly scooped into a plastic bag and pocketed, for Jeremy’s later study and cataloguing.

Waverly dropped the clubs to grab at Nicole’s shoulders, looking her over. “Baby, baby, I’m sorry —”

“Are you kidding?” Nicole grinned and scooped her up, hugging her tight. Waverly laughed, kicking her feet a little and wrapping her arms around Nicole’s shoulders. “That was awesome!”

Doc holstered his revolvers, amused, and looked Nicole up and down as Dolls and Wynonna
moved to make one more circuit of the building together.

“That’s an awful lot of blood, Nicole, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, grinning at him and finally down-shifting, setting Waverly down once she was at her usual height. She rolled the shoulder Waverly had hit, then patted herself down. “Gimme another minute or so and all this’ll be healed shut.”

“Damn,” Doc said, tipping his hat to her. “Glad to see one of us has a relatively good deal as grants health and longevity.” She made a face and bobbed her head to say I dunno about that, but Doc nodded to Waverly. “If you ladies will excuse me, I am told the work of a businessman is never truly done.”

Waverly waved a hand, chuckling, and Doc promptly sauntered out the Wainwright’s doors, whistling to himself.

“He really is something else, isn’t he,” Nicole said.

Waverly chuckled and leaned up to kiss Nicole’s cheek while she was turned to watch Doc make his way down the block. “Not just him.”

Wynonna and Dolls returned, the former looking thrilled with herself and the latter trying not to smile too much, because, at least in Nicole’s estimation, indicating he was pleased with his agents’ performance would cause him physical agony, even after being off the job for two months.

“So,” Wynonna prompted, grinning at him. “How’d we do?”

“Nice job,” Dolls said, looking appropriately pained to admit it.

Wynonna threw her hands in the air with a whoop of joy, and Nicole smiled. Whatever had been bothering her before, she’d set it aside for now, it seemed. Though she’d swear Wynonna still smelled just that little bit different. Hormonal change maybe?

No. Wait. She couldn’t actually be pregnant.

Could she?

“So,” Nicole said, before she could think better of it. “Drinks to celebrate, I assume?”

Wynonna’s grin faltered suddenly, and she looked to Waverly.

“Oh,” Waverly said, fumbling. Nicole looked at her, blinking, then at Wynonna, who was resolutely not looking at her. Holy shit. No wonder Wynonna was so out of sorts this morning. “We should probably get home, right? Didn’t we have a thing to do?”

“Yeah,” Wynonna said, agreeing a little too quick. “Still gotta clean up the place.”

Dolls winced. “Right. Sorry about that.”

“Wait,” Nicole said, distracted for a moment from this revelation. “Wait, hold on. You’re why the house looked so smashed up?”

Dolls gave her a peevish look. “Lucado,” he said, as if that explained everything.

She pressed her lips together. “Ah. Well,” she said, looking to Wynonna, putting on her best innocent expression. If Wynonna didn’t want news getting out—and assuming she was even right
—then that was fine by her. Wouldn’t be the first time they’d kept secrets for each other, anyway. “Listen, no problem. I can come by and help if you like, otherwise I’ll see you guys later?”

Wynonna looked... relieved. Which meant something was definitely up.

“I think we’ll be all right,” Waverly said, and smiled up at her. “Thank you though.” Wynonna nodded, and Waverly walked her back toward the door. They lingered for a moment in the entryway. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Mm,” Nicole said, smiling. “Bright and early, probably. Nedley’s got me in before dawn on the morning shift, but I’ll be off at noon?”

“Sounds perfect,” Waverly murmured, wrapping her arms around Nicole and burying her face against her chest. “Feels like I haven’t been able to think straight.”

Nicole smiled and kissed the top of her head. “Home base.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, grinning. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

She pulled away, and Nicole headed back outside toward her car. Though, strangely enough, when she got there, she found Doc leaning against the wall, a cloud of smoke preceding him.

“Thought you were heading back to Shorty’s?” she called, as she slid around to the door of her cruiser.

“Checked in,” he said smoothly, and grinned at her. “Just waitin’ for Marshal Dolls.”

“Really?” she asked, looking back toward the Wainwright and raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

“We have been goin’ over some of the details of that whole blood-oath nonsense and hashin’ out what has been goin’ on while Lucado was in charge. Had a bit more to discuss tonight after this Redcap business was attended to.”

“Oh,” she said, and waved a hand in farewell. “See you tomorrow then, Doc.”

“Til tomorrow,” he said, smiling as she got into her cruiser and pulled away.

It occurred to her, when she was almost home, that if Wynonna really was pregnant, chances were entirely too good that it was Doc’s.

*Oh,* she thought, pulling into her driveway. *Well, shit.*

Chapter End Notes

Big ol’ shoutout to *elicatkin* for calling Redcaps back on chapter 41. Nicely done, my dude. *Nicely done.*
Nedley checked in a little before noon, stopping by her desk with his stolen X mug in hand—evidently Dolls had not worked out where it had gone yet to ask for it back—and didn’t so much ask how it went as stop in earshot and raise his eyebrow.

She nodded, and the corner of his mouth twitched behind his mug.

“How it went?” he asked, his voice very low.

“None,” she said, smiling up at him. “Got to them before they could hurt anyone else.”

“Good,” he said, and nodded at her. “Good you’re not hurt, either.”

“Pretty sure I’ve still got some sick days left, sir.”

He snorted and headed for his office. “It’s February,” he said. “Given your track record, I’ll be surprised if you still have any in May.”

She chuckled and went back to her work, but it wasn’t long before Wynonna swept into the room in her drinks well with others shirt and a grin so wide Nicole could tell it was 80% fake. She leaned her elbows on the counter and put her hands together like she was praying.

“I really really want you to give me a case. Any case.”

Nicole glanced up at her, for a moment giving her a really? sort of look. Was she supposed to find a new BBD job in twelve hours?

“Sorry girl, I got nothin’,” she said, and looked back down at her monitor.

“Come on,” Wynonna said, and if Nicole didn’t know better she’d think Wynonna was begging. Then again, given how much getting some action had lifted her mood yesterday, maybe that made sense. Maybe she was just desperate for something to distract her. “Cannibal psychiatrist! Scorpion/Shih Tzu hybrid!” Nicole wondered if Waverly should revoke Wynonna’s Netflix subscription. “Ooh. Creepy clowns. Those are really hot right now.”

“Wynonna. Take a day off.”

“Boo,” she said, pouting.

“Get a... a spa treatment!”

“Purgatory doesn’t have any spas,” Wynonna scoffed, moving around the counter to let herself in through the swinging door. “Unless you count the jacuzzi Willie drives around in his pickup.”

Nicole felt her eyes unfocusing as she tried to look at her monitor, thinking idly of the several citations stacking up against Willie for parking that very same jacuzzi-pickup in public spaces without a permit to do what he insisted was not actually business transactions.

“Go shopping?” she suggested. Just a few more minutes, and then she could leave.

“Why?” Wynonna said, with startling urgency. “Do my clothes look tight?”

Shit. Oops.
Nicole looked up, trying to figure out a way to get herself back out of that comment, but Waverly came through the open doorway just then with a bright, cheery, “Hi!” and Nicole felt her stress leach away. Waverly was dressed more simply today, but she was wearing a black choker that made Nicole think of a collar in the best possible way, and the wolf was aching to take her home and just... wait, no, maybe that wasn’t the wolf. Or at least wasn’t all wolf.

“For you,” Waverly continued, setting a go-cup in front of Wynonna.

“Heyyyy,” Wynonna said, taking a healthy-sized sip from it and then spitting it back at the cup. Nicole twisted her mouth to avoid snickering, the scent of tea wafting over from Wynonna immediately. “Question. Why,” she asked Waverly, sounding of all things betrayed, “Does my coffee taste like it was brewed in Nedley’s hat.”

“Because it’s not coffee,” Waverly said. “It’s Soothing Sunshine Herbal Tea! Caffeine-free,” she insisted, leveling her sister with a meaningful glare.

No booze, and no coffee. Nicole’s theory was sounding more accurate by the hour.

“Well if it sounds like a hippie hemorrhoid cream, I don’t want it in my cup.”

“Waverly,” Nicole said, but she couldn’t help smiling, not when her own soothing sunshine was in the room. “Can you... get her out of here? And then, y’know, come back, cuz. I’m off in ten minutes.”

“Ugh,” Wynonna groaned. “You guys make The Notebook look bleak.” Waverly gave her a withering look, but Nicole couldn’t help smiling, and ducked her head. Was she really that transparent? “You practice those googly eyes in the mirror, or just, natural talent?”

She tried to keep her eyes on her screen and not her girlfriend, whose eyes she could feel on her in turn, but she scented blood along with the distant sound of footsteps, and she looked up when a nun stopped in the doorway, her hands absolutely covered in gore.

“My boss was killed,” the nun reported, as Waverly turned around, shocked.

“God really is dead,” Wynonna breathed, and Nicole had to bite down on her lip to keep from laughing.

“Uh, wha- uh, please, Sister, come with us,” Waverly said, shooting Nicole a questioning glance. She raised her hands, palms up, and nodded. “This one’s got you guys written all over it. Please, feel free.”

“I was sorting through the decorations in our basement,” the nun told them, as they headed for BBD’s offices, “When I felt...”

“Hungry?” Wynonna suggested, as they moved out of Nicole’s line of sight. “Nauseous? Horny!” There was a slight pause, in which Nicole assumed Waverly was giving her sister an earful with looks alone. “No judgement! You’re a nun, not a saint.”

“Cold,” the nun said, and she distantly heard a chair being set down. They’d forgotten to close the door, which spoke volumes to their distraction, but it let Nicole keep an ear out even as she wrapped up some filing on her computer. “Freezing cold. I could see my breath. And then I turned around and saw her. A Victorian woman—”

“In black,” Wynonna said, at the same time.
“And then I don’t know what happened,” the nun continued, undisturbed by the fact that Wynonna recognized the thing. “Suddenly I couldn’t move! Not a muscle. And then I just watched. As she... ate him.”

“Don’t worry, Sister,” came Waverly’s soft voice. And she thought Nicole sounded professional, yet caring. “You’re safe. We’ll find out who did this. Come on.” Nicole listened as their footsteps came closer, then turned down the hall, as Waverly led the Sister to another room to rest.

“So you’ve seen this woman before,” Jeremy said, slowly, cautious.

“At the creepy-crawly condo,” Wynonna said, nodding. “She must be the one who got ceremonial with the crows and... poor Earl...” Nicole frowned at her screen, wondering what the hell had been happening while she was avoiding Lucado. Waverly headed back into BBD’s offices, smiling briefly at Nicole as she passed, still holding a small reporter-style notebook and fiddling with it occasionally as she walked.

“Shit,” Wynonna said, as Waverly rejoined the conversation. “I thought I was seeing things! I thought it was... Willa.”

“The condo was built on a former Catholic school,” Jeremy noted. “Now we’re looking at a church basement. Both are—”

“Consecrated ground,” Waverly provided.

“Yeah.”

Wynonna inhaled, sharp. “She was looking for the same thing again! Another seal! There’s more than one seal!” Nicole’s blood ran cold and she jerked, slamming a knee into her desk. If Wynonna meant the seals Nicole thought she did, everything in her life was starting to converge in a way she was very, very uncomfortable with. And now she couldn’t talk to Mikael about what to do. God, this whole thing got worse and worse. If one was already broken... “Okay, if someone moved it, it could still be on another sacred site, right? How many of those do we have?”

“In the Triangle? Uh,” Waverly said, thinking. Nicole glanced up as Dolls and Doc swept down the hall. Together, again. What the hell were they working on? “Churches, synagogues, mosques?”

“Yes, I can narrow it down using an algorithm and a complex set of—”

“Jeremy,” Wynonna warned.

“Math! I can narrow it down using math. I just need 24 hours and a burrito.”

“Hey,” Dolls said, interrupting. “You might wanna sit down.”

“Why?” Wynonna said, her voice rising a little too high. “I’m fine. I feel fine! I’m totally fine.”

“Yeah I was actually talking to Jeremy,” Dolls said.

“Oh yeah, sure,” Jeremy said, and she heard the scrape of the chair and then a light thump as Jeremy promptly slipped off of it.

“So,” Dolls said, once some seat-shuffling had occurred and Jeremy was upright again. And, in a huge and comical oversight, they still hadn’t closed the door. He handed something to Wynonna and Nicole barely made out the sounds of pages turning as she shuffled through. “Jeremy was right. BBD ghosted us. All Moody feels like giving us is this file. Something that got loose from the
blacksite. But otherwise? They’re ‘cutting their losses’ in the Triangle. We’re on our own now. Completely.”

“So, this is good news, right?” Waverly said, and Nicole could hear her shoes clicking as she paced. “I mean, no more blood contract!”

“And no more backup, either,” Doc noted.

“Then who is paying us?” Jeremy asked, bewildered. “Does this mean I’m fired?”

“We are free agents,” Dolls said, with a wealth of meaning behind it that made Nicole a little uncomfortable even just to listen to, without having to see his face, “Free to make our own rules and to pursue our own objectives.”

“Well that’s my point,” Dolls said. “There are no areas that are off-limits anymore.”

“What is happening,” Waverly breathed, and Nicole grinned, hastily stifling it when Lonnie walked by and gave her a confused look. She should’ve figured her girl would catch their real meaning. She was too sharp for that.

“Okay, I’m gonna need someone to write me a reference letter,” Jeremy muttered.

“Oi! Weirdos!” Wynonna said, her bootheels clicking as she got up. “Crazy chick. Big-ass magic gun. There are still demons terrorizing Purgatory. Garroting priests, for example? Mucho illegal; not super Christian. So, you’re all free to do whatever you want, but far as I’m concerned? We hunt supernatural shit, we kill supernatural shit. No piece of metal needed.”

Nicole heard her slump back into her chair.

“Yeah,” Jeremy said. “Peacemaker’s metal.”

“Zip it, Algebra.”

“Oh!” Jeremy said. “I’m gonna go.” He got up, and Nicole heard a hand settle on his shoulder and push him back down.

“The hell you are,” Doc said.

“The hell I am,” Jeremy said, agreeing entirely too quickly.

Oh that poor, smitten boy.

“I’m gonna go find that seal,” Jeremy said, correcting course. “S-uh– does anyone want a snack? Doc, do you want a snack? I’m gonna get– I’m gonna get you a snack. Okay.”

“Hey uh, Wynonna,” Dolls said, lowering his voice slightly. God help her, she was desperately
“curious—she shifted her ears a bit to catch the rest. “You wanna grab a coffee with me? Uh, there’s something I wanna discuss with you. That’s... personal.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“How about she meets you there?” Waverly cut in, her voice tense and almost too confident. “Yeah, we’ve got stuff that we need to discuss?”


Seconds later, Waverly was dragging Wynonna out of BBD and into the doorway of the bullpen, Wynonna hissing complaints as they went.

“Ow!”

“You realize,” Waverly said, crossing her arms over her chest and keeping her voice low, but not quite low enough for Nicole not to hear, “Dolls is about to tell you that he wants to be more.”

“More... than a dragon?”

“More than your boss,” Waverly insisted.

“What?”

“He asked you for coffee to discuss something personal,” Waverly said. Nicole struggled not to bluntly look over at them, to avoid reminding them she could hear them. “It’s a date.” Wynonna squinted at her. “Yeah! And you said yes. You have to talk to Doc.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“Henry’s a big part of this whole... situation you got going on, isn’t he?” Wynonna said nothing, but fixed Waverly with a glare. “Yeah, and now Dolls is... going for it. I mean, you hiding this is not fair. To either of them!”

“Tough shit. It’s my decision who to tell, and when, and it’s my situation, and nobody gets to decide how to handle it but me. So stop pushing me. And while you’re at it, stop judging me.”

There was a pause as Waverly heard her, then looked down. “Okay.”

Nicole found her gaze drifting toward Waverly again. She might not know everything of what was going on, but she found herself full of pride, for... for both of them, really. It was good to see them talking again, after the downspiral that they’d been trapped in through most of January.

“Your girlfriend’s looking at you like you’re the fudge to her sundae,” Wynonna noted, and Nicole hastily looked back at her screen, though she could feel the smile still lingering around her mouth.

“She and I haven’t talked,” Waverly said, her voice very low. “Sinc– you know, talk-talked. Since I was tentacled.”

“Well, you should go,” Wynonna said.

“I can– I can stay,” Waverly offered. “If you want me to.”

“No,” Wynonna said, and heaved a sigh. “One of us should have a non-messed up romantic thingamajig.”
Wynonna left the room, and although Nicole was finished, she lingered where she was, tidying her desk until Waverly sighed, took a deep breath, and turned around. As soon as Waverly’s gaze tracked to her, her whole being softened a little, as if just the sight of Nicole lessened some of the strain. Waverly slipped around the counter as Nicole gathered her coat and her ballcap, and Nicole found her hand as easy as breathing, leading her out of the bullpen.

“Where’s your coat?” she asked, and Waverly glanced around herself, startled.

“Oh, god, probably back in BBD.”

“Here,” Nicole said, smiling. “Borrow mine. It’ll still be there later.”

Waverly sighed, grateful, and bundled herself into it. The sleeves were entirely too long and it fell to her hips like a child wearing their father’s clothing, but she nuzzled into the collar and smiled so widely it crinkled her eyes.

“Oh wow, this is so warm. You’re sure you don’t need it?”

Nicole grinned. “Trust me. I overheat in it. Come on.”

Waverly drove them back to the Homestead and once they were on the road, Nicole allowed herself a moment to actually just... breathe. When she thought about it, she felt like she hadn’t been able to since she was snatched out of her home by Loretta’s goons.

Which had been nearly a week ago.

Nicole leaned her head back against her seat. “God, it just never stops, does it.”

“It really doesn’t.”

“How are you? Really.”

“I’m...” Waverly let out a breath, her gaze tracking the road but her mind somewhere else. “Managing. I think.”

Nicole made a faint noise, acknowledgement more than answer.

“Just... piecing together what happened. Finding the edges of what was real, what wasn’t. Picking out the moments where I was still me, but listening to it, you know? Doing what it wanted because I thought it was what I wanted, without it ever actually being in full control. God, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, baby, trust me,” Nicole said, and reached across to lay a hand on Waverly’s arm, squeezing gently. “That makes perfect sense.”

Waverly glanced toward her, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and she smiled, but it was a bit shaky. “Maybe you should’ve been the one driving,” she teased.

“We can wait to talk till we’re in the house,” Nicole offered.

“Doubtful.”

Nicole raised her eyebrows.

“Nicole Haught, if I manage to keep my hands off you long enough to get upstairs, it’ll be a miracle.”
She laughed. “All right, all right. Then we have a time limit. We have till we park at the Homestead.”

Waverly nodded. Paused. Chewed her lip.

“Is that what it’s like for you?” she asked, her voice softer.

“What part?”

“Like... hearing it talking to you, feeling it pulling at you, digging tiny fingers in to take control. Blacking out and not remembering that you weren’t yourself.”

“Mm,” Nicole said, and looked out the windshield. “The wolf, you mean.”

“Yeah.”

“At the beginning it was... similar,” she said, drawing out the words as she thought about it. “Not exactly the same, but it would tug, it would look for the weaker spots to find ways to come out. And there’s still some ways it comes out whether I let it or not, like the—” She let her fangs shift longer, to demonstrate what she meant, and growled, the sound vicious, grating, and maybe a little too loud in the enclosed vehicle. “That stuff. I mean, it’s. It’s sort of me. But it’s also sort of the wolf? It’s hard to describe. And it’s circumstantial, if it’s me or not. But it also, I mean, she can’t speak, exactly. I can only really get a sense of what she’s feeling. Or maybe what she wants. Food, or a hunt, or violence, or...” Waverly glanced over, saw the way her face had turned red, and smiled. “You know.”

“Duly noted.”

“Hush.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, the blackouts though. That, yes. When the wolf takes full control, under the moon? That’s it. I’m not, y’know, there for that. Not really. And in the morning, I don’t remember what I did. What my body did, that is.”

Waverly frowned. “But when I was there. You remembered me reading.”

“That’s where it gets complicated,” Nicole conceded, frowning. “With you, it’s... it’s different. We.” She rolled her fingers along her knee in a steady drumbeat. “Share better, I guess. It’s not just the wolf, and it’s not just me. It’s both of us. So I remember most of it. Not everything, I’m still missing some time. I think at a certain point I fall asleep even if she’s still awake.”

“Sounds like having a shitty roommate,” Waverly said.

“Kind of,” Nicole said, and laughed. “Actually, yeah. That’s not a bad comparison.”

“You said that’s how it was at the beginning. And... you’ve never called it she before.”

“Huh,” Nicole said, and smiled a little. The wolf was quiet, comfortable. Content. It rumbled at her when she went looking for it, and then settled again. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

Waverly glanced over, maybe reading the look on her face.

“I’m glad, baby.”

“We got a bit off-topic though.”

Waverly heaved a sigh. “Yeah. I just. I feel like everything’s different now. Like I won’t ever be the same again, you know?”
“Yeah, I do. Listen, Waves... I’m no therapist, and I’m certainly not qualified to pretend to be one, but I will say this. Maybe you won’t ever be exactly the same as you were before this happened, no. But that’s okay. Because this doesn’t define you any more than me being what I am defines me.”

Waverly turned onto the Homestead proper and she slid to a stop in front of the house and undid her belt, but Nicole didn’t reach for hers. She’d see this out, and then they could go inside.

“And listen, Waverly, you’re smart. You’re so smart it’s scary sometimes.” Waverly glanced at her, her expression hard to read. “So I know this is rattling around in your head somewhere, because it’s the kind of thing you’d think. Worse, it’s the kind of thing that thing would tell you, would plant in there, to make sure you’d think this, just to fuck with you even after it was gone.”

Waverly narrowed her eyes. “Okay.”

“What happened to you doesn’t make you any less than what you were. And it doesn’t make me care about you any less.” She leaned across the center console and pressed a brief kiss to Waverly’s mouth. “Demon or no demon, I’m here to stay.”

For a moment, Waverly seemed frozen, but then her mouth twisted and she turned away, eyes squeezed shut.

“How,” she said, though it came out a little strangled and she tried again. “How do you do that, how do you... how do you know exactly what to say.”

Nicole smiled and leaned closer, pressing a second kiss to Waverly’s forehead. “I’m not scary-smart, but I know people. And I know you. And I know there’s a lot I didn’t see fast enough in the last two months—”

“No, Nicole, that’s not your fault.”

“Maybe not, but still.”

“Please,” Waverly said, and shook her head. “Please let’s not play that game.”

“Ohkay.” Nicole smiled and reached out to cup Waverly’s cheek in her hand. “Okay. We won’t.” Waverly leaned her face into Nicole’s hand. “For now,” she murmured, her voice dipping a little lower, enough that Waverly blinked and looked at her. “Let’s go inside.”

They did make it to Waverly’s bedroom, but it was a near thing, and probably they wouldn’t have if Nicole hadn’t guided Waverly in front of her to lead up the stairs. She left Nicole’s coat on the hook in the kitchen and Nicole decided, at the top of the stairs, that she didn’t even care that she was still in uniform—she had a bag of civvies but she’d left it in the Jeep and couldn’t even be bothered to find a problem with that, because Waverly was here. She was herself. She wasn’t patient exactly but it wasn’t a manic, edged thing, like it might’ve been before.

It was a contradiction of terms, a paradox that made Nicole’s heart race. Soft desperation. Gentle urgency. Need tempered with adoration; passion tempered by fascination. It was like a heated blanket in the darkest parts of Autumn.

When they reached Waverly’s doorway, Waverly slid her hands up to Nicole’s face and kissed her, warm and soft and everything that she remembered Waverly to be, and god, it ached, the relief. That awful, acrid bitterness she’d been tasting for two months was gone, as if it had never been. It was a physical sensation, the sudden absence of weight Nicole hadn’t fully felt piling up on her shoulders. She felt so full, so light that she couldn’t help a tiny laugh escaping her.
Waverly pulled back, just a little, but she let her fingers stray along Nicole’s cheek and jaw like she couldn’t bear to be separated. “Hm?”

“You taste like my Waverly again.”

Waverly beamed like the sun and closed the distance again and they made it a handful more steps toward her bed before they stopped. She grinned, trailing her hands down to pull at Nicole’s belt. Just like the first time, here in this room, with just a few details changed.

And it hit her then, as a flash. *I feel different,* she’d said. Was that Waverly? Or was that the demon’s idea of a sick joke?

There was a certain irony in the idea that it was Waverly who had been possessed, but now she was the one with darkness curling around her thoughts. What-ifs and could-have-beens that made her stomach twist.

“I—” Nicole lowered her hands to curl her fingers around Waverly’s, hesitating, and Waverly froze, sensing the shift.

“What’s wrong?”

Nicole shook her head, looking for words. “I was... I was just thinking. How much of the other times were– were you... you. Y’know, because– because you said things, and we did... things, and.” She bit her lip and Waverly’s gaze skittered away and she looked for words that wouldn’t cut like these, that wouldn’t hurt, but she couldn’t think of a better way to say it. “I don’t know what was real.”

“No,” Waverly said, and met her eyes again. “It was all real. Okay? It was all me.”

Nicole nodded, wrapping the words around her heart like armor, and Waverly’s mouth was on hers again as easy as breathing. Waverly guided her toward the bed again as Nicole’s hands moved without her really thinking about it. She tugged at Waverly’s shirt, sliding her fingers across bare skin, and there was a part of her that was aware that she was still wearing her utility belt and her boots, but there was another part that didn’t care.

And there was another part that remembered another kiss in uniform, where people could see them, where Tucker had *taped* them, and it all rushed back, the icy fear, the nerves. Waverly’s words eased her but what if Waverly was wrong, what if there had been times where it hadn’t been her and she’d just never noticed?

“How can you be sure?” she whispered, hating the way her voice cracked and broke, hating the fear that crawled out like smoke seeping through the gaps.

“Because,” Waverly said, and her hand was resting on Nicole’s collar and the other was on her shoulder and her eyes were tracking her, *looking* at her and *seeing* in a way that made Nicole feel a little less paranoid, a little less foolish. “I don’t remember much about when.” She paused. Swallowed. “It was in control.” Nicole let her gaze drop. God, if she’d just taken Mikael’s warnings for what they were, if she’d just asked him sooner or guessed that this was the Legion he had talked about, so much of this might have been different.

“But,” Waverly said, and leaned their foreheads together, Waverly’s warmth seeping into her. “I remember every second I was with you,” she said.

Nicole found her gaze drifting up again, finding Waverly, and the utter conviction of her words helped. Waverly was calm, or relatively so, and met her eye steadily.
“Every touch,” she continued, and her fingers traced down Nicole’s jaw, to the v of her shirt where the collar gapped open. The featherlight touch of her finger along the hollow of her throat sent shocks of heat down Nicole’s spine. “Every kiss.” She leaned in again, and this time her kiss was patient, gentle, the sweep of her tongue an easy, effortless thing. When she broke away Nicole let out a faint sound that sounded wolf but was all her. When she looked, she found that the wolf was utterly unconcerned, as if Nicole’s fear didn’t touch it at all, and that by itself was a comfort too. Waverly traced the edge of Nicole’s mouth and she found herself leaning into Waverly’s hand, finding the tips of Waverly’s fingers with her tongue.

“Well,” Nicole murmured, as Waverly leaned in for another kiss, “When you put it that way.” She slid her hands up Waverly’s back, half to feel warm, smooth skin against her palms and half to cushion her as Nicole bore her down onto her bed. As soon as Waverly was on her back she arched, pressing up along the length of Nicole’s body.

This time Nicole didn’t stop her from tugging at her belt, letting her gear drop away as Nicole stripped out of her shirt and bent over her again. Waverly’s hands skimmed up her sides and stalled on the open expanse of skin between collarbone and breast, her thumbs finding both of the long, pale, healed-over scars from Loretta’s knife.

“Nicole, what’s—?”

“Later,” Nicole breathed, bracing her weight on her knees so she could tug at the hem of Waverly’s top, drawing it up over her head and tossing it aside. “I promise, later.”

“Well if you promise,” Waverly murmured, her voice betraying her amusement even as it gave over to a sharp gasp as Nicole’s mouth found the black cloth of her necklace, her lips tracing the edge as her hands roamed lower, straying to familiar, well-practiced places until Waverly couldn’t speak any words that weren’t Nicole’s name.

Metaphors, Nicole decided then, were flawed and insufficient things. There were no words to properly express how it felt to have Waverly—to really have her, both in the carnal sense and in the sense that it was, even if Nicole had not known it at the time, finally only Waverly in her bed. There’d been so much she hadn’t sensed, so much she hadn’t picked up on, before, but now, looking back, it felt like she had known, or maybe the wolf had known, that their bed was not big enough for four souls.

Three, as it was, was a bit of a stretch, and although Nicole didn’t like sharing Waverly with the wolf any more than she’d liked sharing her body with it, they’d come to an understanding. Several, really. Most of which had to do with what the wolf was and was not allowed to do when they were in bed, but, well. That’s not really the point, is it.

But there were no similes, no flowery speeches, to explain how having Waverly in her bed felt like coming home. Nicole had been running for a long time. From her father, from his cult, and then from Shae. From the wolf. In some ways, even from herself.

It had been so long, she’d almost forgotten how it felt not to run. Not to look over her shoulder. To just be, to just exist in that moment between breaths.

Waverly was her oxygen tank and it felt so good to fill her lungs again.
When they came to rest, Waverly settled her head on Nicole’s shoulder, her braid half-undone, her body languid and warm at every point of contact. One of her arms sprawled across Nicole’s stomach and one of her legs tucked up around Nicole’s, arched over the curve of her hip.

“Hey Waves,” she said, because words were a tall order but her mind was spinning still, whirring along because there was so much still to tell Waverly. What had happened with Loretta, for one, and that she had some concerns about this woman in black that Wynonna had apparently seen.

“Hm?”

“We should talk more, huh.”

Waverly chuckled. “Yeah, I guess so. I believe you promised me some information.”

“I did,” Nicole mused. “I’m gonna get us some water first, but. Yes.” She got up, stretching, and Waverly’s eyes tracked her, watching the slope and arch of her body. Nicole wondered then, idly, what she looked like in the afternoon light. Did she look like Waverly did—supple and self-satisfied and warm? Did the light catch on the handful of scars that, due to supernatural origins, would never fully go away?

“You’re amazing, you know that, right?”

“Huh?” Nicole blinked, dropping her arms and turning to look at her.

“You are. Don’t ask me to explain it, just. In every way.”

Nicole smiled and leaned a hand on the bed, bending over to kiss Waverly. “I’m not gonna argue, baby.”

“Good. Cuz. You are.”

Nicole chuckled. “All right. Well, I’ll be right back.”

“You don’t want a robe or anything?”

“Nah,” Nicole said, and grinned. “I’ll just be downstairs for a minute.”
Nicole had her fair share of weird dreams. Most of them were either pseudo-premonitory or they were her memories, replayed as her human mind sifted through the archive for reruns while the wolf had its way with her body.

But this? She knew this wasn’t a moon-dream, for two reasons. Firstly, the full moon wasn’t until tomorrow.

Secondly, this dream was fucking bizarre.

The start of the dream dropped her into the middle of the bullpen. She was naked, which seemed a bit cliché, and she sighed, her dreaming mind evidently not so much concerned about the exposure as her waking mind would have been had this actually been happening for real. Instead, she felt so blasé about it that she actually propped her hands on her hips, looked around the room, and muttered the only thing that came to mind.

“Really? Isn’t this a bit tired?”

The room was filled with prop humans, in that way that only half-sensible dreams are. There were people in the room, her brain told her, but she couldn’t actually sense them. She could hear that distant, background-level muttering sound that was supposed to be the blanket indicator of people are talking, but if she actually focused hard enough to make out words, she realized that she was hearing some sort of weird combination of French, German, and something else that might’ve been Scandinavian. Or Greek. She wasn’t sure.

Similarly, if she looked around, she could see the blurry silhouettes of human beings in roughly the right colors, as if someone had taken a sequence of time-lapse photos and animated it. Vague human shapes oscillating back and forth in jerky, smeared patterns like the in-between frames from a cartoon.

Nedley, dressed in the suit he’d been wearing at the solstice party, stood on top of the counter. Not like he’d climbed there, but that he simply burst into existence like a firework. She looked up at him, but when he turned his face toward her, his eyes were milky white.

“When I retire,” he said, in the slow, numb moan you would expect from a zombie.

“Sheriff?” she asked, her fear as mild and distant as her consternation had been. “You okay?”

His image scratched and distorted, a jagged tear rippling up from his feet to his head like bad VHS tracking, and when he coalesced again, he was wearing his uniform, but his face was bloodied and his eye was swollen shut and several of his fingers were seeping blood and looked misshapen, as if something had slowly broken them, one at a time.

“You can’t stop everything,” he said, and this time her fear was real, and very sharp, shooting down her spine like icewater. Which meant something was wrong. Something was different. Was this actually going to happen to him? “You can’t save everybody, Haught.”

“What?”

His voice distorted, crackling like a record. She heard his voice, but the mangled version of him didn’t speak, just looked at her, as if willing her to understand.
“You’ll learn how this—” His voice distorted, scratching like a bad edit. “Works. It only took me 30 years.”

“No,” she told him, meeting his tired gaze with her own fiercely defiant one. Which might have been more impressive if she were actually wearing her uniform. Or any clothes at all, really. But, well, beggars can’t be choosers, right? “No, the day I accept that is the day we lose. And we’re not losing.”

“You can’t,” Nedley said again.

“Oh yeah?” she growled. “Watch me.”

The dream changed.

This time she was standing in the Wainwright. Still naked, which she could really do without. This time there were people around, real people. Specifically Dolls, Doc, Wynonna, Waverly.

And her. There was another version of herself, lying on the ground in the mismatched oversized sweats she’d worn for the Redcap mission. Her eyes were open, blindly staring, her chest still, her arms and legs sprawled in an inelegant X on the ground. Her dark clothes were patched with darker bloodstains and holes that showed her pale skin beneath, soaked with her blood.

“Jesus,” Nicole whispered, though her friends didn’t seem to hear her.

Waverly was kneeling on the floor next to the dead version of her, her hands limply flopped on the ground beside her. None of the others were saying anything, perhaps out of respect for Waverly’s grief.

“I’m sorry baby girl,” Wynonna said.

“Don’t,” Waverly said, her voice cracking on a pain so vibrant that it took Nicole’s breath away. “Please. We all made our choices to come here. She... she knew.”

Wynonna chuckled, the sound uncomfortable and a bit forced. “Well, on the plus side,” she said, though Waverly didn’t look up, “At least we don’t need to find a 12-foot coffin.”

Doc sighed and Dolls leveled her with a look.

“I know, I know,” she groused, and Waverly’s shoulders shook with silent, strangled sobs. “Sorry.”

The dream changed again.

This time she sat at a table. Specifically the Earps’ dining room table. Except it wasn’t in its usual spot in the kitchen on the Homestead. Instead, it was in an interrogation room. Just a bland, nondescript, concrete box, not specifically identifiable as a PSD interrogation room, almost more a Platonic ideal of what an interrogation room should be. In fact if it weren’t for the mismatched table, it would be as clean and as functionally precise as a TV set.

Nicole was sitting, still utterly naked, in the suspect’s chair, facing the mirror-window with her hands cuffed to the table—when she looked for the iron ring serving as a tether point, her brain skipped past details, her eyes giving her fuzzy, almost incomplete information, as if the dream itself were saying yeah yeah that part doesn’t fit just move along—and her gaze skidded up instead. Across the table from her sat a woman. A woman who looked familiar, somehow, but just slightly different enough that Nicole couldn’t place where she might’ve seen her.
Her eyes were closed, as if she had just in the last few moments drifted off into sleep. She was a redhead, like Nicole, more russet than flame, her hair long and draping over her shoulders in rich, wild waves. She was wearing a suit, perhaps playing the part of lawyer in this strange fiction her brain had cooked up, and had her legs crossed so that her skirt draped perfectly to her knees, her hands neatly folded in her lap. It was her hands that drew Nicole’s attention next, her nails neatly trimmed and painted black. She wore no jewelry, except for a choker of gold, curving lines that looked as delicate as spun sugar, wrapping around the woman’s neck like twining strands of ivy.

There was something about her, a subtle energy that oozed power. That, Nicole thought first, wasn’t surprising. After all that’s exactly the kind of image lawyers intentionally craft. But that wasn’t it. This woman didn’t give off the feeling of political, emotional, mental power, no. Beneath that tailored suit was raw physical strength, and yet even when she breathed, the gold collar—that’s what it was, Nicole realized a moment too late, a collar—never seemed like it would snap.

The woman smelled like something... familiar. Earth and woodsmoke, maybe. She reached for the wolf’s senses, to tell her more, but when she looked for the tether between the two, she found herself shifting forward in her chair instead. The woman mirrored her, shifting in her seat, the first movement she’d made since Nicole saw her.

She opened her eyes, fixing Nicole with a cool, yellow-gold stare.

“You...” Nicole breathed. “You’re the wolf.”

“Am I?” the woman asked, her voice light, but full of the growl Nicole was used to. It was almost sensual, somehow. Primal.

“It... aren’t you?”

The woman smiled, her fangs catching the light from overhead. “I am.”

“You’ve never talked before.”

“You’ve never listened.”

Nicole blinked, but didn’t really know what to say to that.

“Time is rather short, dear,” the wolf murmured. “So we need to get back to the question.”

“Oh I have lots of questions. Why I’m stuck in some weird not-quite-prophetic bullshit dream, for starters. Then, what about the seals? The woman in black?”

The wolf sighed. “The demon is trying to keep you asleep, dear, obviously. It’s why I had this much trouble connecting to you in the first place. As for the rest, you already have most of the pieces. You just don’t know which ones are which.”

“What does that mean?”

“The question, dear, is this: am I the wolf?”

“But you answered that question.”

“I did,” she said. “But you didn’t. Are you the wolf?”

Nicole frowned. “What?”

The wolf shimmered, her image changing until she looked just like Nicole—a perfect copy of her,
sitting naked in the other chair, complete with handcuffs.

She raised a hand-mirror, the chain of her cuffs jangling at the motion, and in the reflection, Nicole saw that now she looked like the wolf, even down to the suit, the painted nails that she realized looked so very much like their claws. She could feel the gold collar around her throat, perfectly fitted to her skin without constricting. It wasn’t oppressive, it wasn’t tight, even though it should’ve been. Instead it just felt like... like power. Like grace. Solid gold with just enough flex that she could move, turn her head, breathe. She did, and realized the gold smelled like wildflowers and leather.

Waverly.

The image of her across the table shifted again. Back to the wolf. But she didn’t change back—it was just the two of them, mirrored images across the table, matching suits and matching collars. Maybe they were both the wolf. Maybe that was the whole point.


The dream changed again.

Somehow this was the worst one.

Mikael sat across from her, cards in hand, a haphazard stack of chips heaped on the table between them. There were no other players, just them, sitting around a table in a darkened corner of a bar. It was one of Mikael’s favorite dive bars, all smoke and cheap booze and wood paneling. Mikael was so very different from his sister, and after seeing Loretta so recently, it was particularly obvious.

He was just as devilishly handsome as she was, of course. That part was to be expected from vampires, and there was no question they were related. They both had the same long, pointed Scandinavian features, the same thick blonde hair. But where she wore hers long and dressed like a runway model, he kept his short and roguishly unkempt. He was wearing blue jeans and a leather jacket over a white t-shirt, looking very much like he’d missed some memo about the deaths of the greaser days and no one had ever worked up the nerve to tell him.

Sitting across from him, covered in a handful of new scars he’d never had the chance to chastise her for, she felt very small, and a little more vulnerable than she was entirely comfortable with.

“Hjärtat,” he murmured, his cool blue eyes darting up to her face from his cards. “Your head’s not in the game.”

She blinked and looked down at her cards. A four of hearts, a three of diamonds, and a nine of spades.

“Even in my dreams, I get a shit hand?”

He laughed, the sound just as rich and warm as she remembered, now without the filter of cell phone towers.

“And what do you suppose that should tell you, hm?”

“That I have a deep-seated victim complex that I should probably be talking about with a therapist?”

He bobbed his head. “Ehh... perhaps. But that is not what I meant, no.”
She heaved a sigh and tossed her cards into the pot to fold. He winked, pulling in his winnings and the cards, then took up shuffling again, dealing out a new hand.

“Come then, Nicole, think. What does it mean?”

“Can I ask you something first?”

He didn’t take his eyes off the cards as he dealt, but he nodded.

“Are you... I mean, you’re just part of the dream, aren’t you. It’s not like with the wolf. It’s not. It’s not really you.”

“Would it make it easier, to know that I am just a construct?”

She sucked in a breath, looking down at her hands. “Maybe.”

“I’m sorry, hjärtat. I’m just part of the dream. Specifically I’m a concrete embodiment of the dreamer’s thoughts. That’s you. I am merely an image giving visual expression to that which is invisible, which is to say, conceptions.”

She snorted. “Did you just actually quote Calvin Hall at me?”

He spread his hands, one of them still holding the deck, and gave what was clearly supposed to be a wounded look, except that he was hiding a sly smile. “Now now, pay attention: I’m just a construct, Nicole. I can only quote *The Meaning of Dreams* because some part of you remembers your Psych 101 textbooks. Also, I did not quote. I paraphrased.”

Nicole groaned. “Well, at least my conceptions got your sense of humor right.”

Mikael chuckled and set the deck down, gesturing to the cards lying face down in front of her.

She picked them up, blinking. The King of Clubs, the Jack and King of Diamonds, the Queen of Hearts, and a Joker.

“This... I thought we were playing 3-card draw?”

Mikael sighed heavily. “It’s all a metaphor, hjärtat. Think it through. All the way from when you first sat down.”

She frowned at him, then lay the cards out flat, staring at the faces as she thought.

“I started out with a shit hand,” she said.

“Yes.”

“But... now, after. Time?” He bobbed his head. “Sort of, okay. Uh, time and... reflection?” He bobbed again. “After time and reflection and... sitting here a while. Getting comfortable. I have a better hand.” She inhaled, starting to get it. “This is that family thing the Night Mare was talking about.”

He grinned.

Nicole spread the cards out a little more, looking at each of them in turn. She pointed to the King of Diamonds, sliding it up out of the group. “Diamonds is...”

“Clergy, according to most accounts,” he said. “It translates to the suit of pentacles, in the Tarot.”
“When the hell did I learn that,” she muttered.

“Giselle.”

She looked up at him, tilting her head. “High school fling Giselle?”

“The very same.”

“Huh.” She looked down at the cards. “Then... mm. That’s gotta be Dolls.” She slid the Jack up too. “And that’s Jeremy.”

“Good,” he murmured.

She tapped the King of Clubs. “Clubs is the suit of wands, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. It represents the common folk.”

“Doc,” she said immediately, sliding the card up out of the line. “Definitely Doc.”

“Very good,” he said, chuckling.

“The Joker is Wynonna,” she said, without hesitation, sliding it out of the line.

“And the Queen of Hearts?”

She picked it up off the table, running her finger over the painted face. Without consciously thinking about it, she raised her other hand to run over her throat where the collar had been while she talked with the wolf.

“Waverly.”

He got up from the table, his mouth curled in a small, proud smile.

“Very good, hjärtat. Very good.”

She looked up at him, and her vision blurred, her eyes burning with tears. He set a hand on her shoulder, squeezed gently, and then stepped past her. One more card slid out of his sleeve into her lap. The Ace of Spades. The highest card in the suit of swords, representing both the blade and the noble class. The card of death.

“Mike,” she said, picking it up and turning to hand it back to him, but he was gone. “You dropped the...”

*Ace up his sleeve. Of course.*

“Nicole.”

She grunted, felt a warm, rough hand on her shoulder, so like Mikael’s that her brain crossed wires for a second, until the hand shook her instead of squeezing.

“Nicole,” came Dolls’ voice again, whispering.

She did not scream, no matter what anyone in the house might have heard. She gave a very dignified but startled *yelp.*
"Officer Haught." He cleared his throat and very abruptly turned away. "Excuse me."

"Don’t look at me," she said, immediately, and then paused. She struggled not to laugh, which sent him into a stifled snickering fit too.

"Shh," she whispered, but it didn’t help. She felt sleepy and lethargic still and he was laughing and so was she and it was just a lost effort, really.

"Nicole, seriously, we have got to stop meeting like this."

"Oh shut up," she said, but it set her off again, chuckling as she fumbled around and grabbed a blanket off the sofa, wrapping it around her shoulders.

"What’s that scar on your leg? You didn’t have that before, at the ridge."

She winced. "Uh. Long story. Which it sounds like we don’t really have time for right now. I’ll tell you later."

"You know, for a second I was a little worried," he said.

"Nah, full moon’s tomorrow," she told him.

"Well, I’ll come back to that, but that wasn’t the tipoff actually."

She rubbed sleep from her eyes. “Okay, then what was?”

"The scratch marks are only on your back."

She frowned, confused, and slid a hand back over her shoulder, finding raised red marks where... where she remembered Waverly’s nails dragging across her skin, scratching deep. She checked against the wolf—who was fine and well but based on an overwhelming feeling of smugness radiating off her, had elected to keep them.

“Oh.”

“But,” he said, only smirking as her face competed with her hair for color, then sobering. “Actually we’ve all been asleep for like.” He ticked off days on his fingers. “Like, weeks. Wynonna and I woke up in the diner and came straight here."

"Weeks?" she spluttered. “That’s impossible. That would mean I’d—"

Fear registered on Dolls’ face about two seconds after it hit hers.

"Waverly," she breathed, and bolted for the stairs, taking them two, even three at a time.

Wynonna was in the doorway of Waverly’s room and leapt back when Nicole barreled up the stairs, her startled "This isn’t greyhound racing, calm down!” only registering a second later. Waverly was sitting up in bed, looking very much like she wanted to go back to sleep, her hair mussed and her face soft in the—afternoon? Morning? What time was it?—light coming in through her window. Nicole slid to her knees beside the bed, setting both hands on Waverly’s face and turning her head each way, checking her neck for bites first.

Wynonna kicked the blanket, which Nicole had accidentally dropped in the doorway, aside, and let herself out.

“Okay, whatever the hell you’re doing, I don’t want to know. You two get decent, I’ll be right
outside. I’ll check in a few minutes to make sure you didn’t slip back under, all right?”

“Okay, Wynonna,” Waverly said, her voice a little distorted where Nicole’s hands were squishing her mouth, and as Wynonna left and closed the door she gave Nicole a deeply concerned look. “Baby, you’re kind of scaring me.”

“We slept through the full moon,” she said, and Waverly’s eyes widened. She sat up, pulling the quilt off, and this time let Nicole move her as needed, checking her shoulders, her arms, her hips, her back, stripping off her clothes again to look for silvery toothmarks. Finding nothing, she finally relaxed, letting her head dip forward to settle on Waverly’s thigh, her skin warm from the thick quilts she’d been sleeping under.

She’d once had someone explain weeping as a physical outlet when the emotions are too much. Just the body’s way of saying I have too much of all of this so it has to leave and the only way I can get it out is saltwater. And this? This was way too fucking much. The weird, stressful dreams, seeing Mikael again, even just as a dream-construct, and now this? Her shoulders shook, a sob catching and strangling in her throat.

“Oh thank god.”

“Hey,” Waverly breathed, running her hands through Nicole’s hair, carding through and smoothing it back. “Shh, it’s okay. Baby, it’s okay.”

“I know,” she whispered, and resting there with her eyes shut, she felt sleep tugging at her again. She sat up, rubbing her hands over her face. “God, I know, I just. If I’d...”

“I know. Hey. It’s okay.” Waverly pulled her closer by the hands still in Nicole’s hair and kissed her forehead. “I trust you. You and her both, okay?”

A phantom sensation of the gold collar around her neck sparked across her senses and she smiled a little. “I know you wouldn’t bite me. Not even on some weird magically messed up moon.”

Nicole let out a harsh, shaking breath, and nodded, leaning into Waverly’s hands. “Okay.”

“Tell you what. You grab your uniform, okay?” Waverly smiled and ran her hand down from Nicole’s hair along her cheek. “I need to talk to Wynonna a little more but I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Oh,” Waverly murmured, gathering up a change of clothes.

“Hm?”

“Your back,” Waverly said, mouth twisting in a self-satisfied little smirk. “Um. Oops?”

Nicole winked, tucking her utility belt back into the loops on her pants before slipping back outside.

“Just gonna say,” Wynonna said, and Nicole paused on the landing, buttoning up her shirt. “If I never see that much of you again, I think I’m good.”
Nicole flushed and pressed her lips together. “Oh trust me, you are not the only one who feels that way.”

Wynonna was radiating tension and something that smelled horrifyingly like fear, but she laughed at that. Waverly opened the door and waved Wynonna inside, and Wynonna shooed Nicole toward the stairs. “We’ll be down in a sec.”

“All clear?” Dolls asked, his voice low as Nicole finished up her shirt buttons and grabbed her shoes from the entryway.

“Yeah, thank god,” she muttered, and whatever Waverly and Wynonna were talking about, they kept their voices very, very low, enough that she could only really hear that they were speaking, not words. Probably if she put some effort in, she could’ve caught it, but she kept her nosiness in check this time and focused on tying her boots.

Dolls blew out a breath, relieved. “It’s possible, too, that because you were asleep, it never actually triggered. How’s... you know?”

She frowned, standing again, hands on the button of her pants, and checked in. The wolf seemed... groggy. Content, but tired.

“Huh.” Dolls raised an eyebrow, waiting. “I think she was asleep too. What the hell could get me and the wolf?”

He shrugged and leaned against the banister, yawning as Nicole finally did up the button on her pants and latched her utility belt.

“Hey,” Waverly said, following Wynonna down the stairs. “My phone battery’s toast, I’m guessing the rest of yours are too?”

Dolls offered her a thermos. “Espresso,” he explained, and while he’d seemed relatively alert until now, he was starting to sound like he wanted to fall asleep right where he was standing. Well, leaning. “Drink.”

Wynonna, in the meantime, went to raid the fridge. “You can wake people up, but they just fall right back asleep.”

“Wha,” Waverly muttered, holding the thermos and stepping into the kitchen as Nicole worked at tucking in her shirt. “What’s doing it?”

“Something that’s about to get dead?” Wynonna suggested.

“It’s like a curse, or a... a spell?” Dolls said, leaning against the wall. Waverly opened the thermos, even just the scent of hot espresso giving Nicole a bit of a jolt like a, well, Pavlovian response. Waverly sipped from it and made a face as Dolls gestured weakly with one hand and added, “I mean, it has to be. This many people, the radius? It’s unprecedented.”

“Sleeping Beauty on steroids,” Waverly offered.

“Oh,” Nicole said, exhaling and shifting forward until her shoulder hit Waverly’s, standing very literally at Waverly’s right hand. “So, we double up, and... start waking the town?” Waverly looped her arm around her waist and leaned into her, resting her head against Nicole’s chest, and Nicole curled an arm around her shoulders without thinking about it. After a moment Waverly slumped a little against her, as if drifting. Nicole glanced down and rubbed Waverly’s shoulder a little more firmly to rouse her again.
“No,” Dolls said, as sharp as his sleepy voice could manage. “No.”

“Waking people up makes it harder to find the source. I mean, whoever’s doing this,” Wynonna said, looking from Nicole to Dolls, as if looking for confirmation. “They’ll be easy to spot if everyone’s zonked, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll need something a little stronger than coffee,” Dolls said.

Wynonna looked down at the energy drink she’d pulled from the fridge, shrugged one shoulder, and tossed it to him, smirking when he fumbled to catch it.

“All right, I’ve got enough pharmaceuticals in the evidence locker to keep all of Purg High buzzing.” Nicole suggested, taking a couple steps from Waverly before her girlfriend’s warmth could lull her to sleep again too.

“Uh, if you snort it, or shoot it,” Waverly said, raising her hands, “I’m out.” She looked at Wynonna. “You too.”

“My own sister, a narc,” Wynonna groused, though it didn’t have her usual heat, just a quiet amusement that, for a moment, caught Nicole’s attention.

“Okay, most of it is not illegal,” Nicole said, maybe just the slightest bit offended they thought she was actually suggesting taking hard narcotics. The wolf thought it was hilarious that she was offended, which she ignored, and continued, “When... taken by the person to whom it is prescribed.”

“Look, if we don’t self-medicate,” Dolls said, looking at each of them, “We’re all...” He jerked a thumb across his throat and clicked his tongue.

“Right,” Nicole said, steering her drowsy girlfriend toward the door. She grabbed her coat from where she’d left it and stepped outside, offering it to Waverly, who shook her head.

“If I wear that I’ll be so warm I’ll fall back asleep for sure,” she said, and Nicole grinned, pulling it on herself, knowing that overheating in it would have the opposite effect for her. Dolls followed them out and Waverly led the way to her Jeep, still holding the thermos between her palms to warm them.

“Oh,” Nicole muttered. “Shit, I’ll be right back. Waves, you start the car? I’ll just be a minute.”

“Sure,” she said, and climbed up into the Jeep, looking absolutely frosty in her skin-tight clothes. Thank god her coat was still at the station.

“I forgot my gloves,” Nicole called as she let herself back into the house, raising her voice to avoid startling Wynonna. Though really, it was her who should’ve been worried about being startled. Wynonna was still standing in the kitchen, with the front of her coat pulled open—and it took Nicole a moment to realize that it was not, in fact, her coat, but one she had evidently, hm, borrowed from a much larger person—around her very pregnant belly.

“Whoa. Uh...”

Wynonna snapped the coat shut, and for a moment they just stood there, frozen, and Nicole listened to her own racing thoughts and Wynonna’s pounding heart, and... god, she almost thought she could hear a tiny, second, offbeat sound, like a heartbeat, but infinitesimally smaller. She reached forward to grab her gloves, at least paying lip service to what she’d said she’d come in for.
“Is... is that?” she breathed, and looked up.

She had never seen Wynonna look so... fragile. So small, and cracked open, and on the verge of tears. And god, who could blame her? This morning—or at least, what they were all still thinking of as this morning—Wynonna had looked, well, normal. What rational woman wouldn’t panic?

“Nicole, please...”

“Okay, this is... wow. Okay. Let’s just.” She closed her eyes, thinking, and for just a moment, the wolf pushed against her thoughts, not fierce, not violent, but protective and strong, and somehow, she wasn’t quite sure how, she knew it was a message that wasn’t meant for her. She reached back and pushed at the door to close it more, giving them more privacy. “Okay, um.” She pushed down her shock so that the look she gave Wynonna was as gentle as she thought Wynonna would want, without condescending to her. She lowered her voice, less for Wynonna’s pride, more because she knew Wynonna wouldn’t want them loudly discussing it near the door if someone wandered back. Wynonna didn’t need fluff and comfort, her sister could give that. But Nicole was very good at being a rock. “Does Waverly know?”

“Yeah,” Wynonna whispered, fumbling for words. “But not Dolls or... anyone else. Yet.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, and nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Uh. Look, I still want to do a loop of the town,” she said, and even if she couldn’t hear the way Wynonna’s heartbeat fluctuated or smell her rampant terror, she would’ve recognized the relief on her face that Nicole was still focused on work, and not on Wynonna’s issue du jour. “I just wanna see if anyone fell asleep outside, and, and move them, even.”

“Great plan,” Wynonna said, nodding. She still had one hand clutched like a vice around the front of her stolen coat, as if hiding the evidence made it less real, perhaps. She offered Nicole the other energy drink she’d taken from the fridge. “Stay alert.”


“Okay. Hey,” Wynonna added, her voice delicate somehow, like an elegant curl of blown glass, beautiful for its inherent fragility. “Nicole?”

She turned around, her eyes flicking down to Wynonna’s hand wrapped into the canvas of her jacket, then back up, meeting Wynonna’s gaze, her resolve to be Wynonna’s stalwart support cracking just a little at the sight of the woman so visibly on the verge of falling apart.

“Uh, thanks. Thank you.”

Nicole nodded and, as she slipped back outside, offered the most uniquely Earp thing she could think of: a shitty joke.

“Heaven help that gynecologist,” she muttered, her lips curling in the slightest of smiles. Waverly shot her a bewildered look through the Jeep’s windshield when Nicole stepped outside and she raised the gloves, waving her prize.

“Why did you go back in for those?” Waverly said, teeth chattering even though the Jeep’s interior was considerably warmer than it had been, now that the engine had been running for a little bit.
“For you,” Nicole said, and handed them over, then reached back to the backseat to snatch up her PSD balacap and jam it onto her head.

“And...” Waverly noted, pulling on the gloves and eyeing the energy drink Nicole had tucked between her thighs. “Wynonna gave you her...”

“Uh, yeah,” Nicole said, stuffing the aforementioned can into a cupholder to buckle her seatbelt. “Weird, how, uh, caffeine and taurine are sort of. You know. Bad, for. Um. Babies.”

Waverly slumped almost double behind the steering wheel.

“Oh thank god,” she said, directed vaguely at her knees, then straightened and pulled the Jeep back toward the road. “It was driving me crazy not to say anything.”

Nicole was quiet for a moment, then chuckled. “She made you promise, huh.”

“No, seriously, it’s fine. It’s... super unexpected.” She pursed her lips for a moment and stared out the side window, then looked back across at Waverly, who was sneaking glances every twenty seconds or so. “Okay, to be fair, I might be in a bit of shock, about Wynonna. But the you not telling me part? That’s totally fine. As far as I’m concerned, baby, you’re not obligated to tell me anything. I prefer it, obviously, communication is pretty nifty and all the cool kids are doing it these days—” Waverly laughed, which meant she was doing her job, “—but I can’t ask you to tell me everything. Especially not your sister’s secrets.”

“It means a lot,” Waverly said, “That you get it.”

“I mean I don’t, not a hundred percent. But...” Nicole sighed. “That’s just because I don’t really have family.” A thought of poker chips and playing cards flashed across her mind. “No, what I mean is... I didn’t. I didn’t really have anyone like that.”

She didn’t think the until now needed to be said, and based on the way Waverly looked at her, her frown of confusion giving way to understanding, and then a thousand-watt smile, she figured she was right. Waverly reached one hand over to tangle her fingers into Nicole’s.

“So it’s... different. It takes adjusting to.” Nicole smiled a little. “But I understand, feeling like one or a couple people are your whole world. And if something happened to them...”

Her throat went tight and Waverly squeezed her fingers.

“Right,” Nicole whispered, and rubbed at her eyes. “Still need to talk to you about. Everything.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and shook their intertwined hands for emphasis. “Soon as we wake up everyone else, we’ll talk. So.” She pulled into the station parking lot, handed Nicole back her gloves, and nodded to her parked cruiser. “Go on and be a hero.”
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

I should probably apologize for the Carmilla Movie joke in this one but... 
ehhhhhhhhhh...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nicole’s first order of business was to do a loop of the town. She snagged a radio from Jeremy’s workstation, knocked back the energy drink Wynonna had given her, and hit the main drag first, prowling along the road at a moderate crawl as she scanned the sidewalks. Most people she saw were in their cars—far from ideal, but not at immediate risk of hypothermia and she didn’t really feel like breaking a bunch of car windows just to get them out—but she did find a few. Pete York had been out walking toward the diner with a young woman she knew to be named Anna, who, according to the alive-and-well Purgatory rumor mill, was his new girlfriend. The two of them she stashed inside the diner for proximity’s sake, taking an extra minute to arrange them in a not-completely-suggestive way in a booth.

A few buildings down she found Moira, who had been out walking her dog. Both of them were snoozing in the middle of the sidewalk, so she stashed both Moira and the dog, who was heavier than he looked, in a nearby convenience store. She was almost out the door, passing a drink fridge, when she stopped short, frowned, and picked up another can of Beaver Buzz for safety.

She left a 5 dollar bill on the counter for the clerk (who was sleeping with his head on his keyboard) and headed back to her car, rubbing at her eyes.

“Well,” she said as she climbed back into the cruiser and continued rolling down the road, heading out into the suburbs next. She kept her voice low, really more just muttering under her breath, but directed the sentiment at the wolf. “This is a hell of a day.”

She didn’t get a reply, exactly, more a faint sense of amusement and agreement.

“Don’t suppose that dream was some big turning point,” she continued, scanning each side of the road carefully as she rolled along. “You seemed a pretty able conversationalist at the time.”

She got more amusement, but no words.

“Hm.” She sighed. “I guess you are still an animal. ‘Noble beast,’ maybe, but. Still animal.”

Agreement, this time.

“Guess the dream was a one-time thing.”

The wolf was quiet, but Nicole was pretty sure she was chuckling to herself.

She stopped one more time, moving Mr. Jones back into his house from where he’d evidently gone outside to check his mail. Thankfully the front door was unlocked, and she carried him into his living room, setting him down on his sofa. She got up, stretching, and yawned. On his coffee table was a handful of photos of Stephanie, scattered around and marked with smudges. These were arranged inelegantly beside a handful of empty beer bottles, and she winced, looking at the man
more closely. He looked... haggard. Beaten down. Stephanie wasn’t exactly a stellar example of human goodness, but Nicole supposed the adage was true: someone always misses you when you’re gone. Even if it’s not the people you’d expect.

She let herself back out and headed for her car. She cracked the can she’d taken from the convenience store and sipped from it, put it back in the cupholder, and settled for a second, listening to the silence. It was eerie, really, the whole town being asleep like this. It had been eerie enough that she could move people without them even stirring, like they were exhausted toddlers rather than grown adults, but the whole town was so quiet. It was like the ethereal silence that follows a really big snowfall, but magnified tenfold, taken so far it edged over into disturbing rather than just gentle and a bit magical.

She felt her head tilt forward, sleep dragging at her like a physical thing, pulling her down into idleness. It took surprising effort to raise her head again, a soft sound, almost a moan, escaping her as she forced her eyes open and picked up the can, drinking deeply from it.

When she lowered the can again, she saw a black, smoky figure sliding across the snow like a ghost, and she let out a breath. A woman in a black, Victorian dress, just like Wynonna had said. Shit.

“Why don’t any of the creepy bad guys ever just wear jeans,” she muttered, and she felt the wolf laughing, but also pulling at her. She wanted a fight, and part of Nicole was entirely too keen to grant it. The thought of leaving the car, of shedding her clothes, her coat, her boots, her skin in the snow as she ran the woman to ground and ripped her apart was so satisfying. She could imagine it even now, the sensation of sickly flesh tearing under her claws, of the bitch screaming as her blood leaked out into the snow. What color would it be? Red? Black?

No, she thought, as loudly and as firmly as she could. No, we need to tell Wynonna. We need to work with the team.

The wolf whined and pushed at her. Pulling at her thoughts, trying to wriggle herself into them to take over a little more.

I thought we were on the same page, Nicole insisted, but the beast chafed at her demands. Scratched and clawed and growled.

It hit her then, that yes, she and the wolf had come to points of understanding. Yes, they were on the same page on some of those points. They agreed about how to handle certain issues. They agreed on what constituted evil. They agreed that Waverly was mate, that pack was Wynonna and Dolls and Doc and Nedley and even, maybe, Jeremy. But the wolf was still a wolf. It was still bound by its nature just as much as she, a guardian and a police officer and a human, was bound by hers.

They were not always going to agree on method. They would always, at least on that point, be in conflict.

However, that did not mean they couldn’t talk about the issue rationally rather than fighting each other in perpetuity for control. Not now that she knew the wolf was more, could be more, than just a slavering animal.

If we go after her alone, she reminded the wolf, No one would know where we went. That’s a big risk that we don’t need to take. More importantly, she added, If we go off alone with no hope of backup and we get hurt, that hurts Waverly. Suddenly it was more quiet, and she knew she had the wolf’s full attention. You saw the same dreams I did, right? There was a moment of total silence
that she took as agreement. She remembered too vividly the sight of Waverly sitting broken on the floor of the Wainwright and she felt the wolf’s pain mingling with her own just at the memory. We die? It kills Waverly. So we need to do this smart.

She felt the wolf grumble, but the pressure of its desire to fight withdrew, and she sighed in relief. She started the cruiser back up and crawled forward, following the woman at an almost excessive distance. At one point she almost lost the trail, and lowered her window, sniffing at the air for the weird, lingering scent of... whatever the woman was. She really wasn’t sure how to define it—she’d never smelled anything quite like it before. Cold and spindly, like sliding into silk sheets in winter or walking into a spiderweb turned crystalline with frozen dew.

Finally she watched the woman slide up the front walk of a huge house on the northwest side of town, and stopped across the street at a distance where she could see the front door. She picked up her BBD radio, looked over the front façade of the building, and frowned, clicking the button.

“Hey, Wynonna? It’s Nicole. I just tracked a lady in black to the old clockmaker’s mansion.”

After a brief pause, she heard the radio click and let out a little static. “Copy that.”

It took Wynonna and Dolls about ten minutes to gear up and make their way to the mansion, during which time Nicole sat in her car, drinking and waiting and sporadically slapping her hands to her face to force herself awake, watching the front door for anyone leaving. When she spotted Wynonna’s blue truck roll up she got out of her cruiser, one hand on her pistol.

“Well, this place is creepy as shit,” Wynonna announced, standing in front of the gate and looking up at it as Dolls and Nicole did a quick loop of the building’s perimeter.

“Agreed,” Nicole said as she made her way back. Dolls was... strangely tense, and oddly quiet, his grip on his pistol a bit tighter than she thought was entirely necessary.

“Shall we?” Wynonna said, drawing Peacemaker and heading up the front walk. She strode forward like she defied anyone to stop her—and maybe that was intentional, because Dolls looked on the verge of protest as Wynonna continued up onto the porch at the same pace and, without any further comment, indicated the hinges with one hand. Dolls raised his pistol to the top hinge as Nicole aimed hers at the lower. Dolls counted out with his fingers—three, two, one—and they fired, blowing holes in the wood and sending sawdust and bits of shrapnel flying. Wynonna slammed her boot against the wood beside the deadbolt, smashing it inward and tearing the hinges free of the frame, and the whole door came down.

She stepped inside and Nicole followed, pistol at the ready, Dolls following behind. They cleared the first floor with an efficiency that would’ve made her academy instructors jealous, and then Dolls led the way down a spiral staircase toward a second level of the house with Nicole at his heels, growling faintly in frustration.

“Earp!” he called, as he neared the base. “In here!” There was a chair across from the spiral staircase and Nicole fixed her gun on it and the old man sitting in it as she moved sideways, keeping pace with Dolls. She frowned, distracted momentarily by all the clocks hanging from every available surface and bare strip of ceiling. There was an honest-to-god iron collar hanging around the man’s neck, chaining him to his seat, and an IV blood bag hung next to him, though it wasn’t currently connected to the catheter still taped to his hand. His milky white eyes tracked from Nicole to Dolls and then to Wynonna, coming down the stairs.

“I think I just found the source of your sleeping curse,” Dolls said, as Wynonna got to the ground floor and stepped closer to the chair, examining the chained man. “A Tempus Monstrum.
Sandman.”

When the demon spoke, his voice echoed, as if he were merely one part of a chorus of three. His voice tripled, quadrupled, overlapping itself even though his mouth only moved the once.

“They made me do it.”

“Well then,” Wynonna said, holding Peacemaker on him but without enough intent to make the barrel light. “Undo it. Wake everybody up.”

“I can’t.”

“Well I can,” she told him, and raised Peacemaker to the height of his face. “One bullet. Straight between the eyes.”

“Kill me, and they all die.”

He didn’t look away from Wynonna, but for a second, Nicole thought she saw his face—maybe a duplicate of his face, like the echoes but visual—turn to her, his milky white eyes focusing on her, intent and horrifyingly strong.

Sleep, she heard, like a distant echo of his voice that had no counterpart. Moonsinger, it’s all right. You can rest now.

Her eyes slipped shut and she forced them open again, fighting it off, but she just felt so tired, so heavy. The wolf was clawing at her thoughts, but the effort was weak, sluggish, like she was falling under too.

“Asleep forever,” he continued, speaking to Wynonna. “Until their bodies rot.”

Sleep, moonsinger. Let’s avoid this coming to blows, hm?

She staggered back a step, rubbing at her eyes as she struggled to stay awake, but she might as well not have bothered. With so much of his attention directed at her, pinpoint-targeting her with his spell, she could never have resisted for long. The weight of his power sank into her bones and turned her whole body to lead. She took another step back, her calves hitting a low chaise, and she collapsed backward, asleep even before she felt her back hit the cushion.

This time she was in her uniform, and part of her, a part that remembered the other Sandman-inspired dreams just as keenly as if she’d only experienced them minutes ago, rather than hours, was relieved at that.

Another part of her was sorely disappointed, because she was in Waverly’s bedroom, lying on her back and looking up at Waverly’s ceiling. Waverly’s face slid into her view, and she raised her eyebrows, looking down and realizing that firstly, compared to her girlfriend she was significantly overdressed, and secondly, Waverly was sliding her hands up Nicole’s legs, the heels of her hands dragging slowly up her thighs, pulling at the cloth of Nicole’s pants as she went.

“Something tells me I’m gonna like this dream,” Nicole murmured, as Waverly’s hands continued up her body, pausing at the level of her belt to pull Nicole’s shirt out from where she’d tucked it into the waistband of her pants. Waverly’s hands slid beneath the fabric to touch the bare skin beneath, her palms as warm as brands against Nicole’s belly.
“Just relax, baby,” Waverly murmured.

Nicole tilted her head back, letting out a breath, and Waverly crawled higher, dipping her head to string kisses along the column of Nicole’s throat, lips tracing the sharp cord of muscle as Nicole strained to keep herself docile and still, per Waverly’s instructions.

“You fight so hard, Nicole,” Waverly continued, pulling back to a more vertical position as she spoke. Her voice was soft and warm and sweet, and made Nicole think irrationally of molten chocolate. Her hands withdrew and Nicole whined at the loss, but then she felt fingers at the buttons of her shirt, undoing one after another, moving upward. Waverly’s knuckles brushed each inch of exposed skin as she worked, trailing fire up Nicole’s belly to her chest, pulling away just as Nicole arched her back, seeking out more contact. “And it’s so incredible to watch you fight. To watch you wrestling with yourself for control.”

Nicole listened, hanging on every word like they were lifelines and Waverly’s touch the boiling ocean around her, tangling her fingers into the quilt to keep from reaching for Waverly and ending whatever this game was prematurely.

Waverly finished with the buttons and lay the cloth aside, baring Nicole’s chest, and then ran a finger along each of the mirrored scars, trailing back down until her fingers each found the edges of Nicole’s bra. She slid them down until they met at the center of her chest, her nails straying in idle, curling patterns along her skin as Nicole squirmed, her breath coming a little sharper, a little faster.

Waverly leaned down again, her lips brushing the edge of Nicole’s ear, her breath hot against Nicole’s skin as she whispered, “But you know what I love watching even more?”

She paused, and Nicole realized belatedly she was actually looking for input.

“What?” she asked, her voice raw and too hoarse, her breath catching in her throat as the tip of Waverly’s tongue flicked and just barely marked an inner curve.

“Watching you give in.”

Nicole snarled, baring fangs in obedience to that implicit command, and grabbed at the bare, soft hips above her, rolling them until she was crouched over Waverly instead. Waverly made a long, low sound that coiled around Nicole’s lungs and squeezed, and tilted her head back, baring her throat. Nicole shuddered where she bent over her girlfriend—her mate, the wolf thought at her, and she accepted it, that word fit better somehow—and felt the agonizing burn of fur growing and rippling along her shoulders and her spine. Waverly’s hands slid up her arms into the thick shaggy strands, pushing fabric out of the way to do it. She tangled her fingers into it and pulled, and Nicole growled in response, not angry but hungry. She bent her head, nosing along the taut muscles in Waverly’s throat, dragging her teeth along the skin but not biting, no, even this far gone she—they—knew that was forbidden.

No, that wasn’t even it. It wasn’t fear of Wynonna that made them stop, it was them, it was their own choice. It was something even the wolf agreed with her on. Waverly was fragile and soft and human and that was how they wanted her. They didn’t want a mirror-copy, a physical equal; they wanted a partner. Fitting together like puzzle pieces, shoring up each other’s weaknesses and amplifying each other’s strengths. Different, but more powerful because of the differences, not because of the similarities.

So they didn’t bite, even though Waverly whimpered and squirmed at the pressure of fangs against her tender skin. Nicole licked, instead, her tongue stronger now that it was half the wolf’s, dragging it against her throat. She felt the hammering of Waverly’s pulse every time her tongue
slid across her flesh, applying pressure without ever needing to bite. Waverly made soft, desperate little sounds as she worked, and when Nicole pulled back, nosing at the underside of Waverly’s jaw, there was a red bloom of color there, rapidly darkening, marking Waverly as hers.

Waverly pulled at her fur again and Nicole nudged her nose against Waverly’s jaw, earning a soft, high sound. It occurred to her belatedly that her nose was dark and cool and just a little wet to the touch, and when she looked down at her hands, she saw they were barely hands at all, but paws, the skin of her palms toughened black and her nails sharpened to claws.

Some part of her brain knew that should alarm her, but instead she just bared her teeth in a grin and dragged her nose down Waverly’s chest from the hollow of her throat to her belly and earned a faint, broken sounding cry at the sensation of it. Waverly trailed her hands from Nicole’s shoulders to her hips and she dug her fingers into Nicole’s left hip, her nails biting. It actually hurt, which was odd, because despite the situation, the pain was so much sharper, so much brighter than the pleasure.

Chemicals roared through her blood and the wolf was howling in her chest but she was out ahead of it, barely. With a sharp gasp she shoved the wolf down before they could lash out on instinct and hurt someone, and the first thought she could coalesce into a sensible sequence of words was a frantic, “Tell me I’m wearing clothes this time!”

“Mmhm!” Wynonna was crouched beside her on one knee, still holding the oversized syringe as she pulled it back out of Nicole’s hip.

Nicole groaned, shaking as the adrenaline kept surging through her system. Her heart was pounding, her body hot all over, her lungs instinctively dragging in more air. The wolf, who had considerably less experience with chemically induced fight-or-flight, was freaking out, and for a few seconds Nicole had to put all her focus into easing the wolf down.

It’s okay. We’re fine, we’re fine. No danger here. Wynonna had to wake us up. It’s okay.

Wynonna was just sitting there, watching Nicole, her expression strained with a fear that had nothing to do with her own wellbeing, or even the possibility that Nicole was five seconds from going full wolf right there in the demon’s living room. Nicole looked at her, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out what was causing that tense frown.

“Waverly’s in trouble.”

“Yeah,” Wynonna admitted, “But I need you to find someone else, Haught, or the whole town dies.”

She groaned, almost rolling her eyes. Of course.

“I’ll save my sister,” Wynonna said, her voice low and genuine. “You know I will.”

Nicole sighed, but nodded. If there was any one person in her pack she trusted to take care of Waverly even at risk of their own life, it was absolutely Wynonna. “Okay,” she said. “Where am I going?”

“Okay. We somehow have to find this psycho named Tucker.”

“Tucker Gardner?” Nicole growled, and pulled her phone from her pocket. “I’ve been tracking his phone for weeks.”
Wynonna let out a low laugh and squeezed Nicole’s hand in relief as she stood back up, heading for the stairs.

Nicole followed her, pulling up the app she needed. “Tucker’s had all my instincts buzzing since day one.”

“You bugged his phone?” Wynonna asked. “Isn’t that like, illegal?”

“Very illegal,” Dolls noted, following them up the steps.

“Hey!” Nicole said, glancing over her shoulder at Dolls. “In my defense? He’s the worst. Don’t judge me.”

“I will judge you,” Wynonna said, her tone one of wry approval. “Judge you ‘Unexpectedly Awesome.’”

Nicole grinned and held her phone where Wynonna could see it. “Okay. It looks like he’s headed to...

She felt two things at the same time. First, her heart dropping down into her stomach like a block of ice. Second, rage twisting up around her limbs like cords of volcanic fire.

“The homestead,” Wynonna finished.

Nicole glanced at Dolls and then bolted for the steps out of the house, snarling as she went.

“Dolls?” she heard Wynonna ask.

“Yeah?”

“I need you to go with her. Please.”

She didn’t linger long enough for Dolls’ answer, but when she threw herself back into her cruiser she waited, engine idling, foot tapping on the floor and her fingers rolling out drumbeats on the steering wheel until she saw Dolls head out the front door and beeline toward her. She leaned over to throw the door open and Dolls jogged the remaining twenty yards, hopping into the car. He’d barely shut his door when Nicole tore away from the curb, back tires skidding as she turned the car toward Earp land. She took advantage of there being no other cars on the road and drove as fast as the roads allowed.

They were halfway to the Homestead when Dolls finally spoke, his voice low and deliberately soothing.

“Easy...”

She snarled in answer.

“Nicole.”

She didn’t look at him, but she did force herself to listen, to let his voice seep in past the level of her rage, and took stock of herself.

Hm. When had her vision gone gold? It helped a little, throwing the ridges of snow alongside the road into sharp relief. But that wasn’t a good sign. She eased her foot back off the accelerator and flicked her gaze down from the windshield, noting that where her gloves ended and the cuff of her jacket started wasn’t showing a strip of skin, like she would’ve expected, but rather tufts of red fur
poking out from under the cloth.

“Sorry,” she growled, forcing herself to settle, forcing the wolf to ease. Yes, she thought. *I know. But we’re on the job right now with a department-issued gun. Gotta do this by the books.*

The wolf growled and she knew she was on borrowed time. Pretty soon, she was gonna have to make this a proper compromise. Still, for now the fur faded back into her skin and she took a deep breath, trying to slow her heart rate down from where the adrenaline still had it jacked up to an unreasonable speed.

“S’all good,” Dolls said, but he sounded like he was fading again. “We just gotta keep chill, okay? The demon. He’s got a daughter. Some girl named Poppy.” He yawned. “Tucker grabbed her and is probably getting his perv on as we speak. We gotta get the girl back safe or he won’t undo the spell.”

“Okay,” she growled, skidding again as she pulled into the driveway, blocking the way out in case Tucker tried to take his car out the main gate, though she didn’t see where he might’ve parked it. She leapt from the car and drew her pistol while Dolls followed, stumbling once in the snow. He was a couple steps behind her as she headed in through the side door.

“Shit,” he muttered, staggering against the doorway where it led into the front hall. “Sorry...”

From upstairs someone—a young woman by the sound of it—screamed. “Help!”

“Ohhh,” Nicole snarled, “He is *not* in her room!”

“Go,” Dolls said, waving her toward the stairs and collapsing onto a bench. “Go!”

She ran up the stairs for the second time in a single day, and when she got to the doorway she saw Tucker toss aside the top of Waverly’s cheerleading uniform, leaning into the woman’s personal space. Poppy, she reminded herself.

“I don’t– I don’t want to,” she said, as he reached for her arm.

“Hands on your head!” Nicole roared, “*Now!*”

He spun, yanking Poppy in front of him as a human shield, and brought a steel blade up to her throat.

Nicole struggled to keep her teeth the right size and stepped fully into the room, pistol trained on him, all too aware that Poppy was directly in her line of fire.

“You hurt her, it’s all over, man. It’s not just a couple upskirts. You do *not* want to cross that line.”

“Everyone keeps talking to me like I’m an idiot,” he said. He looked at her, tilting his head slightly like a dog, his voice disturbingly even. Light. As if he had no real emotional connection to what he was doing. “Those hags, this one here. You. I’m not an idiot. I know what I’m doing. I know what I want.”

Nicole’s attention tracked to Poppy. She expected meek. She expected a quailing captive. But Poppy met her gaze with fire and defiance, and she shifted, holding her hand a little differently. Nicole’s eye flicked down, noting the hairbrush she was still clutching, and in particular its sharp, pointed end. She knew that brush. She on multiple occasions had joked with Waverly that if she ever found a dead man on the Earp property who didn’t have a pair of scissors jammed into his brain, she’d look for that brush first as a proposed murder weapon.
Nicole looked back up at Tucker, her mouth twisting into a smile that she hoped was just mocking enough to make him even angrier.

“Too bad you’re not gonna get it.”

Poppy jammed the sharp end of the brush handle into his thigh and he flinched, yanking his arm away from her to step back. She dove toward the bed and Nicole fired before Tucker could react, his shoulder jerking as the round slammed through his body, spraying blood over the wallpaper.

He stared at her, his eyes wide behind his glasses, his voice raw with pain and surprise.

“You shot me, you bitch!”

“Drop the knife or I’ll do it again!” she shouted, and he let the blade drop from his fingers with a dull *thunk*.

“I did something else,” he said, taking half a step closer. She kept her pistol trained, but resisted the urge to fire again, for all that the wolf was howling for blood. “They’ll kill me for it.”

She growled, the sound low in her chest, and kept her mouth shut, forcing the wolf down before she could show fangs in front of Poppy. Who, while allegedly the daughter of a demon, really didn’t need to know that part of local law enforcement was a werewolf.

Instead of taking another step forward Tucker spun around and dove for the window, flinging himself outside with a hoarse shout and a crash of shattering glass.

“Tucker!” Nicole bellowed, but did not pursue him. For a moment she simply stood in place, listening to pieces of glass dropping out of the frame, waiting in case he had hit the awning and reversed course. She heard him hit the snow and take off running, and when she was satisfied that he was out of range to change his mind and come back, she stepped forward, holstering her pistol.

She could always pick up the scent later. He might come back to recover his car, but she could work with that. Especially with so few cars on the road today, it would be easier. She took hold of Poppy’s shoulders and started guiding her toward the door. “Let’s get you home to your dad, okay?”

She bundled Poppy into the front seat and stashed Dolls in the back, and as she headed back toward town she picked up her radio again.

“Wynonna? This is Nicole. I have Poppy.”

“Make it quick,” Wynonna said, and there was a pause a second too long, as if Wynonna was consciously reminding herself not to use some canine nickname. “I’m almost to Shorty’s.”

“I’ve got Poppy and Dolls in my cruiser. I’ll drop them at BBD for safety and meet you later at the Homestead. Got some cleanup to do.”

There was a short pause. “Do I want to know?”

“Not when I’ve got a minor in the car, no.”

“Fair point. See you then.”

She got to the station and led Poppy inside, carrying Dolls over her shoulder. “Poppy, sit tight right here. I gotta get Dolls up and moving again.” She pointed to one of the chairs in BBD’s main office, then flopped Dolls down across a desk, noting that one of the others had been broken and a
chair overturned. Hm. Odd, and a bit concerning.

Poppy sat, and tangled her hands together in her lap. “I’m sorry. My father doesn’t like using his powers. That’s why usually he stays dormant and I just look after him. But that man, Tucker, and... those two women. They used me to get at him.”

Two women? Nicole glanced toward her, still in the process of digging into the stores Dolls had looted from the evidence locker. “It’s... it’s okay, Poppy. I understand.” She didn’t, really. What experience did she have with a father who would hurt others to keep his daughter safe? But she couldn’t really say that, could she. “No one blames you.”

Poppy sighed, settled back in her chair, and said nothing. Nicole went back to Dolls and jammed him with a dose of adrenaline—payback’s a bitch—and then set a hand to his chest when he jerked upright, panting.


“Hhhhhhholy shit,” he panted, fixing her with what was probably supposed to be a glare, rather than a slightly manic, wide-eyed boggle.

“Sorry, had to get you moving again. Listen. I need to deal with what happened at the Homestead, but can you sit here and keep watch over Poppy till Wynonna gets back?”

He stared at her, taking a little too long to process the words, but then he nodded, jerky and a bit vague. “Right. Right, yeah, I can do that. I’ll wait here till Wynonna gets back with the rest of the team.”

“Good,” she said, and patted his shoulder. “Poppy, Dolls will stay with you. He’ll be here in the unlikely chance Tucker tries anything else, but I really don’t think he’s gonna be back.”

Poppy nodded, and as she left the station, she saw people moving around. Moira walked by with her dog, smiling brightly like nothing particularly out of the ordinary had happened. That was... odd. She jogged over to Moira, flagging her down.

“Officer Haught!”

“Ma’am,” Nicole said, tugging at the brim of her ballcap and smiling. “How are you doing today?”

“Oh just fine, Officer, thank you for asking! Harvey and I have been out having a lovely walk, now haven’t we Harvey.” Her dog whuffed at Nicole and wagged his tail, keeping his head low in a cautious pose of submission. “Huh,” Moira said. “He doesn’t usually act like that with people.”

“I have that effect on dogs,” Nicole said, chuckling. “Sorry to bother you, ma’am, I’ll leave you to it.”

“Not a problem, Officer!” Moira said, heading down the sidewalk. Nicole went back to her cruiser and cautiously checked the clip in her pistol. She wasn’t missing either of the bullets she’d used, on the door or at the Homestead.

But she’d shot Tucker. That had definitely happened. Hadn’t it? She checked her wallet, and found the five-dollar note she’d used. When she sat down in her car, she checked the cupholder. Empty. Had everything been undone when the demon’s spell lifted? She frowned and headed back toward the Homestead, albeit this time at a rather more sedate pace.

She checked Waverly’s room first, but there was no sign a fight had even happened there. The
brush was in its usual spot on the dresser, her uniform was hanging where it should be in the closet. No bullet hole in the wall, no bloodspray, no broken glass. Growing considerably more confused, she headed back out to the driveway and tracked what should’ve been Tucker’s trajectory from the house. She found his footprints, and a few smears of blood, and let out a whoop of triumph before she could stop herself.

Nicole looked around the driveway, weighed her options, and then quickly stripped out of her uniform, leaving it in a vaguely folded pile on the porch with her boots. The moon didn’t drag at her, but she could feel it looming, like it was coming tomorrow.

Without the moon to intensify it the change swept through her like a wave, implacable and ever-present, but not overwhelming. She doubled over onto her knees in the snow, growling and snarling as the wolf surged through her blood. The shift was so seamless and almost painless that it caught her off-guard. She scratched her claws into the earth and let out a chuffing laugh that was... well, probably pretty terrifying to listen to, actually.

She shook herself once, as if flicking off any lingering concerns, and bent her nose to the snow, sniffing at the earth where Tucker’s boots left clear prints. But she didn’t smell him. She jerked her head back, grunting in disapproval, and consulted the wolf.

The wolf was quiet for a moment, and then gave her what Nicole could only interpret as a bewildered shrug.

Nicole bent to the snow again, snuffling. She smelled... something. Some kind of floral scent that made her sneeze and paw at her nose. She didn’t like it, with a fervor that surprised her, and the wolf whined and recoiled even more strongly than she did. A word popped into her head, full-formed, though she didn’t think she’d ever heard it before.

Vervain.

The hell is vervain? Nicole thought at the wolf, but she just whined and scratched and said nothing else. Dammit.

Nicole growled in frustration and stopped sniffing at the ground. Fine. She’d just track the bootprints the old-fashioned way. By sight.

She followed the prints out past the little gulley that ran around the ammolite bedrock, but then stopped short. Her vision blurred, the scent of vervain intensifying, and when she blinked the blurriness away, she saw that Tucker’s bootprints divided into two distinct paths, heading in opposite directions.

She reared up on her hind legs, trying to see as far as she could down each path. They extended out at least 30 yards before it all blurred into the snow. She snarled and tore out after the lefthand path first, paws beating in the snow as she chased his bootprints. They curved north and she followed them for another minute, the path slowly curving, curving, curving...

In front of her was the beaten path she’d left following the tracks. She skidded to a stop, her huge paws sending up clouds of snow, and snarled. What the hell was going on? She turned to follow her own footsteps until she reached the original fork, but now there were two un-examined paths, not just one. The third branched out to what was now her left. Which would have been straight, when she originally saw the two paths diverge.

She snarled, driving her claws into the snow. The wolf was in lockstep with her emotionally, growling thunder and bloodlust, and she took off down the new path first, chasing it at a dead
sprint for several long minutes. She slowed at the very edge of Earp land, several kilometers from the Homestead, and looked back, panting. There was no way he’d walked, wounded, this far in all this time. She raced back the other way, her lungs burning, her body aching with the exertion.

The wolf was radiating disappointment and frustration, and Nicole couldn’t even be particularly annoyed with her for it, because she was just as angry.

When she finally returned to the Homestead, she climbed up on top of the shed and peered out, trying to use the height to her advantage. She made out tire tracks in the distance, maybe half a kilometer beyond the gulley, and headed for those. There she found blood splatters and deep tracks from tire treads, but when she sniffed at the ground, she still just got that disgusting scent of vervain and a head full of foggy confusion.

She heard a car in the distance and growled, ears pinning back to her head, and bolted for cover, taking shelter behind the shed until she spotted the approaching vehicle. Waverly’s Jeep, with Wynonna in the passenger seat, looking miserable. Nicole slowly poked her head out again, crawling out from behind the shed, and the two Earps both shot her utterly bewildered looks, but at least the sight of her seemed to have distracted Wynonna, who said something to her sister that made Waverly choke on a laugh.

Nicole jogged alongside the Jeep for the last few yards at a rolling lope, and then sat beside the Jeep as Wynonna got out, letting her tail stir the snow as she wagged it back and forth.

“Holy shit, Cujo,” Wynonna said, propping her hands on her hips and looking her up and down. “Not sure if I’m impressed or terrified. You’re huge.”

Nicole crouched down and bumped her nose into Wynonna’s belly. Which was, she noticed, still the size it had been. Unlike the bedroom and the rest of town, Wynonna had not gone back to normal. No wonder she was upset. Still, Wynonna let out a startled breath and then, when Nicole looked up at her with big soft caramel eyes, she begrudgingly patted Nicole’s muzzle, then sighed and reached forward to scratch behind her ear.

No matter what anyone says, no one, not even Wynonna Earp, can resist puppy eyes.

“Hey baby,” Waverly said, coming around the nose of the Jeep to pat the top of her head. “How come you’re all furry?”

She made a faint grumbling noise and tilted her head.

“Right, sorry.” She chuckled, but then looked to her sister. “Hey, Wynonna, do you want us to chat in the barn? Give you a few minutes?”

Wynonna’s hand was still scritching at Nicole’s ear, but she inhaled, then exhaled a deep sigh. “Actually, yeah. Just. Need some time to think.”

“Sure,” Waverly said, and smiled.

Nicole rumbled and leaned the top of her head against Wynonna’s chest, and to her surprise, Wynonna sighed and hugged the part of her she could get her arms around. Waverly stepped away, gathering up Nicole’s uniform, and she noted that Waverly had her bag of civilian clothes over one shoulder.

“Thanks,” Wynonna said, as Waverly headed for the barn, and Nicole knew without Wynonna saying anything that it was easier to talk when Nicole was soft and warm and particularly inhuman-looking. Like telling your secrets to your pets. “For... y’know. Not judging. And not freaking out.”
Nicole rumbled and leaned a little harder into her, using pressure alone to convey her meaning.

“It means. It means a lot,” Wynonna said. She took a deep breath then, and patted Nicole’s head. “All right, go. I could use some me-time anyway.”

Nicole pulled back and nudged her nose against Wynonna’s shoulder, then padded away, crunching through the snow behind Waverly’s Jeep and her cruiser. Waverly held the door of the barn open for her and she ducked her head to walk through it, down-shifting as she went until she stumbled forward onto her knees into the hay, groaning and stretching her back.

“Hoo boy. What a day.”

Waverly chuckled and handed over her civilian bag. “Here. Before I get ideas.”

Nicole laughed and changed, but not before flashing her a sly little smile. “You sure? It would give Wynonna more time.”

“No,” Waverly said, and arched an eyebrow. “You promised me information.”

“I did,” Nicole said, shimmying her jeans up to her hips and buttoning them. “You’re right. Okay. Let’s talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay I ain't gonna lie this was a blast to write.
Waverly slid Nicole’s uniform into the newly emptied bag and offered her the boots she’d been wearing, but Nicole shrugged and instead set them aside on the ground with the bag. She stepped up in front of Waverly and ran her hands down from Waverly’s shoulders to her elbows.

“You okay?” Waverly asked. “You seem... a little out of sorts.”

Nicole inhaled, thinking, then froze.

“What?”

Nicole leaned closer, sniffing at Waverly’s face. Her skin smelled like... like cold silk. Like that strange, terrible scent she’d caught trailing the woman in black. She jerked her head back and Waverly blinked up at her.

“Are you–” Nicole stopped short and lifted her hands to cup Waverly’s face. Her skin was cold. Not like she’d been outside, which she had, but icy, with just the slightest lingering sensation of frost. “You couldn’t get out of Shorty’s in time,” she guessed.

“Oh,” Waverly said, and sighed. She stepped forward, leaning into Nicole, her cold nose finding the open V of Nicole’s shirt. “No. They snuck up on us. And it turns out, fun fact, that they can breathe this toxic fog that paralyzes their victims.” Nicole pulled her close and rubbed her hand over Waverly’s shoulders to warm her. “It’s faded now, but.” She exhaled a shaking breath that was warm against Nicole’s skin. “I admit, it was pretty scary.”

“Sounds like a pretty reasonable thing to be scared of to me.” Nicole walked them over to the bed that had once been Doc’s and settled on it, leaning back against the pillows and drawing Waverly down to lie next to her and rest her head on Nicole’s chest. Waverly settled with her hand against Nicole’s bared skin, and it didn’t take long for her fingers to start drawing idle patterns. The heel of her hand pressed over Nicole’s heart, feeling the beat through her palm.

“Yeah. Also it hurts like crazy.” Nicole made a low grumbling noise in her chest and kissed Waverly’s forehead. “Please, don’t let them breathe on you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

For a moment they just settled, both resting but both entirely too awake after a day of chugging energy drinks and medications to keep from falling asleep. Nicole let her hand wander aimless loops over Waverly’s lower back and Waverly nuzzled into the curve of her shoulder, her fingers drawing ancient runes and sigils on her skin.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

Waverly’s fingers stalled and she tilted her head, looking up. “What for?”

“I know what the seals are for. I should’ve said something before.”

“When would you have said something? Nobody told you about the seals until today.” Waverly jerked suddenly and sat up on her elbow, her eyes wide. “Wait. You know what they’re for? Baby
that’s huge. We’ve been floundering around in the dark for weeks!”

Nicole smiled a little, but couldn’t quite meet Waverly’s eyes. “Yeah. Well, I can’t explain all of it. It’s. Complicated.”

“All right,” Waverly said, reaching up to smooth back loose strands of Nicole’s hair. “Okay, well, we’ll work with that. Walk me through what you can tell me?”

“There are three, first off, not just two.” Waverly nodded, and Nicole raised an eyebrow. “Wait, you knew that part?”

“The Sandman demon told Wynonna that today,” Waverly said. “So, on the plus side, I guess his information was reliable.”

“Huh.” Nicole shrugged. “Well, okay. So, the three seals are a prison. There’s an elder demon bound within the Triangle, somewhere within the earth. Entombed, I think, if what I read is accurate. The seals keep his tomb closed, to prevent him from awakening and walking the earth.”

“What you read?”

“Mikael was sending me translations and references from some ancient texts he’d obtained. Actually I think you might have a copy of one of them in BBD. I recognized the cover the other day.”

Waverly lit up with interest. “Can you send them to me? And maybe tomorrow morning we can go get that book. I can use it to cross-reference against what he was sending you.”

Nicole considered that for a moment, then grinned. That was the perfect loophole, wasn’t it? “Yeah. Yeah, let’s do that. I’ll forward the files later tonight.”

“Perfect!” Waverly grinned, her eyes bright. “Now. Do you know which demon it is?”

Nicole winced. “Well... yes. My family told me a lot about him, and used one of his titles. My father called it his Hellfire Name.”

“Oh,” Waverly repeated, her voice dropping to barely a breath. “Oh god, Nicole.”

“The thing is, I can’t just tell you,” Nicole said. “Because he might hear it. Or, maybe worse, the cult’s spies will hear. Or maybe some of the other entities that are always looking to set him free, to curry favor. Like that lesser demon. The one Mikael called Legion.”

Waverly’s eyes widened, understanding. “Mictian.”

Nicole nodded. “If any of them hear us using his name, it could be a big problem. Right now they may not know how much we know. Though apparently my father knows at least something about what I was doing with Mikael, because he knew how to bait me. And one of his agents knows about you.”

“What about me? What about me?”

Nicole winced. She hadn’t really meant to say that part. “That we’re... together.”
Waverly was quiet for a moment, considering it. “Nicole.”

“Hm.”

“Look at me? You haven’t this whole conversation.”

Nicole hesitated, but turned her head, letting her gaze trace up Waverly’s arm to her face. Her expression was gentle, patient. Everything she would’ve expected Waverly would be, even for this.

“I don’t care if they know.”

“Waverly, if they know they can use you to get to me—”

“Then they’ll have Wynonna, and Dolls, and Doc to deal with too.”

The wolf had been patient till now, but now she felt it surge, protective and defiant, against the back of her thoughts, howling a mournful song Nicole knew was supposed to be performed as a group.

_All right, all right, I get it._

“You aren’t fighting all by yourself anymore,” Waverly said, and leaned her forehead against Nicole’s.

“I know. I just. Forget sometimes.”

“Well next time you forget I’m gonna start flicking your ears or something,” Waverly informed her.

Nicole chuckled and nudged her nose against Waverly’s. “Okay.”

“Now. Speaking of not fighting alone. What’s with those new scars.”

Nicole let her eyes slip shut and pressed a little harder against Waverly, her mind wandering back to that weekend in Loretta’s club.

“A few days before the whole...” She searched for the word. “Exorcism, I guess. I kindof. Got pulled out of my home.”

“What?”

“I was gone for like 48 hours.”

Waverly’s tone went flat. “You were what?”

“You remember I mentioned um. Talking to Mikael’s sister about where to find him?”

“Yes...”

“There was so much going on, I didn’t get back in contact with her. And... I guess she found out from somewhere else that Mikael had been killed, and that. Well, I hadn’t.”

Waverly pulled away from Nicole, her mouth working soundlessly.

“She was hurting,” Nicole explained. “And I was her most accessible outlet.”

“Hold on.” Nicole looked up at Waverly again. She sat up fully on the bed, putting a couple feet of
empty space between them, her hands grasping at nothing. Her face was a mask of the unique type of confusion that immediately precedes rage, her mouth twisting, her eyes narrowing to thin lines. “Are you telling me that some... some grieving vampire decided that it was your fault that her brother was murdered by some shitty cult that wants to free an elder demon from its sealed tomb, and so she kidnapped you out of your own home and— and— and what, tortured you?”

Nicole chewed on her lip. “Uh... yeah. Yeah, that’s about the size of it.”

Waverly pressed her hands over her eyes, her shoulders shaking with barely restrained fury. “Okay. I can. I can deal with that.”

“Really?”

“What I cannot deal with,” Waverly said, lowering her hands and fixing Nicole with an absolutely arctic stare, “Is that you said she was hurting. As if that— as if that excuses it.”

“Well she was—”

“Don’t you dare.”

Nicole stopped, blinking.

“Don’t you dare say she was right, Nicole. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Waverly, think about it.” She sat up too, shifting back on her palms so that she could sit against the wall, and ran a hand through her hair. “If he hadn’t gotten involved with me, if he hadn’t been sending me those files... this wouldn’t have happened to him. It’s my father’s cult, Waves. And he helped me. He helped me get away from Shae after I found out she was working with my dad. He helped me get to Purgatory and build a cage for the full moon so that I could stay here long-term. Sure, he sent me here knowing that the demon was here, but he did all that because I asked.”

She half-expected Waverly to come firing back at her for it, but to her surprise, Waverly said nothing. She pressed her palms together, leaning the tips of her fingers against her mouth as she listened, and thought, and Nicole exhaled.

“I tried to... I tried to be cool about it,” she said. “I tried to find some other explanation. I tried to look at it that way, that he made his choices. But I just keep coming back to the fact that he only got involved because I asked. He found me through Shae and I asked him because he was the most powerful supernatural I knew and he got me out. And when Loretta said it I just. I knew deep down she was right.”

“He found you through Shae,” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

“Who works for the cult.”

Nicole frowned. “Yes. I didn’t know at the time, but yes.”

“Nicole, don’t you see how much bigger than you this is?”

“What?”

Waverly gestured with her hands as she talked, mapping out the shape of the last year as if it were abundantly obvious. “He’s a vampire that just happened to know how to find ancient texts about
the demon this cult has been trying to unearth. He just *happened* to be accessible to you when you were trying to get away from Shae and your dad. Don’t you see it? He’s already *been* fighting the cult. It’s not that he only helped you because of that, it’s ridiculously obvious just from my one conversation with him and everything you’ve ever said about him that he cared about you like a daughter, but can’t you see it? He already picked his fight. He knew what he was getting into. How’d you meet him?”

“Wh– I don’t know, I barely remember, it was a year ago.”

“Think.”

Nicole sighed and closed her eyes, tilting her head back against the barn wall to think back to it. Mikael had blown into town like a tornado, all swagger and smile. If she’d been into guys, he probably would’ve had her eye. She remembered the club, a shitty backwater joint that Shae said supernaturals loved because it gave normal people the willies and they steered clear. They’d been surrounded by Shae’s friends, a few other lycanthropes, a couple half-demon drifters, even a Dullahan that carried its head in a football helmet for ease of travel. They’d been drinking and partying most of the night—Shae said it was good for her to deliberately court sensory overload while she was adjusting to the new senses because it taught her she could push so much further past her limits than she thought she could.

And then Mikael had come into the bar, all leather and denim and a smile that made women and men alike swoon for him. He’d handed a box, wrapped with an honest-to-god bow, to Shae, but had offered Nicole his hand.

*You must be the pup,* he’d said, with that slight European cant to his voice. His hand was cool but his smile was warm. It had helped her to focus, to *look* at him and push the rest away.

*Yeah,* she’d stammered, as Shae opened her box. *That’s me.*

“Mating gift,” she told Waverly, but didn’t open her eyes. “He came to town because he’d heard that Shae had a new wolf and he said he wanted to meet me.”

“What else?”

She frowned and thought through more of the conversation.

*Shae darling,* Mikael had said, kissing her on both cheeks. *You won’t mind if I borrow your new pet here for a few minutes.*

And where Shae had a possessive streak a mile wide, with Mikael she minded her manners. *Of course, Lord Mikael,* she’d said, though her voice turned teasing. *No bite-marks.*

*Never, darling!* *After all, you already left yours.* Nicole was too distracted by the flashing neon lights in the bar to realize he was being sarcastic. He’d taken Nicole’s hand and led her deeper into the bar, toward a back door. *Come. Let’s chat for a moment where we can hear ourselves think.*

The smells in the alley behind the bar were intense and too numerous to count, but even for that, it was easier. The sounds were so much quieter, the haze of smoke absent. The bar had been all atmospheric darkness and contrasting light, but outside she could almost see stars overhead, the streetlamps bright but not oppressive.

Nicole had doubled over as soon as they got outside, like the absence of all that scent and light and noise took away a physical crutch that was keeping her standing. Her eyes streamed with tears, either to clear out the lingering smoke or just relief, she couldn’t be sure.
Mikael, a complete stranger, pulled her close to him. *Here. Rest a moment. Equalize.*

Against all sense, she’d leaned into him, pressed her face into the cool cloth of his shirt. He pulled at the lapels of his leather jacket so that even less light got through to her face, the cloth muffling her ears just a little.

*Thank you.*

He’d patted her shoulder, but otherwise left his hands harmlessly on his jacket. It was an illusion for anyone passing by, that it looked like his hands were on her head, but something about it made her feel like he wouldn’t stop her if she pulled away.

So she stayed.

*Shae has always had some strange ideas about how new wolves should be treated,* he said, and she finally looked up at him, squinting through the streetlamps’ glare to make out the sad curve of his smile.

*Have you known her a long time?*

*I’ve been paying attention to the company she keeps for several years,* he said. *She has a tendency to break her toys. If you ever feel unsafe. For any reason.* He did not say anything else, but his hand slid to her hip, and she felt the pressure of a small, stiff paper, like a business card, sliding into her pocket.

Waverly moved closer to her on the bed. She said nothing, but reached up with one hand, smoothing away tears sliding down Nicole’s cheek.

“You... might be right,” Nicole said.

“Listen to me, Nicole Haught.” Waverly shifted to sit in her lap, taking her face in both hands, her gaze intent, but gentle. “What happened to Mikael was horrible, and it should never have happened. It isn’t fair that it happened. But it was *not* your fault. You didn’t start this war. One of them did. And he knew the risks of fighting.”

Nicole bent forward until her forehead rested against Waverly’s chest, and Waverly let her, running her hands through Nicole’s hair.

“Do you want to talk about Loretta?”

Nicole thought about it, then turned her head so that her nose pressed to Waverly’s chest. “There’s not a whole lot to tell. She cut me, those are the scars you found. And she stabbed me in the leg.”

Waverly sucked in a breath and tangled her hands into Nicole’s hair again. “And the scars...?”

“Oh, uh,” Nicole said, and sighed. “Silver knife. She treated them with moonwater, but.”

Waverly was very quiet for a moment, her hands still.

“Oh, she also said I’m not to go anywhere near her or try to contact her again.”

“That’s fine,” Waverly said, her voice tight. “Because if I ever see her I think I’d stake her myself.”

“Wave,” Nicole said. “Please don’t joke about that. She’d tear you apart.”

“Let her try,” Waverly grumbled.
“Please,” Nicole said, pulling back to look at her face while trying not to chuckle a little at the venom her feisty little mate was capable of spitting. Er, companion. Girlfriend. Whichever. She smiled and traced the lines Waverly’s frown carved into her forehead. “As it is I’m worried about the revenants and the demons still wandering around the Triangle. Frankly I lose sleep over the idea that Shae will come after you, since she can cross the border whenever she wants. Please don’t piss off more supernaturals, okay?”

Waverly frowned at her. “Shae can cross the border?”

“Same as I can,” she said. “Mikael said that since we still have human outsides... the boundary doesn’t block us. Werewolves in general, I mean.”

Waverly pursed her lips. “Maybe I’ll look into some deterrents then. Like, things I could keep in my car, for when you’re at work and I’m on my own.”

“That would... actually really make me feel better,” Nicole admitted, resting her cheek against Waverly’s chest.

“Dolls would probably have some suggestions.”

“You might start with vervain,” Nicole grumbled.

“You mean the verbena plant?” Waverly asked. “How on earth do you know that deters werewolves?”

She sighed. “So, uh, earlier, before the Sandman ended the dream, I guess, Tucker was. In the house. And I technically shot him. In the shoulder.”

“You shot Tucker Gardner?” Waverly said, almost choking on the words. She tried to pull back to look at Nicole’s face, but this time she held on.

“In my defense, he had a knife to Poppy’s throat,” Nicole noted, sniffing a little.

“Oh, well, what does technically shot him mean?”

“I think when the dream ended everything reversed. He was still bleeding, I think, but I had all my bullets back. So, it’s sort of confusing. But anyway, I came back to the Homestead to try to track him.”

“Ah,” Waverly said. “Thus the furriness when I got home.”

“Yeah. Only... when I tried, all I could smell was vervain. Which is awful.”

“Aww, I kind of like it.”

“Maybe to you it’s nice,” Nicole said, and chuckled. “But apparently the wolf and I hate it. It blocked all of his path, and even when I tried to track his footprints by sight, I got led in circles and his prints split off a million times... I dunno how, but he’s blocking me from tracking him, and vervain is involved somehow.”

“That might fit,” Waverly said, thoughtful. “He was apparently working with the women in black. Maybe they’re hiding him with magic or something.”

She grumbled. “Bitches.”

“Trust me, Wynonna and I agree with you on that one.”
“Speaking of Wynonna,” Nicole said.

Waverly sighed and ran a hand up and down Nicole’s back, but she let Nicole stay nuzzled in against her chest. “Yeah.”

“Is she... okay?”

“No. I don’t think so. Something happened during that dream, I guess. She said the demon said the baby should’ve gone back to the way it had been, but...”

“But nothing ever goes quite normally when Wynonna is involved?” Nicole guessed.

“Something like that. I know we talked about you staying tonight but.”

“Totally fine,” Nicole said, pulling away to smooth her fingers through Waverly’s hair. “You gotta be here for Wynonna and I’m an extra factor. I get it.” She nudged her nose against Waverly’s. “And if you can’t come by tomorrow night, that’s okay too.”

“I’ll try,” Waverly said, but she smiled. “Thanks. Maybe I’ll come over late, if that’s okay with you.”

She imagined two months ago, the thought of Waverly coming by around midnight, letting herself into the basement, and dealing with the wolf in all her power and glory. But that was then. This was now, and though she never would have expected it, now looked so very, very different.

“Yeah,” she said, and smiled. “Yeah, I think that’s fine. Want me to come pick you up in the morning, or just meet at the station to grab that book. I’ve got tomorrow off.”

“Let’s meet at the station,” Waverly said, and kissed the tip of her nose. “Eight?”

“Eight,” Nicole said, and nuzzled into the curve of her neck. “I can’t wait.”

Chapter End Notes

As promised, here's a quick recap of the current plan:

Tomorrow we're leaving for the second leg of our trip out to CA. We're taking some roundabout paths through the Southwest to see family and some friends, so we won't arrive till like, November 20. Since after that I'll also be moving in and getting settled in my new place, it is entirely possible I won't be able to get 48 up until after Thanksgiving. :c I'm gonna do my best to get you some content before that (hopefully some B-sides! I wanna get back to those, I've got several ideas to work on!) but weeeee shall see my dudes.

In the meantime, again, you can always hit me up on @lexraevision on Twitter. You guys are the best and I love hearing from you and especially while I'm on the road I'll try to reply to more of your comments. Thank you for all your support. Earpers are the rock on best fandom I've ever been even a tiny part of and I am honored y'all are into this kooky story I'm telling.
Dolls found Waverly at the kitchen table on Friday morning, halfway into her second cup of coffee and rubbing at her tired eyes. She’d spent most of the night reading through what Nicole had forwarded to her, and truth told, she was exhausted. She still wasn’t sure how she felt about Mikael, especially in light of what he’d clearly been grooming Nicole to do and be, but... he sure had sent a lot of information over. For that, at least, she was grateful.

“Hey,” Dolls said, as he let himself in a bit before dawn. “Wynonna up?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, hiding a yawn behind her hand. “She’s getting ready for your big sting operation at the Gardners’ place as we speak.”

“Great,” Dolls said, and promptly sat down backward in one of the kitchen tables, giving Waverly the impression that his relief was about Wynonna’s absence, rather than her imminent arrival. “Listen. We need a game plan.”

“I told you,” she said, frowning. “We do this at her pace.”

“Yeah, but that was a couple weeks ago, when it still looked like we were gonna have a long time to prep for this. At this rate it might be, what. Two months? Maybe six weeks?”

Waverly grimaced. As much as she didn’t want it to be the case, Dolls had a point.

“All right. What’d you have in mind?”

“I’ll handle the medical side. Just... stay close, okay? You and Nicole both. The more eyes and ears we have around, the better.”

His tone said no arguments and it made Waverly’s skin itch because it felt just a little like command and not at all like request. “You could just ask, instead of telling me what to do.”

He blinked, startled.

“Sorry,” she muttered, then sighed. “Sorry. You know I will. It’s Wynonna.”

“Okay,” he said, but he was eyeing her like he was approaching an alley cat and expecting claws to flash. “Good.”

She opened her phone’s calendar, flipping through dates. “Shit.”

“What?”

“Nicole and I made plans to take a weekend trip soon.”

Dolls pressed his lips together, watching her.

“I know, all right.” She sighed and deleted it from her phone. “We’ll stay close.”

“Thank you.” He looked up at the sound of Wynonna’s heavy bootsteps on the stairs and got up from his chair again. “Just keep it in mind.”
“Keep what in mind?” Wynonna asked, checking the rounds loaded into Peacemaker before stowing it in her holster.

“Tips for proper firearms storage,” Dolls lied easily, gesturing toward the door. “After you.”

“You came all the way over here at the asscrack of dawn to talk to my sister about firearms safety? God, and just when I thought you got cool. And you had better not be getting all chivalrous just because I look like I’m smuggling a basketball.” Wynonna waved over her shoulder to Waverly as she headed for the door. “See ya Waves! Give Clifford a biscuit for me.”

“Ha ha!” Waverly called after her, but frowned as Dolls offered her a no-nonsense sort of frown and shut the door behind them. She gathered up her things, stashed them in the backseat of her Jeep, and let her mind wander as she did. She would never willingly admit it to Wynonna, but the sensation of lost control was burrowing under her skin like little beetles, creeping and crawling and making her feel twitchy. Dolls wasn’t wrong, but it didn’t mean she had to like it. Someday, Wynonna’s life wouldn’t keep interfering with her own.

She knew that wasn’t fair, but the idea still came, blazing across her thoughts with all the poison and heat of something you’d hear screamed during an argument on some overwrought romantic comedy. She’d spent so long in Wynonna’s shadow, trying to be accepted, trying to be liked, and just like when she’d swept back into town on her birthday, here was her sister, getting in the way of her life just by being there.

Waverly cursed and slammed her hands against the rim of her steering wheel, watching the road. It wasn’t that she didn’t want Wynonna around. God, sister or not, she loved Wynonna, and life was always a little more real, a little more rich, with her around. But there was so much happening right now, and she still hadn’t gotten any responses to whatever she’d mailed out while she was possessed, and the last thing she’d expected to be dealing with on top of her girlfriend, her confusing lineage, demons and revenants still lurking around the Triangle, not to mention her girlfriend’s monthly urges to literally go frolicking through the snow in the moonlight and hunt caribou, was her sister being pregnant.

So yeah, she’d stay close by. Yeah, she’d help, and yeah, she’d do it all without showing an ounce of resentment. And with fewer judging glances, since apparently Wynonna had noticed those.

But that didn’t mean it was all easy.

She spotted Nicole’s cruiser, which sparked a not-quite-fond memory. She chuckled, pulling in beside the parked car and muttering under her breath, “But could everyone just stand still for one frickin’ minute.” She sighed and reached for the door. Nicole was right, it really didn’t ever stop. Not in Purgatory.

And on the subject of Nicole, who was sitting in her front seat and scratching at her forearm with a lazy, disinterested gesture that meant she probably didn’t even know she was doing it, the full moon really couldn’t have had worse timing. She still remembered Nicole’s back, covered in slowly healing wounds from her own claws. Sometimes when she closed her eyes she could see it, the ripping flesh, the stretching skin, the flashing teeth as Nicole howled and wept and screamed as the wolf took over.

Someday, it would get less unsettling to watch.

Wouldn’t it?

“Hey!” Nicole said, as she circled the Jeep and saw her, her grin faltering when she saw Waverly’s
face. “Uh-oh, what happened.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Kinda, yeah,” Nicole said, reaching to touch Waverly’s face, her fingers impossibly warm. “Everything okay? Wynonna okay?”

“Yes,” Waverly sighed. Of course Nicole’s first concern was her, then Wynonna. Really she should’ve expected that. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Just talked with Dolls this morning.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He said that until we figure out when the hell Wynonna is actually due, he thinks I. Well, both of us, really. Should stay close.”

Nicole blinked, understanding hitting her a moment later. “Ah. Our weekend trip.”

“Yes,” Waverly said. Nicole offered her arms and Waverly leaned against her. “I’m sorry baby.”

“I won’t pretend I’m not disappointed, but it’s fine,” Nicole said, chuckling. “We’ll do it after. We’ll get the guys on babysitting duty or something and take off for a few days once all this dust’s settled.”

“You sure?”

“Completely. If you ever need a pick-me-up, just imagine Dolls trying to change a diaper. Instant hilarity,” Nicole said. “Now let’s get inside and get that book.”

“How are you so perfect with all this stuff?”

“Oh I’m not,” Nicole admitted, laughing as they stepped into the hall and headed down past the front offices. “Trust me, I’m not perfect. And I will definitely miss having some alone time with you. But... I mean, I know how important Wynonna is to you. And Dolls is right. Until we know what’s up, better be ready.”

“Yes, and who knows who might be interested in taking her baby away from her,” Waverly said, though it was mostly under her breath as they stopped in the hall outside BBD’s door.

“Oh come on, Waves, have some faith. Child and Family Services can’t possibly know Wynonna’s record.”

Nicole let out a low oof as Waverly poked her in the belly, but Waverly laughed. It was a high, anxious sort of laugh, but still, it was a laugh.

“I’m more worried about...” Waverly waited as an officer left the bullpen past them, then glanced around. “Y’know.”

Nicole inhaled and glanced around too. “Yeah. I know. Sorry.”

Waverly shook her head. “It’s fine. Come on in.”

Jeremy was either not in yet or making himself one of those terrible microwave burritos, because the BBD rooms were empty, tomb-quiet and frankly a little unsettling. Suddenly she was glad to have Nicole here, her more than capable guardian lurking toward the front of the room. Waverly glanced over her shoulder and noted Nicole’s gaze sliding away from the small office in back that had, once, been an impromptu infirmary for a silver-poisoned werewolf. God, it seemed like that
was ages ago, but was it only, what, two months? Maybe three?

“Surprised Jeremy’s not here,” Nicole noted.

“I think ever since the attack he’s been more anxious about the thought of being here by himself,” Waverly said, tapping her fingers against the spines of the heavy tomes as she counted through them, leapfrogging over titles until she got the one she needed. “Here we go.”

Nicole grinned as Waverly headed back her way. “That was fast.”

“Oh please, I’ve pored over BBD’s tiny library so many times I probably could’ve found it blindfolded.”

Nicole chuckled and led the way back out into the hallway, linking her arm into the one not currently holding an ancient text.

“Nicole!”

Waverly chuckled at the look on Nicole’s face, but they moved in tandem to the doorway so Nicole could look into the bullpen. “What, Lonnie?”

“Your phone’s ringin’.”

Nicole frowned, sharing a look with Waverly.

“Why would your phone be ringing?” Waverly asked. “You’re off-duty today, right?”

“Yeah. Someone calling me directly, I guess,” Nicole mused. “C’mon.”

As they headed in, Sarah, the older woman who usually worked Reception, slipped out past them toward the front door, pen in hand.

“So weird,” Nicole muttered, and lifted the handset of her phone out of its cradle, putting it to her ear as Waverly set the book down on her desk. “Officer Haught speaking.”

There was no sound for a long set of seconds, but then she heard the low rumble of speech. Whatever the person on the other line said, it made Nicole’s eyes widen and then go very, very narrow, and her upper lip pulled back into a sneer. There was a sound in her throat, a strangled noise of displeasure that caught and tripped like a baseball card in a bicycle spoke. Waverly set a hand on hers, and Nicole shut her eyes, inhaling and exhaling in a deliberate, precise rhythm.

“Shae,” Nicole said, and when Waverly snapped her gaze to her, understanding, Nicole lowered the handset between their ears so they could both hear the woman on the other line.

“The one and only.”

“Should’ve known you’d come sniffing around eventually. What, did you get bored fetching the morning paper and my dad’s slippers?”

Shae’s laugh was throaty and light, and Waverly bit her lip to keep from saying anything and betraying her presence. Frankly, with Shae’s werewolf ears, she was afraid to even breathe. “Mmm, puppy has bite this month. Thank you, by the way, for that warning before. The howl. I knew you cared, sweetheart.”

“Had nothing to do with you,” Nicole bit out. In the space of a blink her eyes had turned brilliant, beautiful gold. Lonnie walked away from his desk and Nicole closed her eyes entirely, to make
sure he wouldn’t turn by chance and spot the subtle yellow glow. Waverly watched her, trying to piece together the conversation against what she already knew. Was this about the fight they’d had on the Solstice? Nicole lowered her voice. “If they caught you, you’d flip on me to save your hide. It’s what you always do.”

This time Shae’s laugh was sharper. “Ohoho. And you’re an expert in what I’m like now, is that it? Well, hindsight is 20/20 I suppose.”

“Is there a reason you called?” Nicole said, her voice cracking with the effort not to snarl.

“Make sure you check your mail,” Shae purred, and then hung up.

“What the hell,” Nicole muttered, eyeing the handset and listening cautiously at the receiver one more time.

“Oh!” Sarah had returned, and the sudden sound of her voice made Waverly jump. Sarah didn’t seem to notice, all brightness and genial smiles as usual. “Nicole, perfect. You’ve got a package, actually.”

A chill ran up and down Waverly’s spine like a child playing hopscotch. Nicole cautiously put the phone back in its cradle and accepted a sealed mailer bag from Sarah, addressed to her at the Purgatory Sheriff’s Department station. Sarah returned to the counter, unperturbed by Nicole and Waverly’s mutual anxiety. Nicole hefted it in her hand, testing the weight, before she sliced the top of the bag open with a pair of scissors. There was a piece of paper sticking up, which she pulled out first. She read the note, then handed it to Waverly with a detached, almost robotic calmness.

Nicky. Thought you’d want some real closure. Call it a gift, I guess. I know you know it’s pretty valuable. –Dad

Nicole reached into the bag, extracting what looked like a deck of playing cards, the edges foxed and dusted with white. White dust? No, that wasn’t right.

Understanding prickled across Waverly’s thoughts just as Nicole was turning the box over and examining it, a faint sound clicking in her chest.

“This is...”

Waverly grabbed at her wrist, digging her nails in until Nicole flinched and looked at her. She kept her voice down, but only barely.

“Waverly, ouch! What the hell?”

“It’s Mikael’s, isn’t it. Nicole, listen.” She leaned closer, letting her voice drop to a whisper. “You can’t do this here. They’re baiting you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s the full moon,” she continued, still barely audible. She knew Nicole would hear her, but at least Lonnie and Sarah wouldn’t. “They’re trying to get you to out yourself. That’s why she told you to open it now. When people are here.” Recognition flared in Nicole’s eyes and she bared her teeth in defiance, her canines just a bit too long. “Nicole,” Waverly said, her tone more like a warning. Nicole grimaced and squeezed her eyes shut as if it pained her. “Nicole, I know it’s difficult. But you have to stay calm.”

She nodded, but then her expression twisted with pain, and she bent over, leaning the fist still
clutching Mikael’s cards on her desk.

“I can’t,” she whispered, “I–we can’t. It’s so close.”

“Don’t move,” Waverly said, and slipped back to Nedley’s doorway. “Sheriff?”

Nedley looked up, mug halfway to his mouth, and raised his eyebrows. “Earp?”

“Is there a basement here sir? Somewhere... mm, soundproof?”

He blinked for a moment at her, setting down his mug, but maybe he understood more than she thought he did, because he glanced down at his desk calendar and his face went a little pale. He looked at her again, sharp this time and serious as the grave.

“Get her,” he said, grabbing at a ring of keys.

Her mouth dropped open a little. Did he know? Waverly decided she’d worry about that later, and went back to fetch Nicole, who looked like she was on the absolute edge of her control. She was trembling, silent and stalwart, but when she looked up at Waverly, her eyes were that golden caramel color, creeping back toward the wolf’s true gold. That was almost scarier—at least before it had just been her anger coming through. Now they’d escalated to an actual power struggle.

And it was a winner-takes-all fight where whichever part came out on top would get full control of Nicole’s body.

Nedley led them to a stairwell that went toward the morgue and some older, unused rooms, and Waverly followed him, guiding Nicole along. Twice they had to stop, Waverly half-supporting her as her body bucked in tiny convulsions, making tiny, canine noises that somehow simultaneously inspired both fear and pity. Nedley unlocked a door that, judging by the sign, had once been a workout space.

There was no equipment inside, probably salvaged and moved elsewhere, but the mats were still there. Nedley clicked the lights on and a few elderly bulbs flickered to life as Nicole stumbled out to the middle of the room. She was still clutching the bag in her left hand, the playing cards in her right. Nedley closed the door behind them and the sound of it latching was deafening.

“Baby,” Waverly said, moving to cross the room.


“To hell with that,” Waverly said, though she looked over her shoulder. “Sheriff, maybe you should go.”

“Oh no,” Nedley said, with an amused snort. “No, I’m not leaving you alone down here with her like this. Wynonna’d string me up like Christmas lights.”

Waverly blew out a breath and turned back around, moving closer. Nicole growled and bent over on another convulsion, her knees hitting the old mat.

Nicole set the cards aside and then looked into the bag as Waverly settled in a crouch on the balls of her feet, within arm’s reach, just in case.

Nicole frowned, muttering, “Can’t see anything in this light,” then tipped the bag into her palm. A pair of long, ivory incisors rolled into her hand, along with several ounces of greyish-white dust.
No, it wasn’t just the teeth and the dust. Even Waverly could tell it was more than that. It was a pair of fangs. Vampire fangs. Not dust, then, but ash.

All that was left of Mikael.

“Nicole,” she whispered, reaching out to touch Nicole’s fingers as they curled around the fangs.

“I know you know it’s valuable,” she whispered. “Witches would probably kill for vampire fangs.”

“Baby, I’m gonna put this somewhere safe, okay?” Waverly reached forward and gently took the bag before more ash could spill out. Nicole growled, but it was aimless, unfocused. Not directed at her, specifically, but generalized anger.

“That— that fucking— he killed him, Waves, and he kept the remains, just to pull this!”

“I know, baby,” Waverly said, moving a little closer on her knees.

“He’s always a step ahead of me!”

“Waverly,” Nedley said, slow, like it was a warning.

“I know, but we’ll catch up,” Waverly said. Nicole slammed her hands down on the mat, the sudden sound of it making her flinch. “Nicole, come on, you need to calm down some.”

Nicole let out a low, terrible noise in her chest that reminded Waverly of a running woodchipper, and when she stretched out her jaw her teeth were too sharp, too long. Longer even than the fangs in her hand.

No, that wasn’t quite it. It wasn’t Nicole. Not really.

The werewolf leaned toward Waverly and slammed her hands on the ground again, shoulders hunched, and bellowed a guttural, deafening roar of challenge and rage that did its level best to turn Waverly’s brain into fundamental fight-or-flight. She was like a fawn sitting before a bear, and she froze, primal, gut-deep terror and the urge to run suddenly at war with her very human fear for Nicole, the person inside that bestial maelstrom of pain and hatred. For a moment she could imagine it all too easily. Bolting away from the beast. Tripping its instinct to pursue moving prey. She could imagine the weight of several hundred pounds of half-transformed wolf leaping, taking her to the ground and ripping into her before it could even realize that Waverly was the wrong target.

Nicole buckled, as if her elbow wouldn’t hold her weight, and she collapsed forward onto the mat, forehead touching the ground as she let out a howl of agony that echoed off the walls, a sound that was as much emotional as it was physical. Nicole’s nails grew, sharp and hard and black and tearing into the mat as she twisted and writhed. Fur grew in fast-forward along the backs of her hands, her wrists and up her arms. Her face was contorting, like her skull was trying to push forward through her face, the skin stretching and warping over her skeleton.


Nicole’s hands twisted and stretched, bending in the wrong directions, and Mikael’s fangs tumbled from her grasp onto the mat. She reared back, spine arching as if she’d been struck with lightning, the seams of her shirt straining as her body twisted and changed. Waverly could see her struggling not to go all the way over, making another horrible sound that cut through the fear and broke Waverly’s heart open all over again.
For just a second, Waverly saw this singular moment extrapolated into a lifetime. A lifetime of tracking the lunar calendar. A lifetime of looking over her shoulder for revenants and enemy werewolves alike. A lifetime of wondering if this month was the month the wolf decided it had gotten bored of her and reached through the bars to rip her apart. A lifetime of watching Nicole wrestle with herself, incapable of doing anything but sitting on the sideline and watching. A lifetime of having to think two steps ahead of a beast with the brain of a human and the instincts of a predator. A lifetime of fear and pain.

A future with Nicole wasn’t bright, and it was far from perfect. No white picket fence and 2.5 kids. But then again, she wasn’t those things either, or at least she wasn’t anymore. She was something that might not be an Earp. That might not even be fully human. Maybe they were more alike than either of them would ever have imagined.

And then, too, a lifetime with Nicole wasn’t only those things. It wasn’t just fear and pain, but also love and strength.

She didn’t need bright and perfect. She needed Nicole. The beautiful, confident officer that had walked into her bar one dusty autumn morning and changed the whole world. An officer that just happened to be a werewolf.

“I am so tired of other people telling me what I should and should not do,” Waverly snapped, and crawled forward on her knees, wrapping her arms around Nicole’s shoulders and holding on tight even as the werewolf twisted and thrashed and tried to dislodge her, howling like the world was ending, like Waverly’s touch burned. “I’ve got you,” she whispered, and half-formed ears flicked, one of them brushing her cheek as somewhere inside the storm Nicole listened to her. Nedley had moved closer, but out of either fear of the wolf or acceptance of Waverly’s will, he’d stayed about ten feet away, watching with shrewd, cautious eyes. “I’ve got you, Nicole.”

The wolf—or was it Nicole? Or both?—made a faint, almost inquisitive noise, and Waverly held on a little tighter.


Slowly, so slowly, Waverly felt as Nicole set aside the rage and regained herself. The wolf fell away in bits. Her body twisted and realigned, shrinking back to its usual shape, until Nicole was the right size within Waverly’s arms. The fur fell away, or withdrew, Waverly wasn’t quite watching closely enough to tell for sure.

A low, aching howl escaped her as she changed, softening and faltering to a very human cry of despair. As if by putting aside the anger she had nothing left to distract her from the pain, and it all hit her at once. Nicole’s hands fell limply in her lap, her face slipping to Waverly’s shoulder, letting out only half-swallowed, coughing sobs. Waverly wrapped her arms around Nicole and tugged her gently, rearranging her until Nicole was partially sprawled in Waverly’s lap. She looked up, noting Nedley still a few feet away.

I’ll let you two be, he mouthed at her, and Waverly spared him a small smile and a nod. The sheriff slipped out of the room, closing the door so quietly Waverly wouldn’t have thought it was happening if she hadn’t been watching.

She assumed Nicole could hear it, but if she’d noticed, it didn’t break her focus. Waverly tangled a hand into her hair at the back of her head, holding her tight as the other rubbed up and down her back.
“It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s just me here.”

She half-expected Nicole to ignore that, but then, Nicole always did surprise her. She stopped trying to muffle herself, letting out open, heaving sobs that shook her whole body in Waverly’s grip.

Waverly lost track of the time, not that she was exactly counting the minutes. Only when Nicole had been breathing steadily for longer than about twenty seconds at a time did Waverly look down at her and kiss her forehead. The hand she’d had on Nicole’s back felt odd, the tips of her fingers almost numb from long minutes of constant motion against Nicole’s shirt.

“Hey,” she whispered, pressing another kiss to Nicole’s hairline.

“Messed up your shirt,” Nicole mumbled.

“I don’t mind. Think I’ve got a tissue in my purse, want one?” Nicole made a faint, noncommittal noise that Waverly took as agreement, so she set to poking through her bag as Nicole rested against her. “How’s your head?”

“Hurts,” Nicole admitted. “Some of that’s the moon.”

Waverly handed her a tissue, waiting as Nicole wiped at her nose and face.

“I’m so sorry baby.”

“He was a dick,” Nicole mumbled, with a surprising amount of vitriol. “He was a vampire. He hurt people, he killed people, he probably used me like a big dumb fuzzy weapon against my dad...” Waverly waited. “But god, Waves, I think there was still a part of me hoping the centaur was wrong. That he’d pulled some fucking Houdini trick right at the end.”

“I know,” Waverly murmured.

“You’re right, Shae was trying to get me to fuck up.” Waverly said nothing, and Nicole sat up on the mat, hands balling into fists. “I am so. Tired. Of everyone using me. Of thinking they can control me.”

Waverly blew out a breath through her nose. “Yeah, I know.”

“No more,” Nicole said, letting out a growl that was all animal. “I’m done being other people’s pawn.”

Waverly smiled and leaned forward, nudging her nose against Nicole’s to pull her focus.

“You’re definitely a queen in my book, baby.”

Nicole’s expression softened abruptly, and she grinned, all dimples and twinkling caramel eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Waverly stroked a hand through her hair, tucking some behind her ear. “Nicole, I know we said I’d go back to the Homestead to work on those translations but... I don’t want you to be by yourself.” Nicole opened her mouth and Waverly added, “Jane doesn’t count.”

Nicole closed her mouth, then smiled.

“Okay, okay. I won’t go home and sulk alone and plan revenge fantasies.”
“Baby...”

Nicole gave a weak chuckle, wiping at her face with one hand. “I’m kidding. Really. Just. Let me go and wash up, okay? I’ll... I’ll get Calamity Jane set up and I’ll swing by in a few hours. I promise.”

Waverly leaned her forehead against Nicole’s, blowing out a breath. “Okay. Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

AND I'M BAAAACK! Super super big amounts of gratitude to all of y'all for your patience and support. I'm settling in pretty well in my new place here in CA and adjusting to my new schedule.

As a result though, I'm not sure if I'll be able to sustain the pace I was keeping up before (that is to say, every day). But! I'm hhhhoping to do every two days? In which case you can expect to see me popping up on your subscription feeds this Friday, pups.
Nicole was no stranger to grief. It had been a longtime companion, certainly since she’d turned 18 and worked out exactly what it was that her father was using pentacles for in the basement. Even more so since she’d figured out her mother was the one playing lookout and getaway driver and research assistant. It had dogged her steps since Shae, and it had followed her to the edge of the Ghost River Triangle.

And now it had crawled into Purgatory, sneaking back into her life like a thief and bringing with it the last surviving scraps of the first supernatural who’d ever helped her: a pair of teeth, three handfuls of ash, and his favorite deck of playing cards. She kept her promise to Waverly, in that she did not sulk or sit in the dark plotting revenge, but she also didn’t move as quick as she maybe should have. She lingered, making pit stops on her journey from station to house to homestead.

First was the front seat of her cruiser, once she’d parked in her driveway.

Waverly, wisely, had taken the bag of ash with her. Just as well, since Nicole’s hands shook every time she thought about it. She’d have spilled it by now, for sure.

She had kept the fangs, which were in her shirt pocket, and the cards, which she had tucked into the cupholder of her cruiser until she got home. Now she sat, mere yards from her own front door, and opened the box, thumbing through the cards. She examined the faces, read the symbols, counted the numbers. She was looking for something, but she wasn’t actually sure what it was she was trying to find. A message, maybe? Something he’d left behind?

She got through the entire deck, and there was nothing there but cards. No tears came, but she found herself running her fingers over the queen of hearts, feeling the worn edges, the warped corners.

The second stop was her entryway. She felt... tired. Drained, in a way that had nothing to do with how much sleep she’d gotten last night. The looming full moon made her skin itch and her teeth vibrate and made the wolf tense and upset but she just couldn’t bring herself to acknowledge it. She sat down with her back to the door, to take her boots off, then stayed there, unable to find the energy to get back up. After a couple minutes, Calamity Jane plodded over, with the cautious, lofty concern unique to cats: genuine worry, masked as selfish disinterest. She thumped her head into Nicole’s shin, rubbing her body against the denim of her jeans from shoulder to hip until she was standing between Nicole’s knees, rubbing her body against the denim of her jeans from shoulder to hip until she was standing between Nicole’s knees.

“Hey, Jane,” Nicole whispered, and her cat started up a positively deafening purr, climbing up her front until she was standing in Nicole’s lap with her front paws braced on Nicole’s chest. She chuckled, and the ginger puffball butted her head against Nicole’s mouth, rubbing until Nicole relented and scritched her fingers behind soft ears. “Love you too.”

There they remained until Calamity Jane decided that there was no more she could do, and wandered off into another room.

Third was in her shower, leaning against the wall on one hand as she let the hot water pour down over her head. Part of her, a part that was too tired to cry, wanted to just curl up in bed and take a nap. But she had things to take care of first. And there was always something that had to be done first, wasn’t there? People to worry about. Jobs to do.

And on top of all that, her phone was ringing when she got out of the shower.
“Waverly?” she said, when she picked up.

“Nicole, hey,” Waverly said, her voice firm, tense. “I need a favor.”

“Uh, sure,” she said, tucking her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she ran her towel through her hair. “What’s up?”

“Look, I know this is pretty much the worst timing ever and I’m asking so, so much of you, baby, but something stupid is going on and I need help.”

A grin played around her mouth. “It’s fine. Honestly, having something to do is probably good. Keep my mind busy, y’know?”

Waverly heaved a sigh. “You’re being entirely too reasonable. It makes me worry when it is I’m gonna find the line and cross right over it and upset you so much that you break up with me and move to South America and get caught up in a drug cartel and wind up dead in a ditch with a Colombian necktie or something.”

“Right.” Nicole let the silence stretch for a long moment. “Uh. You lost me.”

Waverly sighed. “Wynonna thought that between Black Badge missions it would be good to show Doc some television, y’know, to get him more used to modern times? And I don’t know if you know this but a lot of daytime programming is awful.”

Nicole bit on her lip, trying not to laugh. “Right. Um. What’s the favor?”

“God. Right. I need you to look after Wynonna for a while. She just had her first gynecologist appointment and she’s kinda freaking out and I really don’t want her to be alone but Doc drove off in a huff and I need to make sure he’s not going to do something even more stupid...”

Nicole inhaled, then exhaled, slow.

“I know, baby, the timing is so bad, but—”

“It’s okay, Waves.”

There was a long pause and she heard the faint sound of Waverly tugging at her necklace, rolling the chain between her fingers. “Yeah?”

She chuckled. “Yeah. Waves, yeah, it is. If there’s anything that’ll keep me from wallowing in all of my shit, it’s some unplanned quality time with Wynonna.”

Waverly blew out a faint laugh and sighed. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“Yeah, I am. I’ll just get some proper clothes on and head out. Be there in like twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Nicole. I am so making this up to you later.”

“Oh yeah?” Nicole murmured, grinning until she was sure Waverly could hear it in her voice. “What’d you have in mind?”

“Oh, you know,” Waverly said, matching her tone, then lowered her voice until it was a silky purr. “Something nice... slow... sensual... something that definitely won’t be happening until after the full moon’s over...”

Distracted, Nicole shoulder-checked a doorframe and cursed under her breath, earning a delighted
laugh from Waverly. “Well. Well, *damn.*”

“Cockblocked by a celestial body, baby, sorry.”

“The true curse of lycanthropy,” Nicole said, pulling out clothes from her dresser without quite looking at them.

“I’m *pretty* sure that’s not true.” She paused, weighing her words as carefully as gold. “You... you sound good, Nicole. Are you faking because you think I want to hear you sound better, or are you actually doing better?”

“Little of both, I guess. Shower helped. Go and talk to Doc, Waves. We’ll talk later.”

“Okay. See you tonight?”

“Yes,” Nicole said, smiling as she set her towel aside. “Yeah, I can’t wait, actually, which is pretty weird to say about spending hours locked in a steel box. And for the record?”

“Yes?”

“Nothing you could say or do would make me run off to South America. I mean, can you imagine me down there? I’d be the color of a lobster the second I stepped off the plane.”

Waverly laughed, and Nicole felt the sound like a physical blow to the gut, staggering her. How could just the sound of someone’s voice feel like coming home?

When she got to the Homestead, wearing a coat she hadn’t worn since the bite because even with the wolf’s natural body heat a tank top in February was, well, *a bit much,* Wynonna was just coming out the front door, bundled up in one of her heavy, long coats that mostly masked her... er, *condition.*

“Waverly left,” Wynonna informed her, rolling her eyes as she reached back to pull the door shut. “Cellphones, people, use ‘em. You’ll have to take a rain check on the ol’ pop-by.”

Nicole set her feet in the snow in front of the porch stairs and smiled.

“Nicole, I’m leaving. Don’t make me belly-bump you.”


Wynonna looked very much like there was a snarky comment on the tip of her tongue, and Nicole could imagine it all too well—you, the giant red death machine with chainsaws for hands, afraid of *Waverly*—but Wynonna kept it to herself. She considered Nicole’s words, then sighed, recognizing the diabolical scheme she was up against.

“Waverly sent you to babysit.”

“Well,” Nicole tamed her grin down to a sly smile. “Mommysit, technically?”

Wynonna rolled her eyes. “Ew.”

Nicole sighed and steeled herself for the long haul. “I am not to let you out of my sight until she comes back. You’re... going through a lot,” she said, the irony not lost on her that she might as well
be talking to herself, “And she doesn’t want you to be alone right now.”

Wynonna pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth, presumably to suppress any comments she might make. “Fine,” she said, and started down the stairs. “To the bar.”

She headed for Nicole’s cruiser, and Nicole turned to watch her. “Uh... it’s a little early to hit Shorty’s?”

“Not Shorty’s,” Wynonna said, and turned back around, arching her eyebrows. “It’s an away game. You coming or what?”

Nicole pressed her lips together, weighing her options. On the one hand, she and the wolf were both very keen on the prospect of curling up in Waverly’s bed, snoozing until she got back, and then heading home to spend an evening locked away while she forgot about her worries entirely for some 12 hours. On the other, she could go get drunk with Wynonna when she was already emotionally compromised, which was probably a terrible idea.

Oh who was she kidding, she’d made her mind up before she even started tallying the pros and cons.

“Guess I’m drinking for two,” she grumbled, catching up to Wynonna’s side, but it was mostly for show.

“Three,” Wynonna reminded her, as they fell into step and headed for her cruiser. “I hate doing everything sober.”

For a few minutes, Wynonna did nothing but give directions, which mostly comprised only the occasional turn left here or the somewhat unspecific okay stay here for like, a while. But as they left main-street-Purgatory, heading out into the more rundown neighborhoods, Wynonna broke her self-imposed silence.

“Werewolves are top of the food chain, right?”

“I... guess, sure?”

Wynonna turned in her seat, the belt sliding across her shoulder, and leveled Nicole with a supremely unimpressed look.

“So what the hell’s eating you, dude?” Nicole snorted. “You’ve been quiet since we got in the car. So either you tell me what’s up, or I get really goddamn annoying.”

“It’s—” Nicole sighed, shaking her head. “Listen, it’s not so bad. Just.” She thought of the loose incisor teeth now sitting in a small dish in a drawer where Calamity Jane couldn’t reach it. “Lost a friend recently. Got confirmation this morning that he’s... y’know.”

“Shit,” Wynonna said, settling a little lower into her seat. “Hang a right up here, after the dumpster.”

Nicole grunted in acknowledgement and for a moment the only sound in the car was the heavy clicking of her turn signal. She saw a distant sign for Pussy Willows, which could only possibly be a strip club. Wynonna pointed, and Nicole headed toward the sign, tracing backroads to get to the club’s beat up asphalt parking lot.

“That sucks. And here I thought you were just getting some real shitty PMS. Y’know. Period Moon Swings.”
“Wynonna.”

“You said one!” Wynonna protested. “You said I get one and I finally used it. Don’t you dare get all stingy on me now, Haught! Also, I just want it on the record that pre-moonrise syndrome also works. Two for the price of one.”

Nicole laughed. It startled her, actually—it started out as just a splutter of indignation that tripped over into snickering, but then she couldn’t stop. She parked toward the back by the alley that accessed the back of the venue, chuckles escalating into an all-out belly laugh, and she doubled over against the steering wheel, helpless and wiping at her streaming eyes. The wolf was either helpful or unhelpful, depending on your point of view. She stayed in the background, quiet and eternally patient, allowing Nicole the moment of mirth without interfering or seeming at all upset by what was happening.

When Nicole had finally calmed down, Wynonna winked and got out of the cruiser, leading the way into the strip club through a side door like she knew the place well. As Nicole followed her inside, something odd hit her, momentarily taking her breath away.

Wynonna hadn’t made any mocking comments, hadn’t laughed at her, hadn’t called her any names. Like she understood, maybe. Like maybe Wynonna had known exactly what Nicole needed, even when she hadn’t.

*Pussy Willows* was the exact kind of bar that Shae would like. Loud, hazy with smoke, and filled to bursting with cheap beer, hard liquor, half-naked women, and supernaturals. Oh not too many, of course. There were plenty of normal folk around too, but they gave off the air of initiates, the hidden community’s friends-and-family-discounts. People that might be 100% corn-fed organic human, but knew enough to walk in non-human circles.

“Wow,” Nicole muttered as she looked around, sniffing at the air and catching the scent of sulfur and char underneath the layers of booze, drunk human, and peanut shells. She looked around, but with most people in booths or watching dancers, or otherwise masked by smoke, it was harder to do a proper supernatural headcount like she had at the diner. Suddenly she was glad she’d stashed a .22 in her boot. Until the package she’d requested from Mikael came in, it would be a decent substitute, though it felt weirdly heavy and extraneous sitting against her ankle.

“Hm?” Wynonna said, looking around too. She was watching faces with a fitful, nervous look to her eye, checking if anyone recognized her.

“This,” Nicole mused, “Is one hell of a supernatural Tupperware party.”

Wynonna squinted at her, not even pretending to mask her blatant confusion. “Do I even want to—no, no I probably don’t. All right. First things first. Listen. I need you to go order a pitcher of beer for us. Two glasses, I don’t want any of these Hell’s Angels rejects to figure out I’m rolling with a sidecar.”

“Oh, if it’s so important they think you’re drinking, why am I ordering?”

Wynonna pushed her toward the bar. “Just. Do it, please, I don’t want any of the bartenders to recognize me.”

Nicole sighed, but raised her hands in concession. “All right, all right. I’m going.”

“Good. Oh, and, Nicole,” Wynonna said, just as Nicole started to turn away. When she turned
back, Wynonna leaned into her space, enough that it caught the wolf’s attention, growling in the back of her mind in complaint. “Um. Keep the canine stuff to a dull roar today. Please?” Wynonna’s gaze skittered around the room as she talked, so tense you could string a longbow with her, and the wolf’s complaint died away immediately, replaced by protective displeasure at Wynonna’s obvious fear. “Last thing we need is a big barfight.”

“Sure, okay. We’ll do this your way. We’re in your territory, Wynonna.”

“Oh you sweet innocent puppy,” Wynonna muttered as she walked away, so soft Nicole almost didn’t catch it over the thumping bassline. “You have no idea.”

The nearest bartender, a big, leather-clad dude with a trim but greying beard, reeked of hellfire and blood, but Nicole pretended not to notice. She leaned across the bar, suddenly wishing she’d worn something slightly more imposing than a green down jacket.

“Hey,” she said, tapping the bar to get the guy’s attention. “Pitcher of beer for me and my friend?”

The barkeep grunted in acknowledgement, filled it, and set it down with a heavy clunk. “Ten bucks.”

She frowned, grunted back at him, and dug a bill out of her pocket, slapping it down next to the pitcher. When he’d taken it, he set down two glasses, and she carried the lot back to where Wynonna was sitting, at a corner of the bar where the two of them could sit and watch almost all of the doors and avenues of approach.

“Nice choice,” Nicole noted, setting the pitcher and the glasses down. She poured both glasses, then set the pitcher aside, shrugging out of her coat to hang it over the back of her chair. Inside, with this much smoke and sweat and human lust, the heat of it was absolutely stifling.

“Yeah, figured, y’know. Better vantage points, better lines of sight. Cop shit.”

She took a big gulp from her cup, chuckling, then reached over to take a sip from Wynonna’s, twisting it back around so the foam streaks were on Wynonna’s side. “Yeah. Boil down complex defensive strategy and reconnaissance to cop shit. It’s fine. I’m not offended.”

“Good to hear it.”

The music, which had unfortunately not been dulled for supernatural ears the way it had been at Loretta’s club, faded slightly, and a PA system crackled, making her wince.

“Sorry about the noise,” Wynonna said, lowering her voice a little. “I uh. Didn’t think about that.”

“It’s cool.” She looked over her shoulder and peered around as the main dancer slid down her pole and hit the stage, sauntering out of the spotlight.

“Everybody put your hands together for your favorite: Jesse!”

“So,” Nicole added, picking up her glass and scanning the room again, looking for oddities, supernaturals, warning signs... pretty much anything that might get her or her wolf’s attention. There were a couple biker women in one corner who definitely smelled like wolves, and eyed her until she nodded and looked away, but other than that and a few folks milling around that she presumed were low-power demons, she couldn’t ID any others. “This is Pussy Willows, huh?”

Wynonna rolled her eyes and scanned the tableau before her: shitty neon signs, buffalo skulls, scantily clad women, and sticky floors. “Wrong side of the wrong side of the tracks,” she agreed.
“God,” she breathed, watching the dancers. “What kind of girl ends up workin’ a place like this?”

“Well! Maybe one with no family, a reputation for conjuring up fake demons, and no other way to raise money for a bus ticket out of here?”

Nicole frowned at her, doing the math as a heavyset, balding man in a leather vest and a beard so long and grey he could have passed for a particularly grungy wizard stepped up behind Wynonna, clamping his hand down on her bare shoulder enough that his fingers dug into the muscle. He stank of beer, but most of it, Nicole thought, was contact high just from being in the bar. He wasn’t so sloshed or so aggressive that she was particularly concerned he was about to do something stupid, but she didn’t at all like the way Wynonna tensed up under his touch. Her wolf roared for violence and she tamped it down with a brutally heavy hand.


“Where ya been, Aphrodite?” he crooned, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“Ohhh hey, ‘sup, TJ,” Wynonna said, wincing in discomfort where he couldn’t see the look on her face. “I have my period, so you’ll have to…”

TJ left as quickly as he’d arrived, evidently not intending it to be a social visit, and Wynonna let out a breath, rolling her eyes.

“Who’s Aphro…” Suddenly Wynonna wouldn’t meet her gaze. “Oh.” Nicole grimaced, watching the man’s retreating back, suddenly hoping desperately he had never actually gotten what it sounded like he wanted from Wynonna. She reached for Wynonna’s glass again and took another healthy-sized gulp.

“Pace yourself,” Wynonna said drily. “There’s so much more to judge.”

“Mm.”

“I came here a few months ago, when…” Wynonna sighed. “I got so drunk even Shorty’s wouldn’t serve me anymore, and I… did something.”

Nicole frowned, trying to remember if she’d heard of any calls out to this, hm, establishment about disturbances, barfights or even mysteriously missing bar patrons who might’ve met the business end of Peacemaker.

“What?”

Wynonna’s gaze slid across to the busier side of the bar, and Nicole spotted a handsome younger man in a grey t-shirt, tight jeans, and a smile that probably had most women eating out of his hand. He was chatting with a patron, grinning and laughing.

“Him.”

“Ah,” Nicole said, and grinned at her, raising her glass of beer in a toast. “Well, drunk Wynonna still has standards,” she said, gulping down another mouthful. It wasn’t exactly great, but it didn’t taste offensive and the wolf was reveling in it, rolling around gleefully in the slow, distant sensation of growing drunkenness.

“Yeah, I…” Wynonna grinned. “No beer goggles here.”

A thought sparked, making Nicole frown. “Wait, sorry,” she said, lowering the glass back to the
bar with a faint clink. “How many months ago?”

“Oh, just...” Wynonna made a faint, dismissive noise, then pivoted on her chair, eyeing her supernaturally advanced belly. “Yea many?”

*Oh, shit.*

“Whoa, okay.” Nicole said, trying to keep her shock down to a manageable and relatively non-obvious level, “So, we’re here to tell Mister One-Night-Stand that you’re now a crazy chick with a...” She grinned, waggling her shoulders. “*Bun in the oven?*”

Wynonna chuckled, shaking her head. “*Officer Haught. So sweet, so naïve.*” She cleared her throat. “No, I have *no* intention of letting this *pussy willow* out of the bag.” Nicole stifled a laugh but leaned in, listening. “You’re gonna buy him a drink, and then you’re gonna steal the glass for the saliva sample. Science will tell us who the dad is, and then we *murder* Science to keep its filthy mouth shut, and hopefully I never have to tell Doc about this whole unsavory scenario.”

Nicole mulled it over for a moment, looking for any obvious flaws, then nodded. “That... actually is a good plan.”

“You don’t become Wynonna Earp by confronting problems head on,” Wynonna said, with a smug smile.

Nicole chuckled, raising her glass to take a sip. Somewhere further off, on the other side of the bar, she caught the tail end of an argument, just barely audible over the thump of the music. There was the faint sound of a slap, as of a hand on skin, and then two men shouting over a dancer’s cry of *hey!*

The noise got louder suddenly, trying hard to escalate into a full out fight, and Wynonna looked toward the conflict, alarmed. Nicole glanced over as Wynonna’s one-night-stand slammed a hand against the offender’s chest and shoved him back into a low wall.

“Hands off the girls,” he snapped.

The guy he was holding pressed against his grip, his eyes turning dark, glowing with that all too distinctive red revenant glow.

“His eyes,” Nicole whispered. “Did you see his eyes?”

“Oh *shit.*” Wynonna hissed. “Not now.”

Her one-night-stand turned back around to another bartender, his own eyes glowing, and when he spoke, his voice had a demonic, vicious undertone to it.

“*Get him outta here.*”

“Wynonna,” Nicole said, cautious. “You...”

“Had sex,” Wynonna breathed, “With a revenant.” She turned back toward the bar, exhaling a strangled little groan. She locked one hand around her beer glass and Nicole reached for it before she could really think about taking a sip, plucking it up out of her grip.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, breathe, *breathe,***” she said, pulling both glasses toward her and muttering, “*Breathe, breathe, breathe.*” Even she wasn’t sure who she was really talking to, Wynonna or herself. She took a big gulp from each glass.
“Shit shit shit shit!”

“I mean, you were.” Nicole raised the two glasses to indicate her meaning. “You were drunk, right? So are you sure? That you had sex with...” She pointed, lowering her voice to a whisper. “With the revenant guy?”

Her head felt a bit wobbly when she bobbed it for emphasis. Which meant the shitty beer was hitting rather faster than she’d bargained for. Shit, did I eat anything earlier? The wolf didn’t answer, exactly, just made grumbling, irritable noises. She’d been so focused on the package and Shae’s phone call that she’d forgotten all about getting a proper meal in. This... might get interesting.

“After I killed the last of the Seven?” Wynonna said, leaning into her palm, and a tiny part of Nicole’s mind noticed that there was a short scar on her wrist that Nicole didn’t think she’d noticed before, a faint, older mark like a cat-scratch, or... shit. “The– the Jack of Knives?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, leaning a little closer so Wynonna could lower her voice.

“It destroyed me.” Nicole pressed her mouth into a line, nodding her head a little in acknowledgement. Who wouldn’t be destroyed by that? The Jack had been vicious, fast, and impossibly cruel. He’d killed so many just in Purgatory, let alone any other victims he’d taken down before Wyatt Earp and his descendants got to him. It was a miracle she and Wynonna had gotten out alive; it would’ve taken an act of god to get them both out in one psychological piece.

“So. I dealt with it the best way I knew how. I binged. Lord did I binge. I just... I was trying to erase the memories of being paralyzed, tortured, nearly eviscerated by the revenant Ripper before I blew his head off.”

Nicole shuddered, remembering all too well the sensation of creeping cold, foggy blindness, the smell of Shae’s perfume. That thought brought back more: the weight of Shae’s head on her shoulder, like it was familiar. Like it was easy to just slip back into that role. She remembered waking up in the hospital, and talking with Nedley and with Waverly. She remembered coming home afterward and finding that Nedley had taken care of Calamity Jane like she was his own. Even changed out all the litter in her box, like she’d been meaning to for a little while.

“Most of the night was a blur,” Wynonna admitted, rubbing her hand over her eyes. “Doc offered to bring me home, but I wasn’t done, so. I came here. It just– I wanted to be touched. I wanted to feel something...” She hesitated, searching for words, and the weight of it felt like a confession. “Good.” She sighed, her gaze skittering toward the revenant before darting away, sliding past Nicole’s face like she was afraid of what she’d find there, then doubling back in surprise. Nicole’s expression bore no judgement, no anger, just understanding. “And he was nice! He– we had fun!”

Nicole smiled a little just to hear that brightness in Wynonna’s voice, even if only for a second. She glanced across the room again, but the revenant was leaning against the bar, chatting up a couple guests, not paying any attention to the two of them.

“And, you know what?” Wynonna asked. “It actually helped.” She blew out a sharp breath and her next words were a whisper. “I never thought I’d see him again.”

It occurred to her, watching Wynonna stare down at the bar with her head in her hands, that next to Waverly, there was nothing that riled up the wolf as fast as seeing Wynonna hurting and vulnerable and subdued. But her thoughts skidded aside to a secondary concern, and that burst out of her first.

“Oh, uh, so– so you’re the Earp heir and he’s... a revenant,” she said, glancing down at Wynonna’s belly. “So that means the baby is...” Her phone rang and she reached for it. “It’s uh.”
She flipped her phone over to see the screen and panic shot through her like a jolt of lightning. “It’s Waverly. Oh boy.”

Wynonna gave her a tense, horrified look, eyes wide.

“I…” She grimaced and picked up the phone, putting on a big fake grin that she hoped carried to her voice. “Hey cutie!”

“Don’t cutie me!” Waverly protested, then sighed. “Hi sweetie-pie. No, but seriously, where is she?”

“Uh– the- uh… she’s with me,” Nicole said, watching Wynonna’s face as it shifted from alarmed to impotent anger. “And we’re… fine.” She pulled her phone down from her mouth and whispered, “I cannot lie to her.”

“You have to!” Wynonna hissed, and Nicole grunted her ineffective but strong disapproval.

“I hear music,” Waverly said.

She panicked. “No.”

“Trashy… pumping…” Waverly gasped. “You’re at a– a strip joint!”

Nicole looked to Wynonna, screwing up her face and searching for a way out. “Aphrodite made me do it!” she insisted, and Wynonna gasped, horrified. She yelped in response and Waverly let out a low, warning noise as she read between the lines.

“Just! Shut! Your mouth!” Wynonna hissed.

“Tell me which one,” Waverly demanded.

Nicole pulled the phone down again, whispering to Wynonna. “I am so sorry.” She leaned back, raising the phone again. “We’re at uh—”

Fast, faster even than she and the wolf could fully track, Wynonna snatched her phone and dropped it directly into the pitcher of beer. She let out a low, horrified breath, as if even she was appalled at what she’d done, but she pointed at Nicole to head off whatever protest she thought was coming.

“Okay, yeah,” Nicole said, tucking her hair behind her ear, “I guess I deserved that.”

“Next time, this?” Wynonna said, and recreated her wide-eyed, terrified stare for a handful of seconds, “Means don’t tell my sister we’re at a sleazy knocker-locker!”

“Oh,” Nicole grunted, “It’s Waverly, okay? You know me, you know how I am. I can’t lie to her.”

“See?” Wynonna scoffed, “This is what you get when you’re friends with a narc.”

“Guess I deserved that too,” she mused, and sighed.

Wynonna echoed the sigh and slid a hand over her face. “I did drag you into this shitstorm.”

The wolf didn’t even have to push this time, Nicole was already a step ahead.

“And I…” Nicole grabbed Wynonna’s wrist, gripping tight. “I’m gonna drag you out, just as soon as I get that saliva sample. But you have got to jet.”
Wynonna looked at her, and for once, said nothing, just reading the determination and support on Nicole’s face.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Nicole flinched, hearing footsteps, and looked over at mister one-night-stand himself, fighting down the urge to growl and bare her fangs in defiance and dominance.

“Wynonna?”

Wynonna flinched, turning back to face him before she’d even really gotten down off her seat.

“Woman, how long has it been,” the revenant murmured.

“Oh,” Wynonna said, getting that high, uneven pitch she’d used so often with Lucado. The pitch that meant she was scared, which meant there was some quality sass incoming. “I’d say... about 28 weeks?”
Nicole was finally, \textit{finally}, well and truly loaded.

The bartender was staring at her from behind a small army of upended shot glasses, his expression... well she wasn’t actually quite sure, because he kept blurring and sliding in and out of her line of sight.

“Lady?” he asked, with that note in his voice like it was the third time he’d said it. “Hey.”

“No,” she said, or something like it. “No ‘mergency rooms. No.”

He heaved a sigh. “How much did you have before you got here?”

“Doesn’ matter,” she mumbled.

“Yeah, it \textit{does},” he insisted, though he kept the calm, neutral tone of someone who was very used to dealing with moping drunks. She wasn’t moping, thank you, but when she tried to assess the image her eyes were showing her, she realized she’d set her head on the bar. Or at least that was probably what it was, seeing as everything was sideways, and half her face was delightfully cool. He pressed his hands on the bar on either side of her. “Cuz when you walked in here, I figured you’d only been pregaming, but if somebody else already cut you off and I kept serving you, I could get fucked over by this. How much. Did you drink today.”

“Julio, hey.” Warm hands slid over the nape of Nicole’s neck and a voice like silk and sex talked across her, over her head. “I’m sorry. She’s with me.”

The bartender—Julio—grunted but pulled his hands back. “Shae. Figures. Where’ve you been? I haven’t seen you tonight.”

“Trying to track down my wife!” Shae said with a light, airy laugh, gently squeezing Nicole’s shoulders to indicate her meaning. Nicole grunted and shook, trying to dislodge her. “Thanks for keeping an eye on her for me.”

“Right,” Julio said, though his tone betrayed his many, many misgivings. “Congrats, I guess. Listen, keep an eye on her. I’m worried.”

“Thanks, Julio. I’ll take her right back to the hotel.” A deceptively strong arm looped around Nicole’s back, under her arm, and hefted her up off her stool. “Did she have a tab with you?”

“Yeah. I’ll close it out.”

“Put it on my card, would you?”

Nicole only dimly tracked the conversation, most of her attention on the firm grasp Shae had on her upper body. It was nice, in a way, being held like that, but it would have been nicer if she didn’t know exactly why and \textit{how} Shae was so strong that she could hold a grown-ass woman as if she weighed nothing more than a toddler. Her head lolled forward until her chin hit her chest, and the prickly, angry pressure of the \textit{thing} now sharing space in her skull \textit{scratched} at her, frazzling her drunken thoughts until she realized she was making an angry, scratchy noise too. Though hers
was actually audible.

“Sorry about this, Julio,” Shae said, laughing all too easily. “Thanks again.”

Then they were moving, and the whole bar spun and pinwheeled around her as Shae walked her (carried her, really) toward the back door and out into an alley. The Montana night was cold, bitter cold, the way only dry mountain air can be.

“Le’go,” Nicole mumbled, as her boots splashed in a puddle. The night air was overwhelming. It was arid, for starters, drying out her nose, but besides that she could smell... god, she could smell everything. Car exhaust. Gasoline. Oil. Wet cardboard. Dry cardboard. Shoe leather, laundry detergent, cigarette smoke, pot smoke, rotting food. Blood. Urine. Sweat. Panic, terror, excitement, joy, anguish, rage. It was all there, the full range of humanity’s odors, and it assaulted her like a stampede of buffalo, trampling her under a thousand images and smells and sounds.

Add to that the fact that she was still roaring drunk, the too-bright lights blurring and blinding, the too-loud sounds incomprehensible and indistinguishable, until it turned into an impenetrable wall of sound.

“Don’t make a scene,” Shae snapped, though she kept her voice low, marching Nicole down the alley and back toward their hotel. Nicole hadn’t ranged terribly far from home, but now the walk felt far too long. She felt sick. More than that, she felt homesick, more so than when she’d gone off to university. She missed her bed in her old house and the familiar smells of home that didn’t try to overrun her brain. She missed her dad’s dumb jokes and the special way he made coffee for her, rich and dark and sweet. She missed her mom’s hugs and soft kisses pressed into her hair.

But now she couldn’t go home. Not now that she’d seen the woman her father had killed in the basement. Not now that she’d seen arcane symbols on the floor and the walls drawn in blood, not now that she’d seen things no one would ever believe, even if she told. Not now that she’d called the cops on her own parents.

“Jesus, Nicole.” Shae stopped, and had her soft hands on Nicole’s face. They’d stopped by the rear entrance of the hotel’s grounds, a few dozen yards from the pool. She could smell the chlorine, almost enough to make her gag, and could hear the faint splashing of a handful of laughing, drunk adults out for a late-night swim.

“Shhshit. Did I say. Like. All’a that out loud?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, you kinda did.” Shae stroked warm fingers along her cheek and tucked hair behind Nicole’s ear. “Nicole, you should’ve... you should have told me.”

She grunted and shrugged off Shae’s touch, taking a few shaky steps toward the back gate. She set a hand on it, trying to look casual even though she was growing ever more confident that she was about to fall on her damn face.

“Just. ‘M tired of. Finding out super late that everyone I know is.” She waved a hand at Shae. “Y’know. Differ’nt.”

Shae smiled, biting her lip as she moved closer again. Nicole backed up until her shoulders hit the metal fence, and Shae slid against her, pressing their bodies together. The heat of her body was palpable through their clothes, and that thing in the back of her mind growled and paced and itched for more. Shae smelled like sex and violence and now, especially with the added pressure from the creature, she wanted both. Bad.
“Is that really your problem, sweetheart?” she murmured, her lips ghosting over Nicole’s, drawing back when Nicole leaned to follow. “You’ve always been different, and you know it. You’ve always been more like me than you’ve been like… well, those people over there.” She turned, nodding at the swimmers. Nicole looked over her shoulder, head bobbing as she did, and she squinted, bringing the people into focus. Her vision had turned sorta golden, like someone had put a cellophane filter over it, and now she could pick out the three people with ease. Two women in bikinis, and a man, who was wearing hideous lime green board shorts that looked radioactive in the light from the pool’s lamps. Steam rose off the surface of the water, giving the three a sort of horror movie mystique. They were laughing, splashing each other. Generally having a great time, by the sounds of it.

While she watched them, Shae’s lips wandered up the column of her throat, leaving kisses that burned like brands. “You’ve always been special, Nicole,” she purred, and Nicole shuddered at the sound of it. “We’re special.”

Nicole grunted in acknowledgement and Shae let one of her teeth—too sharp to be human, which made the thing in Nicole’s head snarl in desire and challenge and submission all at the same time—catch on Nicole’s earlobe, pulling the small steel earring there into her mouth and flicking at it with her tongue. Nicole let out a low, too-eager moan.

“Hey!”

The white beam of a flashlight swept over Nicole’s face and she squinted her eyes shut to block it out, snarling in defiance of whatever had interrupted them.

“Got reports of a prowler,” someone was saying, but Nicole only barely registered the words. “Sorry, but I’m gonna have to ask you and your date here to move along, sir.”

Shae finally pulled away from Nicole’s ear and turned to look at the officer standing a few feet from them. The beam swept over her face and down to her shirt, and the policeman frowned.

“Oh. Uh. Ma’am.”

There was something in how he said it that set Nicole’s teeth on edge, and she realized a moment too late that she was growling, her mouth open so that the sound was properly audible. She realized a moment after that Shae was growling too, and grinning like a hyena. Gold eyes flicked to her face, and one of them slid shut in a wink.

The police officer took a step back. His mouth was moving but real, bone-deep terror took his voice away as he started to reach for his radio and his gun.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Shae purred, and leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Let’s have some fun.”

Nicole didn’t remember the rest, and she wasn’t sure why not. Maybe it was the drink. Maybe she’d repressed it all. Maybe the wolf was trying to protect her from it. She wasn’t sure, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to find out, either, so she hadn’t exactly asked.

But she hadn’t gotten that drunk again since, and the few times she did drink, she put a whole lot of effort into making sure she talked about sensible, safe topics that were not in any way related to her father, her wife, or the supernatural community in general.

She was pretty sure that instinct of hers, the instinct to keep her mouth running on innocuous things, was why after four of the shots Jonas had mixed up—well, eight, because she was drinking...
all of Wynonna’s too—she had somehow ended up filling the awkward silence with a story from that summer she worked with the Red Cross to keep herself busy over the break while she couldn’t go home.

“So if you ever find yourselves building a temporary shelter in a flood zone,” she was saying, for some godforsaken reason, “Do not forget to write your name on the inside of your mosquito helmet!”

Part of her was aware that Jonas looked absolutely bored out of his mind, and that Wynonna was doing her level best to pretend to be interested. Part of her was also aware her phone was still sitting in the pitcher of beer. But damn if she couldn’t get her mouth to stop running.

“Amateur move, Haught,” Wynonna said, chuckling.

“I’ll drink to that,” Jonas added with a grin, raising another shot. As he knocked it back, Nicole grabbed Wynonna’s, then her own. She set her glass down, trying to swallow while pretending she hadn’t just had her mouth full of way too much Schnapps and... god, she wasn’t even sure anymore what else was in this. Her throat burned and ached and she was starting to wonder which was worse: the idea of her mouth going numb from desensitization to the liquor, or having to suffer through it every time.

“Jonas, this was great, but,” Wynonna said, and Nicole glanced at her, trying to keep her hope off her face. Wynonna looked around, gesturing to the other patrons. “You have customers! We should... we should go.”

“Are we having a good time?” Jonas asked.

“Psh,” Nicole said, leaning on her hand. Which she did to look casual, and definitely not because it was getting harder to hold up her head. “Yeah we are! Which is why we’re gonna need a few more of those peppermint shots,” she said, giving Wynonna a meaningful look and glancing down at Jonas’ emptied shot glass. “Because– it’s like drinking Christmas!”

“You redheads are wild,” Jonas said, grinning at her.

“Yeah,” Nicole agreed, forcing the grin to stay on her face even as his expression shifted to a leer. Even this many in, she knew the look of a man who was imagining getting something from her that he was never going to have.

“I like you.”

“Thanks.”

“You too, Wynonna,” he said, turning to signal for more shots from the other bartender. Nicole reached for his glass at the same time Wynonna did, but he kept his hand by it, and they both backed off just before he turned around, his eyes glowing red and his voice dropping into that basso, grinding tone unique to revenants. “Even if you are here to kill me.”

Wynonna glanced to Nicole, then back at Jonas, exhaling a long, slow breath.

The other bartender came over with new glasses while they were all staring at each other in tense silence. Part of her, the part that was wolf and moon-struck and very, very drunk, operated on instinct. She picked up the glass, drank it down, then frowned, realizing as an afterthought that she was holding an empty glass.

“Haught,” Wynonna said, frowning at her.
“I’unno,” Nicole muttered, shaking her head. Just that tiny motion made her sense of balance waver, and for a half a second it felt like the whole bar tipped sideways. If the situation weren’t so dangerous, that probably would’ve been sort of fun. “Habit.”

There was a part of her, a part that was crunching the numbers and counting shot glasses and paying attention to the half-empty pitcher on the bar next to Wynonna, that knew she’d had a frankly terrifying amount of alcohol—an amount that was just shy of being liable to kill a normal human being.

She was not a normal human being, but she also wasn’t shy. But at the moment, at least, she kinda felt like she was, and the rest of her wasn’t really listening.

Wynonna sighed and rubbed a hand over her face. “So you knew who I was,” she said, redirecting her focus to Jonas. Nicole swayed a little in her seat, leaning one arm on the bar. She really, really should’ve had something to eat first. It had been a long time since she’d been this drunk. “And you had sex with me without telling me what you are.”

“I don’t recall it being important to you that we tell each other our life stories before we... bumped nasties.” He looked directly at Nicole as he said it, and just the low, amused tone of his voice made her gag.

“We just came here for a drink,” Wynonna told him.

“Yeah,” Nicole chimed in. She hadn’t been saying much. Which was bad. That was probably kind of unsupportive, wasn’t it? The wolf seemed to agree with her, though Nicole realized the wolf seemed to not be operating at 100% either. It felt like even the wolf was sort of slumped comfortably in her corner, fuzzy-headed and comfortable. Well. More fuzzy-headed than usual. Anyway, talking. She needed to back Wynonna up on this. “And to have a few drinks.”

Jonas’ mouth twisted, amused, and Wynonna leaned a little closer to her with a pained smile. “Okay, let me do the talking.”

“Ok,” Nicole said, letting her head droop forward. What she didn’t remember from the last time she’d been this drunk was that after a while it started to deaden her senses. She didn’t smell or hear everything, the way she usually did. What she did smell she still got pretty much in bright shiny technicolor, but it wasn’t nearly as overwhelming. It was kind of... nice, actually. Almost peaceful.

“Baby,” Jonas murmured, and Nicole didn’t like it, but she wasn’t supposed to growl, because growling was a giveaway, “You’re better at—”

“Watch your mouth,” Wynonna snapped. “Or the little friend in my boot comes out to play.”

“Yeah, she means her gun,” Nicole added, giving Jonas a sly, vindictive little smile. “An’ I got one too, cuz I’m a cop.” She leaned back in her chair and checked her hip for her holster. Which was conspicuously missing. “Aw nuts.” She leaned closer to Wynonna, whispering, “I left it at home!”

“Okay,” Wynonna said, obviously humoring her.

“Let’s not make a scene,” Jonas said. “I got a lot of... friends here. If it comes to it, they’ll surround you before you could even pop off two shots.”

That, to her chagrin, was sound logic, and Nicole leaned toward Wynonna again. “He’s got a point.”

Wynonna considered it, pressing her tongue to the back of her teeth. “What do you want, anus?”
She chuckled, almost as if it were an honest mistake. “I mean, Jonas?”

“First? I wanna gloat. And then I wanna ask you out on a second date.”

Nicole muttered under her breath I don’t think that’s a date as Jonas started around the bar, and Wynonna slapped a hand against her knee in reproach. This was getting out of hand. If Nicole could get her boots on level ground and properly shift, they could maybe make a go of this, but it would be a tough fight. To that end she shifted her feet, reaching for the floor, and she felt the weight of her .22 in her boot again. Aha! Now this was gonna get interesting. “We could do it out back! If memory serves, it only takes ten minutes.”

“Oh, ten minutes?” Wynonna said, eyeing him over her shoulder without turning around where he could see her in full. “In your dreams.”

“Well, m’lady,” he murmured, and Nicole leaned down, so her chin nearly touched the bar, affecting a look of dazed fatigue so Jonas wouldn’t notice. Right. Affecting. Wynonna eyed her, wary but feigning confidence. “You kinda don’t have a choice.”

He spun her chair around and glanced down.

“Tell me you just got fat.”

“Don’t touch her!” Nicole snapped, pulling the .22 and clicking the hammer back as she did, training it on his face, and he at least had the decency to look a bit startled. “That’s right,” she told him, though he hadn’t actually said anything. “I keep one in my sock! How smart’m I? I’m... I’m smart.”

“And word of advice?” Wynonna said. He kept his focus on Nicole and her sidearm, and she used his distraction to slam her elbow up and back, directly into the soft flesh of his throat. He choked and doubled over, and Nicole switched her target to a fusebox across the room. Her senses were still a bit fried and she was still warm and comfortable from entirely too much booze, but she let her eyes tint gold and sighted down the muzzle of her pistol. “It’s always ‘lady’s choice.”’

Wynonna nodded, and Nicole fired, striking the box dead-on and sending up a shower of sparks. The lights flickered and failed entirely, giving them cover to grab their things and bolt out the side door, bundling up into their coats as soon as they hit the cold outside air.

“Take my keys,” Nicole said, doing her best to say each word clearly, and slapped her keyring into Wynonna’s hands. Probably it was bad to let a civilian (did Wynonna count as a civilian, though?) drive her cruiser, but it would be far, far worse to drive like this. “You drive.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Wynonna said, and patted her shoulder. “But you are a cute drunk. Good aim, too.”

Nicole grinned, the compliment soothing and strangely reminiscent of Waverly scratching behind her ears when she was all wolf-y.

“Grabby McRevenant’s not gonna be too happy about having his thorax crushed,” she reminded Wynonna, “So we really need t’skip-a-doodle outta here.”

Wynonna stopped short. “Wait. Abort. Abort!” She gasped and looked down, setting her hand over her belly. “Sorry.” Nicole looked at her, raising her eyebrows. “He knows,” Wynonna said, pointing back toward the club. “He knows that I’m... ehh, harboring a fugitive, as in, the next Earp Heir? Possible Rev-Earp hybrid? What if he tells the rest of them?”
Nicole gasped, horror setting in, and her wolf was positively **snarling**, if a bit woozily, for vengeance and protection. “Then they’re gonna come for it,” she said, pointing at Wynonna’s face. Or... possibly her shoulders. Something close. *And you.*

The back door of the club slammed open and Jonas lurched out into the snow.

“Hey, wait!” he shouted, and Wynonna turned around to face him. “Is that mine?”

“Mm, no,” Nicole muttered.

Wynonna watched him. “Maybe.”

Nicole sighed and **frowned** at her, but she wasn’t paying attention.

“It’s not supposed to be possible,” he said, taking a step closer. “Do you know what we’ve done here?” He grinned, his eyes starting to glow, the demonic note to his voice returning. **We’ve started a new race. We’re the new Adam and Eve.**

Nicole rolled her eyes so hard she almost knocked herself on her ass. *Men.* Always trying to take credit for *everything.*

“I see you more as the snake,” Wynonna noted, leaning down to scoop Peacemaker from its holster.

**You wouldn’t,**” Jonas said, even as she raised the Colt, the barrel glowing gold and giving off that strange metallic hum.

Wynonna aimed, and Nicole frowned, tilting her head slightly, listening to the sound of an approaching car—a red Jeep, further off.

Jonas broke into a sprint down the alley.

“No fair!” Wynonna complained, actually stomping a foot on the ground. “I have cankles!”

Waverly shoved her door open as Jonas tried to sprint by, taking him in the face and sending him directly to the ground. Nicole bit her lip, trying not to laugh as the revenant asshole dropped senseless in the snow.

“Door prize,” Wynonna murmured, as Waverly hopped down and stalked toward them across the snow.

“He’s a bad guy, right?” she called out as Wynonna and Nicole moved to meet her.

There was part of Nicole that knew she needed to keep her mouth shut. She’d gotten in trouble before by running her mouth like this, and look where it had gotten her with Shae. But the sight of Waverly standing there in the alley by her car and her downed foe, triumphant and bold and shining with breathless excitement, made words bubble up in her chest before she could second-guess them.

“You are *so pretty* and I like you *so much,*” Nicole told her.

It had the opposite effect of what she’d intended, given that Waverly shot her a furious frown and jabbed a finger in her direction.

“You are drunk! And in trouble, okay? Both of you! I hit three other strip clubs. Three!” Wynonna
grimaced a little and Nicole tried desperately not to look like a pouting, guilty puppy, but she couldn’t quite stop herself. “Do you know how much strawberry-scented glitter I have on me? Huh?”

Nicole made a faint noise and bobbed her head, opening her mouth to say that she had a reasonable guess, given the scent, and that she didn’t quite mind, but the look on Waverly’s face stopped that thought dead in its tracks.

“Hey,” Waverly said, turning her attention to Wynonna. “You okay?”

“No she’s not,” Nicole offered, before Wynonna could say anything, “Because that guy might be the...” She waved her hands in vague, disorganized gestures, trying to indicate baby and sex. “With...” She added one more gesture, hoping Waverly understood her impromptu, drunken, definitely non-codified sign language for demonic asshole.

Waverly’s eyes dropped to Wynonna’s belly, then went a bit wide with recognition.

“Oh,” she said, and turned to look at the still very unconscious revenant in the street. “So what do we do with him?”

Wynonna didn’t even hesitate. “We take him for a ride,” she said, and nodded toward Jonas’ limp body.

The plan was relatively simple. Waverly moved the cruiser closer while Nicole hefted Jonas across her shoulder in a fireman’s carry and, without much ceremony and with even less regard for his well-being, dumped him into the trunk. Wynonna worked out a meeting place with Waverly, and they traded keys.

“See you there,” Wynonna told Waverly.

“Yeah. I’ll be there soon. Need to talk to Nicole for a minute.”

Nicole ducked her head and leaned against the trunk of her cruiser, making a low whining noise in her chest. She wasn’t sure if it was her or the wolf who’d started it. Frankly, it could’ve been either of them. The wolf pushed, and she let it convince her, shifting her ears a little to make sure she caught the majority of their conversation.

“Don’t blame her, Waves,” Wynonna said, keeping her voice low. “It was my idea.”

“Oh, trust me, that part I definitely figured out,” Waverly said. “This has Wynonna Earp written all over it.”

“Psh,” Wynonna said, hauling herself up into Waverly’s Jeep. “What, your girlfriend doesn’t seem like the type to think up a stupid, crazy plan to trick some douchebag one-night-stand into leaving a saliva sample in a shot glass? Only then, because he turns out to be a revenant, she drinks herself three-quarters of the way to alcohol poisoning, just so he doesn’t figure out that her friend, who, incidentally, he slept with, is like, actually-supernaturally-fast pregnant? Sounds boring. Tell me again why you’re dating her?”

Waverly watched her for a long, silent moment, and sighed when Wynonna gave her a tiny, sad smile. “Yeah. Okay. I get it.”

Wynonna reached through the driver-side window and patted her shoulder. “See you there.”

“Yeah.”
Wynonna drove off, and Waverly turned around. Nicole ducked her head and scuffed her boot through the snow as Waverly took a long look at her.

“Nicole,” Waverly said, sighing as she headed back over to the cruiser, stopping in front of her and looking up to catch Nicole’s eye. “Baby. Tell me you see how scary this looks?”

“Huh?”

Waverly gestured to the car. “Go and sit.”

Nicole moved around to the passenger side. It was very odd being on this side of her car. Everything felt weirdly far away, and none of her equipment was facing the right way. She fiddled with one of the devices until Waverly sat down, muttered stop that, and pushed her hand away. Nicole tangled her fingers around Waverly’s instead, and heard the soft hitch of her breath.

“Dammit, Nicole, I’m trying to be upset with you.”

“Sorry,” Nicole said, and let go.

Waverly muttered under her breath and snagged her hand again, squeezing gently before she started the engine.

“Why’s it scary?” Nicole mumbled. As Waverly started driving, the snow and buildings around them tilted and slid by in a blur. She slumped down in her seat until she couldn’t see it. The last thing she needed now was motion-sickness.

“Because this morning you nearly lost control in the police station,” Waverly reminded her. “I mean, you almost wolfed out in front of Nedley. Your ex and your dad are trying to make you mess up, and you’re grieving, and... and look, I’m not upset about the Wynonna thing. I asked a crazy big favor of you and I know how she is. But right now you’re wasted, Nicole, and I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“Yeah,” Nicole muttered, leaning her head against the door of her car. “I know.”

“Is this a thing I should be worried about? I mean, I’ve seen alcoholism before, but you really didn’t seem like the type. It’s. Kind of scary, Nicole. And I just want to know if this is the kind of thing I should be keeping an eye on or if it’s a one-time thing.”

“No,” Nicole said, with a little more force. “No, it’s. I’ssa fluke. This isn’ me. An’ with the wolf it takes a whole bunch more t’get like this anyway. Normally I don’ bother.”

“Okay,” Waverly said, glancing over once, then a second time.

“M’sorry, Wave. I didn’ mean t’scare you.”

“All right. I forgive you.”

“Yaaaay,” Nicole murmured, tilting her head back and basking in the noonday sun where it washed over her face.

Waverly chuckled, watching Nicole almost as much as she watched the road. “Okay, I still don’t really want this to happen again, but now that it has, I’m gonna admit that you’re really cute when you’re drunk.”

Nicole frowned. “You’n W’nonna both said that.”
“Well, probably because it’s true.”

“Hrmf,” Nicole said, considering it. “You think I’m cute?”

Waverly laughed. “Of course I do, you big puppy. The cutest.”

“Good. Well you smell like strawberries. I know you’re mad ‘bout it but s’nice.” Nicole grinned out the window, not quite catching the exhausted sigh that Waverly gave at that. “Hm. You said ‘m cute. An’ now it feels like the sun rose in my chest.”

“What?” she said, laughing again. “Oh my god, I wish I could video-tape this.”

“Oh... shit.”

“What?”

“Video. Waves, I left my phone in the bar.”

“Oh. Um.” Waverly frowned. “I’m thinking it’s a bad idea for you to go back and get it. Not exactly friendly territory.”

“No, you’re right,” she agreed, and sighed. “B’sides. It’s got beer in it.”

Waverly was quiet for a moment. “Did... you say in it? How’d beer get in your phone, baby.”

“Wynonna dropped it inna pitcher,” she explained. “No ‘m serious. She did. Stop laughin’. Waves. ‘M serious.”

When Waverly finally stopped at a secluded stretch of backroad, she leaned over, kissed Waverly on the cheek, and then slid out of the car with the grace of a particularly well-cooked noodle while Waverly was still unbuckling. She took one step, and then fell straight into a snowdrift with a muted whumph.

“Nicole,” she heard Waverly say, and then the creak of the car door and the distant slam of it shutting. “If I had video of this, I swear to god, I’d have blackmail material for months.”

Nicole let out a little grumbling noise, but the snow swallowed it.

“Up you get, you big clumsy dog,” she said, looping her arms around Nicole’s belly and hefting her up out of the snow. She leaned Nicole against the cruiser and dusted her off, wiping snow out of the fur ruff of her collar and off her shirt. The one upside was that the snow was so bitterly cold it was chewing through her warm, comfortable haze. She could feel her nose turning pink with the ice, but it was helping to sober her up a bit. “Honestly.”

Nicole glanced over at the sound of another car door opening and shutting, and looked toward Wynonna as she stepped out around the hood of the Jeep and raised a hand, calling out, “About time you got here!”

“Sorry,” Waverly called back, looping an arm into Nicole’s to lead her to the back of the car. “Sorry.”

Wynonna flashed a smile that looked a bit ill. “No worries.”

“Think he’s awake?” Waverly asked.
“Let’s find out, shall we?” Wynonna said, and stepped up between them. She banged a fist twice on the trunk.

The car shook as the revenant thrashed and rolled around inside. Waverly hopped up onto the trunk, for safety maybe, and Nicole leaned against the car beside her with a groan. Her head was starting to clear, and with it came the cold sensation of a headache climbing up her spine.

“Let me out!” Jonas banged on the trunk’s door. “Hey!”

“Oh god,” Nicole said, leaning her head back a bit. “I think I just hit hangover.”

Waverly gave her a look that was half disbelief, half jealousy, then turned her attention to Wynonna. “Haven’t been this close to a revenant in a while,” she said, then exhaled. “I mean. Not that I know of.”

“It’s not always that obvious,” Wynonna said.

“Clearly.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, blinking away hazy, foggy thoughts and the moon alike. “Well, what if the baby’s not his?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Wynonna said. “He knows I’m pregnant. We let him go? They all know.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, struggling to think. “So, we hold him somewhere.”

“Yeah, say... Hell?” Waverly suggested.

“What, execute him?” Nicole asked. Curse or not, it seemed a bit excessive to shove him onto his knees and put a bullet between his eyes like some tribal warlord.

“That’s what she does, Nicole.”

Nicole opened her mouth to protest—until they knew for sure he wasn’t the dad, wasn’t this a bit premature—but Wynonna cut in before she could speak.

“It could be there’s another way,” she said. Nicole and Waverly both looked at her, and she frowned. “Don’t know what it is, but.” She motioned Waverly off the car, then popped the trunk, pointing Peacemaker at Jonas’ face. “He might. Out of the car.”

“What, are you gonna—”

Wynonna moved closer until the barrel was a mere centimeter from Jonas’ skin. The barrel lit up with golden fire and he quailed back, a hellish brand splitting open on his face and his eyes glowing red.

“Okay, okay!”


Jonas clambered out, nearly tripping on the rear bumper, and Wynonna kept the gun on him as he did.

“Nicole, I need a favor.”

“Of course.”
Wynonna didn’t look away from Jonas.

“I need you not to hear whatever comes next.”

Nicole took a deep breath, glanced at Waverly, and sighed. “Sure. Okay.”

“How far?”

“Hundred meters. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Jonas looked at her, eyebrows knitting with confusion, but this time he did, in fact, keep his mouth shut.

Wynonna nodded and motioned with her head. Jonas turned and walked, hands held level with his shoulders. Waverly reached over, squeezed Nicole’s hand.

“You’ll be okay?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and chuckled. “I’ll just focus on sobering up over here.”

Waverly gave her a thin smile, and jogged off after Wynonna, leaving Nicole alone by the cars. She went into her cruiser, pulling a set of earplugs out and sliding them into her ears. It dulled all but the loudest sounds, and as the Earps took their prisoner to nearly the distance Nicole had told them, she couldn’t even hear the crunching snow of their footsteps anymore.

Nicole did not, however, look away. If she needed to jump in, she wanted to know what was going on. Even if that meant witnessing a crime.

Did it count as a crime if he was a demon? That was a decidedly complicated question that she did not have the brainpower for, so she set it aside. She’d deal with it later. Much later.

So she watched. She watched as they talked. As Jonas wandered in the gulf of space the sisters had left between them. She watched as he circled Wynonna like a shark around its prey, slow, patient, vicious. She watched as Waverly barked a furious retort and she watched as he advanced on Waverly, pointing for emphasis, fighting the wolf and her own instincts simultaneously—no one can treat her like that not ever not EVER—not to jump into the fray. She watched as Wynonna stood, like a lighthouse against the surf, implacable and coldly furious.

She watched as Waverly slid to one side, giving Wynonna a clear line of fire.

And she watched as Wynonna raised Peacemaker, its barrel glowing gold. Even 100 meters away, even wearing earplugs, she heard the crack of the firing pin, of gunpowder flashing to ash. She watched as a bullet slammed into Jonas’ forehead, watched his head snap back, watched the hellfire brand blaze across his face and the entry wound alike. A circle of fire that stank of sulfur and rang with the sound of human screams yawned open beneath him and something snatched at his ankles, dragging him down into the ground as he clawed at the snow.

And then he was gone.

Waverly stepped closer to Wynonna, and slid her arms around her sister, and for a moment, it was like time had stopped. She left the earplugs in. She could smell the distant scent of gunpowder and sulfur, far-off pine trees, and the gasoline in the cars behind her.

She watched Wynonna and Waverly, wrapped around each other. Two Earps, standing tall against a tableau of snow and winter.
Chapter End Notes

Big 5-0. Holy shit, you guys. I am in awe that you've all stuck with me this long and stuck it out through the long pauses and the wacky shenanigans.

Thank you. This story really wouldn't be what it is without y'all.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waverly took Nicole home, got her inside, and pointed to the couch. “Sit. I’ll bring you a glass of orange juice.”

“Orange juice?” Nicole muttered, but she went, and sat. And yawned. “Why orange juice?”

“Vitamin B6,” Waverly explained, heading into the kitchen. “It’s not as good as brewer’s yeast, but it’ll help.” Nicole lay down on her couch and set her head on a throw pillow with her hand under her cheek. She’d just rest for a second.

Famous last words.

Taking naps is pretty much always a gamble, and it all has to do with timing. Nap too short: wake up groggy, still tired, and wondering why you even bothered. Nap too long: wake up feeling like a time traveler who went the wrong way, and begging for death.

So suffice to say Nicole was a little surprised when she woke up an unclear amount of time later, horizontal on her couch and drooling onto the back of her hand. There was a faint, soft sound, sort of musical. She listened for a moment, catching a handful of words.

“Girls are like guns: you better run when they’re smokin’...”

There was also a soft pressure on her calf, like a hand gently rubbing, and she grunted, blinking and squinting around her living room. The light coming in through the window was warmer, softer, which meant it was probably mid-afternoon. The singing stopped, and she looked back over her shoulder.

Waverly smiled. “Hey beautiful.”

“Hey,” Nicole said, her voice coming out as gravel and sandpaper. Waverly was sitting on the couch with Nicole’s legs across her lap, and she gently rubbed a hand over Nicole’s thigh as Nicole looked around. There was a glass of orange juice sitting on the coffee table, and what looked suspiciously like her phone was sitting near it in a ziplock bag. “How long’s it been?”

“Mm, couple hours.”

“How come you didn’t wake me up?”

Waverly inhaled, slow, giving the question real thought.

“Something Gus said, last year when Uncle Curtis died.”

“Mm?”

“Grief is heavy, darlin’,” Waverly said, with a slight drawl to her voice that Nicole thought might be an unconscious imitation of her aunt. “An’ it takes a toll on your body. Some folk’l try to tell ya that ain’t true but it is. So when everything gets heavy, get some sleep. Everything that’s heavy is a bit easier to carry when you’ve had some rest.”

“Hm.” Nicole felt a small smile tug at the corner of her mouth. “Smart woman.”
“Yeah.” Waverly smiled a little and rubbed her calf. It occurred to Nicole as an afterthought that at some point Waverly must have taken her boots off for her.

“How’d you get on the couch?”

“You were out, baby. Honestly I’m not sure I could’ve woken you up even if I’d been trying to.”

“Wow.” Nicole let her head thump back against the throw pillow, wiping the back of her hand across her jeans. The thought that Waverly had stayed, had kept watch, all afternoon, crossed her mind, affection finding the little cracks in her soul and *sticking*, stubborn, like grout. “Um. Well, thank you.”

“Wynonna brought your phone by, too.”

Nicole lifted her head, eyeing the bag, then dropped it again. “That’s... good?”

“She swung by earlier. Didn’t stay though. I think with all this Jonas stuff she’s got a lot on her mind.”

“And you didn’t go with her?”

Waverly shifted a little, maybe uncomfortable. “No. She needs some space, and... so did I, I think. She just came to drop off the phone, said she grabbed it as you were leaving because she didn’t want to leave *incriminating evidence at the scene*, and then slipped off again.”

“Huh.” Nicole stared up at her ceiling again. “Cool. Won’t lose my contacts after all.”

Waverly snorted a laugh. “Your priorities.”

She still seemed a little on edge, a little unhappy. Nicole wasn’t sure why, but she did know she had to say something. Nicole reached out and curled her hand over Waverly’s wrist. She traced the elegant, fragile bones down to her knuckles, wrapped her fingers gently, so gently, around Waverly’s, and squeezed, just a little.

“Thank you. For staying,” she said.

Waverly’s smile was as fragile as her wrist, but bright as the sun.

“You’re welcome. But I think it’s time you eat. You’re losing daylight.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and stiffly hauled herself upright. “Mm,” She said, while she still had Waverly trapped with her legs. “C’mere.”

“Hm?”

Nicole leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Waverly’s mouth.

Waverly smiled, patient, but then licked her lips and pursed them in an expression of disgust and dismay. “*Eugh*. Babe, I love– how cute you’re being right now, but you... you taste like an old Christmas tree.”

Nicole laughed, and pretended she hadn’t noticed that odd little pause in Waverly’s words. Waverly cooked up eggs and bacon for her while she brushed her teeth, and when Nicole reemerged in a bathrobe, Waverly’s gaze tracked her, lingering on the v where her collar gaped a little.
“That,” Waverly mused, her hand moving on autopilot to keep the food from burning, “Is a sight I could get used to.”

Nicole grinned and slid up behind her, looping her arms around Waverly’s waist. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Now feed your cat while I feed you.”

Nicole heaved a sigh. “So bossy.”

“Watch it, ma’am, I have a hot frying pan in hand and you are in striking distance.”

Nicole grinned. Kibble rattling on metal prompted a distant thump elsewhere in the house as her cat abandoned whatever perch she’d claimed and came loping toward the kitchen. As Calamity Jane wound around her ankles and settled in to eat, Nicole found herself watching Waverly. She had that air of focus around her, her gaze on the pan as she watched the food and mentally counted seconds. Her hair was still pulled into that high bun, though she’d stripped down to a white sleeveless top that showed her shoulders and just served to highlight that subtle, shy grace she had when she wasn’t thinking about how people saw her or what they saw when they looked at her. Here she wasn’t the Waverly that was trying in desperation to have all of Purgatory like her, or respect her, or admire her. Here she wasn’t Waverly Earp, either: younger sister—maybe adopted sister—of the Earp clan, most recent scion of a house that had brought death and destruction wherever it went. She was not the third-born Earp, she was not the walking antithesis to everything broken about Wynonna.

Here she was just Waverly. Beautiful, strong, brilliant, flawed Waverly.

“Do I have egg on my nose or something?”

Nicole blinked. “Huh?”

Nice. Eloquent as ever.

“You were staring.”

“Oh,” Nicole said. “No, you’re. You’re perfect.”

Waverly ducked her head, trying—and failing—to hide her smile. “Is that so.”

Nicole leaned a little closer and kissed her cheek. “Yeah, it is.” Nicole set her kitchen table, and when Waverly set plates down she pointed, expectant and almost a little peevish, at Nicole’s chair.

“Sit.”

Nicole sat.

Waverly watched her, twisting her mouth in a valiant attempt not to laugh.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Roll over.”

“Waverly.”

She laughed, and sat in her own chair, and leaned her chin on her hand, elbow resting on the table.
“Stay.”

There was something in her expression, something Nicole couldn’t put words to. Something hopeful, and vulnerable, and broken open. Her voice cracked, coming out barely above a whisper.

“Always.”

“Do you trust me?” Waverly asked, as the steel door of Nicole’s cage clanged shut and the lock slid into place.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” Waverly moved closer until she stood just on the other side of the cage door. She leaned her hands against the tungsten bars, and waited. “Good.”

Nicole inhaled, slow, and let it back out. She kept her eyes on Waverly’s, looking for fear, for hesitation, for second thoughts.

She didn’t find it.

With slow, cautious care she stripped out of the robe and handed it through the bars to Waverly. She took it and folded it over her arm, but she didn’t move away. She stayed, standing very still, breathing slow, measured breaths as the last light of sunset disappeared. And as it did, the wolf pushed at her, gentle, asking for something that almost didn’t make sense.

“Do you trust me,” Nicole whispered.

“Yes.”

Nicole took a breath and slid her hand between the bars, curling her long fingers over Waverly’s, wrapping her hand around Waverly’s and the bar together. She left it there, and waited.

It was strange, this time.

After so many months, she had come to think of the full moon as a battlehorn, instigating and inspiring open combat between her and the wolf. It was a war, quiet and subtle during the month but raging hot and lethal under the light of the moon. And when she had faced the wolf in their dream-world, there had been a part of her that thought it wouldn’t matter. That when the moon came, no compromise would hold. Not really.

But as it turned out, she was only half-right.

It still hurt. The moon burned away some of the barriers between them and the wolf surged in to fill the gaps like the ocean coming roaring in to fill a canyon. She felt the wolf clawing at her focus, but this time it didn’t feel like an assault. It felt like holding Calamity Jane as she was spooked by something and getting a lap full of claws—not something deliberate, but merely a byproduct: it was a fact of nature that cats had claws, and on instinct, she was using them, without necessarily recognizing that it was hurting her person.

She felt the changes burning across her body. Skeleton first, then muscle, then fur, then organs. But it was different now, subtler, less violent. Her body bucked with the effort and the strain but she didn’t feel the need to thrash and claw at the prison of her body. Her skin didn’t itch the way it usually did. She stood as steady as she could, her hand still curled around Waverly’s even while her
hand changed and stopped being a hand at all. She hunched her shoulders when her added height made her head hit the top of the cage, and let her knees buckle, drooping forward until her head was about level with Waverly’s hips.

A sound came to her, the ragged, thready sound of heavy breathing. It was hers, but there was an undercurrent too, of Waverly’s, matching her.

The wolf looked up and Nicole’s attention tracked with it. Waverly was very still, her body trembling with the effort not to bolt. In the warm, caramel-gold filter of her vision, Waverly looked triumphant, if a bit pale. She could smell it still, that quiet, subdued fear. Not as strong as it had been two months before, but still there. But there was also pride in the set of her shoulders, and beaming joy in her eyes. The wolf looked down, and Nicole saw that her own huge paw was still wrapped around Waverly’s hand. Waverly saw where the wolf was looking and turned her hand inside the shelter of the paw, curling her fingers around one of the wolf’s.

She hadn’t crushed any bones, hadn’t cut into skin with errant claws.

“Good girl,” Waverly murmured, her voice soft and so, so happy. “There’s my good girl.” The wolf grinned a big doggy grin and pushed her nose through the bars, and Waverly stroked a hand up the length of her muzzle to scratch between the wolf’s eyes and then up to her ears. She had to lean forward to reach around to the back of the wolf’s enormous head, so that her shoulder rested against the bars as she stretched her hand through. “That’s it.”

Before, Nicole would have panicked to see Waverly so close, so clearly unafraid, but now it felt... different. She felt different. It felt good.

And the wolf’s thoughts, more coherent, more... cogent, rose to meet her. Not a demand, but a request. God, she was asking permission.

The thought rocked her.

You asked that before, she thought at it. Waverly was still scratching behind their ears and the wolf rumbled at the sensation, but most of its thoughts were here, with her, the warmth of agreement.

She let her mind scan through memory, let it take her back to that first full moon. Shae had taken her somewhere in northern Nevada, or maybe southern Idaho? Somewhere out in the wilderness where no one would hear a woman screaming as her body liquefied and reformed into the shape of something primeval and awe-inspiring. It had asked, and Nicole had screamed her answer until her throat couldn’t process human speech anymore, until no turned into an anguished cry of defeat and the wolf’s triumphant howl.

The wolf just gave her patience in return.

You knew eventually I’d come around, didn’t you. You just had to wait me out.

She could almost see the response in her mind’s eye—an amused smile and a half-hearted shrug. The wolf’s equivalent of Yeah, well, I could always have been wrong.

Nicole chuckled and it came out as a low whuff through their shared mouth.

Waverly smiled and leaned down a little to kiss the top of her nose. “Hm?”

Nicole looked at Waverly, this incredible, brave young woman, and knew that it was Waverly who
had changed everything.

Okay, she thought, and the wolf’s thoughts brimmed over with happiness.

And for once, for the first time since wolf fangs had driven deep into her shoulder, she gave herself to it, on purpose, and let her own consciousness drift back. Waverly shifted yellow-gold in her vision as the wolf took over entirely, and Waverly’s smile was what lulled her to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Most of the time my notes are sorta loud and boisterous, meant to be funny or even a bit self-deprecating. But I’ve got something serious I want to say about this chapter.

The most important thing I learned in high school wasn’t about work ethic or study habits. It wasn’t anything to do with mathematics, or science, or history, or even English. It wasn’t even something I learned in class. It was when a teacher pulled me aside because I was struggling, and told me, "Before you can deal with grief, get some sleep. Sleep starts the body’s healing process."

So now I impart that to you as well. Emotional pain is still pain, and the body heals all pain the same way: with rest, and care, and kindness. So when you're hurting, remember to be kind to yourselves, and also remember to be kind to others who might be going through something unimaginable.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few days after the full moon was over, Waverly had an errand in the city, and Nicole all too happily went back to bed after she’d left, snoozing for another hour or so.

At least, until her phone rang.

She pawed at it, grunting something that might have sounded vaguely like *hello* into the receiver.

“Haught! Excellent.”

“Wynonna. Of course.” Nicole frowned and squinted at her alarm clock. “What’s the situation?”

“No situation,” Wynonna said. “You’ve got a late shift today right?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, rubbing her eyes. She clearly wasn’t going to get back to her dreams any time soon. “Which is why I was *sleeping*.”


“What? Right now?”

“Yes, right now!”

Nicole grunted into the phone and sat up. “Wynonna, are you familiar with the saying *let sleeping dogs lie*?”

“Yeah, but you suck at lying, so I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Wynonna.”

“Come over, Benji! You know you want to...”

“I swear to god, Wynonna.”

“That isn’t a no. Come on. I’m gonna make it worth your time, I promise.”

Nicole heaved a sigh and rubbed the bridge of her nose while Wynonna waited.

“*Fine.*”

“Great! Oh and dress in something that’s easy to get out of.”

“Why?”

“I want to see you put your money where your mouth is, dogbreath.”

“If you’re trying to make me nervous, it’s working.”

She could practically *hear* Wynonna’s eager little grin. “Good. Get your ass over here, Haught.”
“Fine, fine,” she said, digging one of her loose-fitting shifting-friendly outfits out of her closet. “Sit tight.”

“Oh no worries there. If I don’t I’ll slide off the roof.”

Nicole hesitated, thinking very hard about her response.

“You’re sitting on the roof.”

“Yes.”

“While you are like. Eight months pregnant.”

“Yes, thank you for that entirely unwanted reminder.”

“Does Waverly know?”

Wynonna barked a laugh. “Haught. No she does not. I’m reckless, not suicidal.”

“I don’t want to know why you’re doing this, do I.”

“Come over and find out.”

“Wynonna, I swear to god, you’re going to be the death of me one of these days, with or without Peacemaker.”

“You always say the sweetest things, Haught.”

When she pulled into the driveway at the Homestead, Wynonna was, in fact, sitting on the roof with her legs hanging over the edge, her boots kicking now and then. Doc was sitting beside her, with the ladder next to him and a bowl between them. It was one Waverly had used for popcorn before, but they didn’t seem to be eating from it, which seemed like a red flag. Dolls was leaning against the porch rail, arguing with Jeremy, who was standing against the front wall of the house with his phone in hand. The argument didn’t seem to be particularly heated—more so it looked as if Jeremy was begging Dolls for permission to do something and Dolls was trying to tell him no.

Wynonna waved for her to park by the barn, and when she had, she got out of the cruiser, heading back their way and standing in the open driveway, her sneakers crunching a little in the snow.

“So what’s this about?” she called out, eyeing each of the four of them in turn.

“All right,” Wynonna said, leaning forward with her hands on the edge of the roof to either side of her knees. “Here’s the rundown. Doc is up here and Dolls is down there because they’re both convinced I’m going to fall off the roof and die.”

“Reasonable,” Nicole called back, and Dolls looked up at Wynonna, gesturing to Nicole as if to say see?

“Jeremy is here because he desperately wants to see a werewolf up close.”

Nicole sighed, giving Jeremy a look that he returned with a guilty grin.

“Please? I’d really appreciate getting some video footage. I mean I’ve never actually gotten to see a living specimen of your species before.” Dolls smacked the back of his shoulder and he winced.
“Right, sorry. That’s inappropriate.”

Nicole shook her head and rubbed her eyes with one hand. “All right, all right. Fine. You may take video of whatever this is, but it is for your use only, Jeremy. Do not give it to BBD.”

“Not a problem! We don’t really work for BBD anymore, anyway.” He shuffled his feet, adding under his breath, “Still not sure who’s paying me.”

Dolls sighed. “I’ll get it in writing for you, Haught.”

Jeremy looked up at him, a protest dying on his lips.

“Thanks,” she said, then looked up at Wynonna again. “What about you? What’s that bowl for?”

Wynonna grinned and reached inside, picking up what looked like a large chunk of something red and squishy that dripped down her fingers, maybe half the size of Wynonna’s palm. Nicole tilted her head in confusion, then sniffed at the air. Was that a hint of...?

“You actually got cubed steak,” she said, laughing and shaking her head. “All right. Fine. Fine, I guess we’re doing this. Be right back.” Jeremy moved as if intending to follow her and Nicole raised a hand as she headed for the side of the house. “Don’t. I like you, Jeremy, but not that much.”

“Right,” he said, and waited, fiddling with his phone as his face split into a shy, clumsy sort of grin. “Yep, yep, no problem.”

The wolf was positively abuzz with excitement as she stripped out of her clothes and changed, melding almost seamlessly from human to wolf. When she lumbered back around to the front of the house, Jeremy’s face lit up, and he held up his phone to take her in. She sat first, patient, and let him walk a circle around her, occasionally leaning closer to get details or further away to get all of her in a shot. He kept up a running commentary to himself under his breath, as if he were recording notes on what he was seeing. She waited and inhaled and took in the scents of the Homestead, reveling in the comfort of what was familiar and noting with interest the new scents of what wasn’t.

Dolls, smelling of butane and sulfur and sweat, was familiar. As was Doc, dust and whiskey and gunpowder, and Wynonna, leather and gun polish and that weird, new smell that reminded her a little of baby powder. The Homestead itself was familiar too, wildflowers and warm old sturdy wood and the bedrock of love that suffused the building’s walls and roof and very foundation.

And then there was Jeremy, new, but not unpleasantly so, who smelled like plastic and circuitry and coffee and microwaveable gas station food.

“Can you—” he asked, and she straightened, standing up on her hind paws so that she towered over him. “Oh wow. Perfect.” He backed up a little more, and then a little more, until he was nearly to the house’s front wall, leaning backward to get her in frame. He did another partial circle of her, and she turned a little to help him get each side. “You’re incredible,” he said, and then drifted back to stand near Dolls.

“You done, Brainiac?”

He sighed, but leaned back to look at Wynonna. “Yeah, I’m done.”

“Perfect!” she crowed, and then pointed at Nicole. “Now. Haught.”
She lifted her head. The Homestead was tall enough that like this, standing, Wynonna was only a little above her eye line.

“You said you jump. So. Back up, and let’s see.”

Nicole let out a low huff of laughter, but obliged, pacing out toward the archway that heralded the edge of the Homestead proper, then crouched down, tail waving back and forth.

“Jeremy?” Dolls said, a bit wary, his voice carrying across the flat snowy land. “You might want to move to the side.”

“Oh. Right,” Jeremy said, and moved.

Wynonna scooped up a chunk of steak and cocked her arm back, flinging it hard toward the sign above Nicole’s head.

She drew on the wolf’s senses, tracking the trajectory and speed before she stepped forward twice and stood straight up, stretching her head to its full height. She snapped her jaws shut around the chunk of meat with an audible clack before she dropped back down onto all fours, giving the steak a cursory chew with her molars before swallowing it whole. She snorted and sat, shaking her head to ruffle her fur and indicate that she was unimpressed.

“Well then,” Wynonna grumbled, and carefully got to her feet with Doc’s arm hovering nearby to help. She was relatively steady, and he gathered up the bowl so that she could pick up another piece, lifting it up to show it to Nicole. “Ready, Haught?”

Nicole grinned, and fell back into a crouch to wait. Wynonna twisted and flung the next piece like a frisbee, and Nicole watched it, pivoting on her paws to race away from the house. She leapt over the fence in a short hop and then launched herself up off the ground, twisting her body mid-air to snatch the flying meat before dropping to earth with a crash and a plume of snow.

She turned, chomping down on her prize, and flicked her ear to listen to the whooping and yelling coming from the house. Wynonna and Doc were yelling over each other in excitement, and even Dolls was laughing, loud and hard like it had caught him off-guard. She cocked an ear, recognizing the sound of the Jeep’s tires a little ways off, and trotted back into the driveway for the next throw.

This one Doc threw, and hard, so that it sailed over the Earp archway and sent her racing down the snowy path to catch it. She had to go into a running jump that carried her about five meters off the road and then down in a huge burst of snow and dirt. She jerked upright again, sitting back on her haunches so the others could see she’d gotten it.

Nicole tilted her head back, chewing and trying to keep the meat from getting stuck in the crook of her jaw... right as Waverly rounded the turn. To her credit, she didn’t slam the brakes or swerve. She just rode on by, turning her head to stare out her window as if she couldn’t quite understand what she was seeing. Which was probably fair—it was not often that one witnessed one’s girlfriend gnawing at a hunk of steak like a golden retriever unsticking peanut butter from its mouth.

Waverly parked by the cruiser, as if sensing that leaving her Jeep in the driveway was a bad move, and as Nicole plodded back toward the house she heard Waverly’s voice, high and flirting the line with angry.

“Wynonna! What the hell are you doing?”

“Uh,” Wynonna said, holding another handful of bloodied meat. “Having some fun?”
“Why are you on the roof?”

“Because I couldn’t throw it as high if I was on the ground,” Wynonna said, utterly unfazed. “And people think you’re the smart one.”

“But you could fall!”

Doc shrugged the shoulder not currently holding the bowl of meat. “In all fairness, Waverly, that is what Marshal Dolls and I are here for.”

She let out a huge breath and gestured to Jeremy. “Okay, what about you?”

“Uh, studying the physical capabilities and strengths of *Lycanthropus Lupis*?” he said, and flinched when Dolls cuffed the back of his head. “What?”

Waverly flung her hands in the air. “Wynonna! Didn’t you think this might be demeaning? You’re treating her like—like a showdog!”

Wynonna was half a breath into her protest, but Nicole nudged Waverly’s back with her nose and tilted her head, opening her mouth in a grin.

Waverly sighed and rubbed a hand over her forehead. “I know, I know, you can make your own decisions.”

Nicole nodded, letting out a soft little *whuff* of agreement.

“And you could have told Wynonna no if you didn’t want to.”

Another nod, another muted *whuff*.

“I know, you wouldn’t have kept doing it if you actually felt like you were being made fun of.”

Nicole tilted her head, watching her girlfriend with warm, if puzzled golden-brown eyes.

“No, I’m not reading your mind, I just know you well enough to know that’s what you’d be saying.”

Nicole set a paw to her chest and let out a breath through her nose, feigning offense.

“Oh don’t, if you actually didn’t like my translations you’d have said something.”

Nicole rolled her head to one side to look at Wynonna, a *you see what I have to deal with* look, and Wynonna laughed.

“You’re the one who picked her, Haught!”

Waverly smacked a hand against Nicole’s shoulder, though it was barely more than a light tap. “Shut up.”

Nicole grinned and nudged her nose against Waverly’s belly, nuzzling.

“Fine, okay.” Waverly ran a hand up her nose to the top of her head, scratching her fingers through the fur. “If you’re having fun, I won’t stop you.”

Tires crunched further up the road, and Nicole jerked her head up, cocking one ear to listen.
Waverly frowned at her, then looked down the road. She tapped Nicole’s shoulder with one hand. “Go.”

Nicole ducked around Waverly and ran to hide to one side of the barn, keeping her body low and her ears forward, just in case. The likelihood of it being an unwanted guest in the middle of the day was low. The likelihood that it was someone that Wynonna, Doc, Dolls, and Waverly couldn’t handle without her was even lower.

But better safe than sorry.

She kept her head out of sight and listened as a car crossed the boundary into the Homestead’s driveway. It was a sedan, too light to be anything bigger but crunching too heavy in the snow to be a private vehicle.

The door opened, a boot touched down, and Randy Nedley’s warm, rough voice broke the awkward silence that had fallen over the Homestead.

“Earp,” he called.

Wynonna cleared her throat. “Sheriff.”

If Nicole’s throat had been capable of human speech, she would’ve cursed under her breath. Her clothes were on the other side of the house, and now that Nedley was in the front drive, she’d never be able to get to them without being seen.

“What the hell are you doin’ up on your roof?”

“I’ve taken up contracting?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s a long story.”

“It usually is with you,” he agreed. “Where’s Officer Haught? I need to talk to all of you ‘bout a case.”

“She’s um,” Waverly said, a little too fast. “She’s in the house.”

“Well all things considered I’d rather not chat out on your front lawn, seein’ as it’s cold, so why don’t we all step inside and find her then,” he said.

“Sheriff,” Dolls started, though he sounded as uncomfortable as Waverly did. “We um. Yeah, definitely, we’ll get on that.”

If only to save her pack—er, friends. Family?—from further discomfort, Nicole padded out from behind the barn, ducking her head low until her chin brushed the snow.

Nedley’s gaze tracked to her immediately, and if she hadn’t been able to hear his sharp little inhale, she wouldn’t have known he’d reacted at all.

“Oh,” he said. “Well then.”

Nicole wondered how it might look from the outside, watching a twelve-foot-tall werewolf look sheepish, head ducked like a pet who’s just been caught standing over a broken vase.

She started to move to circle the house, to get her clothes, but Nedley approached her and she
hesitated, keeping her head low and her ears at that loose, forward position that in dogs looked like I’m friendly, interested, and maybe also a little nervous.

“Well,” Nedley said, looking her over and coming within arm’s reach. He didn’t try to touch her, but he did look her over, nodding to himself with a thoughtful slant to his mouth. “Aren’t you something.” She gave a cautious grin and let her tail wag a little, and he snorted a laugh. “Think it might be best we have this conversation when we’re all more or less the same size. Wynonna, mind comin’ down? I’d rather not shout up to the roof atcha.”

Wynonna sighed like a child who’s just been told five more minutes at a church luncheon, but she stepped toward the ladder. “Fine. Doc, if you’d do the very dubious honors.”

Doc chuckled and held the ladder steady as Dolls grabbed the bottom end to brace it on the ground, and Nicole snuck around the side of the house to down-shift and change back into her clothes.

Nedley’s expression when she re-emerged, dressed and distinctly human-shaped, was some odd blend of approval and intrigue.

“Guess you’re tall no matter what shape you’re in, huh,” he said.

“I guess,” Nicole said with a chuckle. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged one shoulder, and headed for the porch to follow Wynonna and Doc inside. “Just that you’re a hell of a lot bigger than the last werewolf lady I saw.”

Nicole blinked and stopped, processing, and he got a bit ahead of her.

“Just how many werewolf ladies have you met, sir?”

He looked over his shoulder at her, winked, and headed indoors.

Even as often as she’d been over, these days every time Nicole visited, the Earp home looked slightly different. At first it was the drapes. Then a couple rugs in odd spots Nicole had finally decided were meant to combat drafts let in by windows or spots the vents didn’t reach. Now, though, there were an awful lot of decorative pillows... well, everywhere, actually, which she didn’t recall being a design feature in Wynonna’s plan for the place. Not that interior design was her middle name.

Frankly, knowing the general Earp naming conventions, she half-expected Wynonna Earp’s middle name to be Wisteria.

“Alright Sheriff,” Wynonna drawled, upon settling into a chair at the kitchen table and spreading her hands as if to say are you not entertained. “Lay it on me. Who died.”

“If I’ve got anythin’ to say about it,” Nedley said, stopping on the other side of the table and tucking his hands into his pockets. “Nobody. Wynonna?”

“Yep.”

“Your hands are still covered in steak.”

She looked down at them, pulled a face, and then got back up to wash her hands.
Nedley waited as the rest of them filed in. Waverly took another seat at the table. Dolls took a spot by the doorway, while Doc leaned against the counter beside the fridge. Jeremy hovered awkwardly for a moment until Waverly pointed to the remaining unoccupied chair, and Nicole fell in at Waverly’s left shoulder, feeling like she were standing in two moments of time at once. Just a couple months ago they’d all been around this table, just like this, minus several people and plus one BBD agent. Eliza Shapiro.

God, Nicole hadn’t thought about her in weeks. When had there even been time to?

“So what are we looking at?” Dolls asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he lounged in the doorway. Wynonna sat back down, grimacing and rubbing a towel over her hands.

“Buncha missing teenagers,” Nedley said, skipping right to the point. “Six so far, all of ‘em boys between 14 and 18. Purg High students. By all accounts, each one of ‘em just drove out of town. Said they had plans in the city. Movies or dates. Only they never came back.”

“Any other patterns?” Nicole asked.

“Two of ‘em are on the hockey team. Another’s in the junior varsity. One’s been the lead in every play the theater department’s put on for the last four years, and the last two are stars on the debate team, two years running.”

“Quite the selection,” Dolls noted. “Odds are they aren’t moving in the same social circles.”

“Not unless high school has gotten a lot more interesting than the last time I was there,” Wynonna quipped, but the concerned slant of her mouth spoke volumes.

“Hm.” Nicole crossed her arms over her chest, chewing on her lip. Her wolf was simmering with energy, still high on the exercise outside and intrigued by the new case, all at the same time. Truth be told it was a little hard to think critically. She—they?—wanted to jump right in and hunt down the missing kids the old-fashioned way and screw the thinking part. “Any of them got records?”

“Jac Michaels,” Nedley said without hesitation. “Devils’ star center. Couple of citations, mostly fightin’. Seems he even got into an altercation with an adult at the high school on the day of the Homecoming game.”

Wynonna scoffed, a little too loud and a little too fast. “What? That’s ridiculous. What punk high schooler would get into a fistfight with a grownup.”

“Uh-huh,” Nedley said, eyeing her before returning his attention to Nicole. “And Dennis Arden, the JV kid, had a couple possession charges when he was 16, but it never went anywhere.”

“Possession?” Doc asked. “Are you sayin’ folks will call the police before an exorcist? No wonder people are callin’ this place a police state.”

Nicole bit her lip and tried not to laugh as Nedley leveled him with a frown.

Dolls rubbed his forehead with one hand. “No. I refuse. I’m not doing this one.”

“No, Doc,” Waverly said, falling somewhere between helplessly amused and horrified. “It means he had illegal drugs in his possession.”

“Marijuana, if you want to be particular,” Nedley said.

“Yeah,” Wynonna muttered, glancing at Doc. “Uh, Waves, any way you can block his phone from
Nedley ignored her and turned his attention back to Nicole. “Thing is, yesterday we recovered a vehicle from up near the county border. Robert Jenkins, left defense for the Devils. We found his car abandoned a bit off the road behind a billboard.”

“Someone ran him off the road?” Dolls asked. “Maybe an opponent holding a grudge?”

“No exterior damage, so if they did, they managed to do it without touchin’ him. Not even so much as scratched paint.” Nedley snorted. “An’ be serious, Marshal, the Devils haven’t won a game since ’07. Nobody walks away from Purgatory pissed off about the results.” He raised a hand just as Jeremy opened his mouth. “And before you ask, no signs of anything internal neither. No damage to the brakes or the starter, nothin’. Driver door was standin’ open, keys in the ignition.”

“Which implies he parked it there on purpose,” Wynonna said, scoffing. “Sheriff, come on, kids are kids. By which I mean ‘kids are jackasses.’ He probably brought some girl up there and they wandered off, no big deal.”

Nedley’s expression went politely blank, and Waverly made a quiet noise of discomfort. “Wynonna, Robert Jenkins was in the closet until around New Years. It was all over the internet when he came out.”

“Oh.” Wynonna cringed. “Okay, so... maybe he went up there to meet someone from outside the Ghost River Triangle. Purgatory’s not exactly a happenin’ gay scene. Present company included.”

Almost at the same time, Nicole, Waverly, and Jeremy all frowned at her. “Hey.”

“An’ left his car keys behind?” Doc chimed in, if only to save Wynonna from herself. “Seems an odd choice.”

“No, I don’t buy it,” Nicole said. “No way he left it on purpose, but if there’s no sign of struggle, maybe someone lured him away.”

Waverly sucked in a breath. “We still don’t know everything that got in on the Solstice. Maybe there’s something like a... a Will o’ Wisp up there, or a Rusalka or something.”

“I was hoping,” Nedley said, tapping his thumb awkwardly at his holster. “That maybe you could head up there and see if you can’t... sniff out the other cars. Maybe find the boys. Between parents and friends we think they all left town separately, but they did go in sets. Three of them on February 5th, three more on February 8th.”

“Before the full moon,” Nicole muttered, and then frowned at the sudden attention it got her. “Well it rules that out at least.”

Wynonna nodded, thoughtful, and then glanced at Dolls. “Sheriff,” Dolls said, tucking his hands behind his back and flashing that sly, calculated smile he had when he was being politic. “Get us whatever you’ve got so far and we’ll head north, see what we can find. I’m sure Officer Haught’s... reconnaissance abilities will come in handy.”

Nedley nodded. “File’s in my car.”

“Jeremy?” Dolls said, flicking his head.

“Me?” Jeremy asked, then shrugged, leaving the room to follow Nedley outside. As soon as the
door latched, Dolls glanced at Wynonna, then focused on Waverly.

“You’ll stay here in Purgatory.”

“What?” She looked to her sister, then to Doc, then back to the Marshal. “Dolls, come on, I can help on this. You know I can.”

“I do know that, but I need you here to feed us updates on the Widows’ movement, if there is any. You’ve encountered them before, which means you can help Jeremy. Any research you could do up north you can do from here.”

“If the Marshal has no objections,” Doc added, though he looked a bit wary of interjecting himself into whatever was brewing, “I will stay as well. I have business to tend here at the bar, after all.”

“No, I have no objections,” Dolls said, with surprisingly little venom. Something had shifted between the two of them again, of that Nicole was pretty sure.

“Dolls,” she protested, then looked at Wynonna again. “You can’t seriously expect me to stay behind. Again.”

Wynonna let out a breath and looked at her sister. “Waves, come on. It’s nothing personal.”

“Like hell it isn’t,” Waverly said, pushing back from the table. “Fine.” She glared at Dolls and headed for the stairs. “Contact me when you’ve made up your mind about whether I’m a deputy you can give commands to or a consultant you can ask favors of, sir.”

Nicole watched her go, then shot Dolls a helpless look.

“Go,” he said. “We’ll go over the briefing on the drive north. We leave in an hour.”

Nicole pressed her lips together, chewing on words before deciding not to share any of them. She headed up the stairs, announcing herself with a soft, “Hey, Waves?” No vitriol or anger came her way, so she finished her climb and stopped in the hallway, listening. The bathroom sink was running, so she headed there first, stopping in the open doorway.

Waverly was bent over the sink, splashing water on her face, and didn’t acknowledge Nicole’s presence at first. When she did, Nicole almost wished she hadn’t.

“Thank you ever so much for the assist down there.”

“Waverly, come on, that’s not fair.”

She turned off the water and leaned her hands on the sink for a moment, thinking, then took up a towel and buried her face in it. For a moment Nicole thought she was going to scream into it, if just to have an outlet, but towels were not, generally speaking, as good at muffling frustration as pillows.

“I know it isn’t.”

Nicole tucked her hands into her pockets. “I’m sorry. If it were up to me I’d want you there.”

“You’re biased.”

“Mm. Guilty as charged.”

Waverly glared at her own reflection. “This keeps happening.”
“What?”

“Dolls telling me what to do.”

Nicole chuckled, though the look on Waverly’s face stopped her. “Waves, come on, you have met Xavier Dolls, right? He tells everyone what to do. I mean the man threatened me with a treason charge the first day I met him, for Christ’s sake.”

“I know, I know, but it’s not just him,” she said, and turned, leaning back against the sink. “Nedley, Doc, Wynonna...” Nicole frowned, but didn’t interrupt. “It’s just. Getting old.”

“I get it.” Nicole shrugged a shoulder when Waverly looked at her. “You’re finally getting the space to be yourself, and they’re cramping your style. I get that.”

“You don’t think I’m being unreasonable?”

Nicole bobbed her head to the side. “No. I mean, do I think maybe it’s worth not picking fights over? Sure. And I think it’s worth remembering that they’re trying to look out for you. Not always the right way, but... maybe the only way they know how. They’re not trying to own you. But no, I don’t think it’s unreasonable for you to be upset about it.”

Waverly considered that for a moment, then sighed. “I know. It just. I dunno. It’s like he doesn’t trust me to take care of myself.”

“Well for what it’s worth, I know you can.” Waverly frowned, and Nicole held her arms out. “Still mad at me? I don’t want to leave it like this.”

Waverly watched her for a moment, without moving, and Nicole chanced a small, hopeful smile.

“Like I could actually stay mad at you,” Waverly grumbled, and leaned into Nicole’s chest, accepting the hug. Nicole rested her chin on top of Waverly’s head, and found herself smiling.

“It occurs to me,” Nicole said, though she proceeded with some caution, especially now that she couldn’t see Waverly’s face, “That maybe part of why you’re upset is that the one time I went off on a BBD thing without you, I got hurt.” She grinned. “Almost like you’re my good luck charm. Without you there’s no telling what’ll happen.”

“You better not,” Waverly said. “I don’t think I could stand it if you got hurt again.”

“I’ll do my best,” Nicole said, and kissed the top of her head. “Promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Listen, the dramatic irony on those last few lines is so good I couldn't NOT include it. I refuse to take the blame for this one.
A little before Dolls’ hour was up, Nicole came down, carrying a bag over her shoulder with the things she usually left here at the Homestead. She was almost to the bottom step when Nedley caught her attention with a soft, “Haught.”

“Sir?”

He jerked his head and led her into the living room, away from the energy and confusion of the rest of BBD chatting in the kitchen.

“Anything else I should know?” Nicole asked, resisting the urge to stand at attention.

“I’ve got someone to cover your shifts for the next few days,” he said. “If you think it’ll take longer than that, fine, just keep me up to date.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t know what you’re gonna find up there, and I pretty much figure I’m not gonna want to know, either.”

“I’ll look forward to you losing my report then, sir.”

He grunted. “Good. Try not to get yourself stabbed again.”

“I’ll do my best, sir,” she said, grinning. “We’ll find the boys.”

He nodded, then shifted on his feet, his gaze flitting around like he didn’t want to look her in the eye. “If you’d like,” he said, with that slight uptick in his voice that said he was trying to sound like he didn’t care, “I’ll look after your cat while you’re up north.”

Nicole grinned and tucked her hands into her pockets, forcing her face down to a neutral expression. Who knew Nedley was such a softy.

“That’s very kind of you to offer, sir. She’s made her opinion pretty well known, so. I wouldn’t entrust her to any other person with a Y chromosome.”

He didn’t smile, exactly, but his eyes warmed, and the lines around his mouth softened. “Good. That’s good.”

Dolls stopped in the front hall and waved a hand to her. “Haught. We move in 5.”

“Meet you outside, Dolls,” she said, and then looked to the sheriff again. He offered his hand, and she shook it. “Thank you, sir. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Good hunting,” he said.

He didn’t say it the way Mikael did, of course. Mikael always said it in a way that betrayed him for what he was: a hunter, a predator, and a lethal one besides. Mikael said it with a tone of primal, vicious glee.

Nedley just said it like a human would. Calm, genuine, almost a joke given her nature, but maybe just something you would say to a fellow hunter. A normal, totally human thing to say.

But it still made her stop for a second, blinking.
“Thank you, sir,” she said.

If her voice cracked or rasped a little more than it should have, Nedley at least had the compassion not to say anything.

In contrast to their usual arrangement, Nicole sat up front in Dolls’ SUV, her window cracked and her nose—once they got on the highway—shifted far enough to turn a bit leathery and black and cool to the touch. The roadside was an onslaught of smells, but she tasked that to the wolf and focused on listening.

Wynonna lounged in the backseat, which she insisted was the only way she felt at all comfortable.

“So here’s what we have so far,” Wynonna said. “Six kids, like Nedley said. The hockey players are Robert Jenkins, whose car was discovered on February 12th, and Jac Michaels, the guy whose lip I might have split trying to get the genie trophy.” Dolls made a faint grunting sound to express his disapproval and Wynonna rolled her eyes so hard Nicole thought the baby would feel it. “Oh don’t you make that noise, if we hadn’t gotten that trophy you’d still be so cracked out on withdrawal you wouldn’t know your own name.”

He sighed, but waved a hand. “Go on.”

“Michaels’ car has not yet been recovered. Blue Honda sedan, 2012. JV kid with the pot charges is Dennis Arden. Apparently he drives a grey pickup with the right side mirror held on with duct tape, so it’ll be hard to miss. Then we’ve got Troy Brooks, who apparently has a rich-ass daddy, cuz he’s driving a 2016 silver monster.”

“What’s the make?” Nicole asked, though she didn’t look over her shoulder.

“No that’s what Nedley wrote down. Right here.” She stuck the clipboard between the space in the seats, ignoring Dolls’ startled curse. Nicole glanced at it. “Silver monster.”

Nicole choked on a laugh. Nedley’s handwriting wasn’t actually that bad, and what he’d written was definitely silver Mazda. But Wynonna was having fun with it, and she decided not to press the point.

“Anyway,” Wynonna said, pulling the clipboard back. “Nedley said they all left separately, but Tim Whitfield, master debater,” she snickered, then sobered at Dolls’ glare in the rear-view mirror. “Tim Whitfield’s car was located on the north side of town near his girlfriend’s house, so current theory is that maybe he hitched a ride with his debate buddy Laurence Reynolds after all. Reynolds drives a white pickup. Which basically means he’s an asshole.”

“Why does that make him—”

“Okay, anyway,” Dolls said, cutting in. “Nedley hadn’t been investigating too deeply because they thought the kids were just heading north across county lines, maybe it was just a couple hysterical parents filing the missing persons reports, y’know, but once they found Jenkins’ car...”

He trailed off meaningfully and Nicole nodded, keeping her nose to the cracked window. “All bets were off.”

“Exactly.”

“Not to be an asshole, but it is freezing in here,” Wynonna noted.

“Yeah, I know,” Dolls said. “But we need the window open for Haught.”
Nicole kept her nose to the window but reached back, twisting her shoulder a little to stick her arm back behind her like a mom comforting a child in a carseat. For a moment Wynonna just made a low, uncertain noise, but she grabbed Nicole’s hand and shook it once.

“Okay, now roll over—holy shit.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said.

She still hadn’t let go, and in fact wrapped both hands around Nicole’s. “Dude. You’re like a space heater.”

Nicole grinned. “Yeah.”

“You’re the bonus blanket,” she said with a gasp, and Nicole laughed. “No wonder she talks about how great you are in bed.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, and started to pull her hand back.

“No, no wait! I’ll be good!”

After almost an hour, Nicole’s shoulder ached from reaching backward, but it had helped keep Wynonna warm, and the three of them had kept up a comfortable banter along the way. They were only a handful of kilometers from the spot where Purgatory SD had found Jenkins’ car when Nicole sensed... something. She wasn’t quite sure what it was. A little more than a smell, a little less than a sound. The ground to either side of the roadway was sheeted with snow, a sprawling winter scene untouched by human boots. A vision so pretty it was fit for a painting.

“Pull over.”

“Here?” Wynonna asked, but Dolls was already pulling to the shoulder. As soon as the car stopped she slipped out, rolling her sore shoulder and sniffing at the air.

Dolls followed her out, standing by his door and peering around. Further to the north the edge of a forest loomed like a wall. Deeper inside the trunks got so dense the forest’s inner heart was a black abyss of space, but the front edge was a line of dead trees. Dry and aged branches waved like the hands of an army of the dead, clawing at the world of the living as they tried to keep from being sucked into the darkness.

It sent a shiver up Nicole’s spine that had nothing to do with cold, and even the wolf felt uneasy about the woods.

A distant cawing of crows made her jump, and then there was a chaotic baying of dogs, as of a whole pack startled into motion.

“What is it?” Dolls asked.

“Dunno,” she said, and finally looked back at him with a frown. “Cover me?”

He nodded and ducked back into the car. Wynonna remained in the SUV, though she moved up to the driver’s seat. Nicole stripped down to her tank top and shifted to almost the halfway point, gaining height and fur and a mostly wolfish face. Dolls checked the magazine in his pistol and worked the slide to chamber a round.

“After you.”
Nicole grunted, her voice coming out thick and guttural where her chest was halfway beast. “All things considered, please don’t hit me,” she said, and hopped a fence, bending double to keep her nose close to the ground. She mostly kept to her feet, but she dipped her hands into the snow now and then, both to keep balance and to occasionally scoop up a handful of white powder and sniff warily at it.

It just smelled like snow. Nothing out of place.

They climbed a low rise with Nicole in the lead and Dolls a few dozen paces behind her. It wasn’t a proper hill, she thought, but a gentle slope that just barely hid a vehicle from their sight until they reached the top. It was almost completely covered by snow, and she let out a low bark, a discovery call that probably didn’t mean anything to Dolls, but it did get him to pick up the pace, his boots crunching and sloshing in the deep snow as he ran up behind her. She looked over her shoulder at him, then bounded forward, sliding down the little hill until she bumped into the front right door. She shifted her hands all the way over to paws and started shoving at the snow cover, using her paws like shovels or big ice scrapers.

She exposed part of the windshield frame and blew away a bit of snow clinging to the metal.

“Silver,” she said as Dolls finally caught up to her.

He scanned the horizon, keeping his gun low, and she clambered around to the rear of the car, marking out the edges of the car’s shape with her paws. She grunted and scraped at the snow covering the trunk until she could get to the stamped name on the door.

“What is it?” Dolls prompted when he heard her let out a sharp, heavy breath.

“Mazda 3.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah,” she said. Dolls pulled his phone out of his coat and called Wynonna as she moved to the driver’s side door. She stripped down completely and shifted all the way, then set about repeating the process, digging out huge clumps of snow. The wind blew the better portion of what she scooped behind her right back at her, and a couple times she had to stop and give a violent shake to dislodge all the powder trying to turn her red fur white.

“Wow,” Wynonna called as she approached them from the roadside, the SUV’s keys in hand. “Note to self, don’t bother buying a snow plow. Also, if we find bones buried in the backyard, we definitely know who to blame.”

Nicole gave her a half-hearted growl in response and went back to work until she’d cleared out a couple meters in every direction around the door, allowing enough room to open it. She nodded at it and Dolls moved to the door, testing the latch.

“Unlocked,” he noted. He holstered his pistol and braced a foot against the passenger door to muscle it open, triggering a miniature avalanche of frost and loose powder down along the door’s frame.

Nicole downshifted slightly, enough to speak, and looked around. “It looks like he was leaving town,” she noted. “Heading back toward Purgatory.”

“Except he’s angled like he was gonna turn around,” Dolls said, raising his hands and framing the car with them, then comparing it to the tree line. “Maybe he saw something in his rear-view and pulled off the road?”
Another raucous round of crowing and a sharp, bitterly cold wind from the north made Wynonna jump and shiver in her boots. Dolls looked around, drawing his pistol again, and Nicole downshifted a bit more, leaving as much fur as she could for warmth. She moved past Dolls to sit in the driver’s seat and poked through the center console and the glovebox.

“Registration is to Troy Brooks,” she noted, calling it out so that they could hear her. “And,” she said, pulling up scraps of paper from the cupholder. “Receipts from a gas station. Crossroads Hill.”

“That’s a bit north of here. Maybe another 15, right before the edge of the Triangle,” Dolls said.

“Probably just a freeway stop,” Nicole said, nodding. “But they might be the last ones to have seen Troy. Sounds like we’re headed north next to have a little chat.”

“What’s that Blue?” Wynonna chirped. “You found a clue?”

Dolls choked on what sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

“Wynonna.”

“I’m freezing my butt off. Let’s head for this Crossroads place and discuss this further in the car. Where it’s warm.”

“All right, all right. Dolls, toss me my clothes, will you?”

Crossroads Hill turned out to be a nowhere sort of town. It was, as Nicole had surmised, barely bigger than a freeway stop, comprising little more than a gas station, a diner, and a motel that looked like it hadn’t been updated since the early 70s. As they rolled up to the intersection—the only one in town—Dolls stopped at the sign and the three of them each peered around. The place looked completely desolate. Nicole practically expected to see cobwebs ensnaring the fuel pumps at the station.

“Well isn’t this a cheery place,” Wynonna said, to break the silence.


“Where first?” Dolls asked.

“Station looks dead,” Nicole said.

“Please don’t use that word,” Wynonna interrupted.

Nicole ignored her. “So let’s try the motel first. It’s the only place with real lights on.”

Dolls nodded and pulled out into the road. An icicle cracked off the stop sign and hit the pavement as they went by, and moments later they were pulling into the little parking lot in front of the motel’s office. Theirs was the only car in sight.

Nicole led the way in, peering around. The décor smacked of the unmaintained drabness of the 70s as seen through the lens of the 2010s. What might, decades ago, have been an explosion of color—mauve wallpaper, flaxen overstuffed armchairs, a brilliant glass-faced coffee table covered in the newest magazines—now bore the room’s age like a concrete yoke. The wallpaper peeled at the corners and had aged to a sickly grey; the armchairs seemed more like a subdued khaki than yellow.
Incomprehensibly, the woman standing behind the counter looked like age had not touched her at all. She didn’t look like she belonged in the 70s, exactly, but rather seemed somehow ageless. Nicole couldn’t decide if she looked 20, 30, or 50. Depending on the depths of the crinkles around her eyes when she smiled, she gained or lost a decade or more.

And oh how she smiled. Readily and warmly and without compunction.

She was a very pretty woman. It wasn’t the result of any particular one of her features, exactly, but she had a calm, quiet confidence to her that made Nicole decide that she was pretty, irrespective of any supporting evidence. And Nicole wasn’t quite sure whether or not that evidence existed, either —afterward she would’ve been hard-pressed to describe the woman in clear terms. She knew the woman had dark, almost black hair, and a pretty, well-toned face that was neither pale nor particularly dark. She was wearing a red suit, over a black shirt, and Nicole thought the colors fit her, for all that it didn’t fit the room at all.

She was wearing a nametag that read Ms. Taika, and there was a brooch on the lapel of her suit. A little twig, as of an evergreen tree, and a little sprig of purple-black berries.

It was the smell of the brooch that made Nicole nervous, even though there was part of her that really wanted to like Ms. Taika on sight.

It smelled like death.

“Hello!” Ms. Taika said, and her voice was kind and soft. When Nicole glanced around her she saw that Dolls was smiling, just a little. Wynonna, however, was frowning, maybe thoughtful, which Nicole took as a good sign. If this woman had any ability to charm—Waverly’s guess of a siren suddenly came roaring back to mind and she wondered if they had walked into a trap just coming in here—it might’ve gotten Dolls, but at least Wynonna had not been swayed.

“Hi there,” Nicole said, and stepped ahead of Dolls to speak with her. She set her overnight bag down against the partition separating them and tugged her wallet out of her purse. “Any chance you’ve got a room we could rent?”

“Two queens okay?” Ms. Taika asked, flashing the beaming, customer-service smile that made her look 20.

“That’s fine, yeah,” Nicole said.

“It just so happens I do have a room of that layout available,” Ms. Taika said, beaming still. “For how many nights might I expect you?”

“One for sure,” Nicole said, and Dolls made a faint noise of protest until Wynonna jabbed him in the ribs with one of her elbows. “Maybe longer.”

“What brings you to Crossroads Hill?” she asked, as bubbly and nonchalant as if this were a perfectly ordinary conversation. As if she were not wearing a deadly plant as a bit of jewelry.

“Oh, just looking for someone,” Nicole said, and grinned when Ms. Taika smiled at her. “We thought he might have come through here, so we’re trying to trace his steps.”

“How lovely!” Ms. Taika said. “Well best of luck finding him. We do get an awful lot of travelers through here. Crossroads is in the name after all!”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and grinned. “By the way, that belladonna in your lapel pin is beautiful. Interesting choice.”
Ms. Taika’s smile didn’t so much as flicker, but she raised a hand to touch the base of the pin. “Oh thank you! It’s a custom job, hardly anyone thinks to pair yew with belladonna. Are you a horticulturist?”

“No,” Nicole said, briefly trying to imagine a version of her life where she’d pursued that particular career path instead of law enforcement. “Uh, no, just a hobbyist.”

“Well isn’t that something,” Ms. Taika said cheerily, and plucked a key from the wall beside her. “Well here you go! It’s a pleasure having a daughter of Apollo out this way.”

Nicole blinked, glancing momentarily back at Wynonna, who gave an almost imperceptible shrug in response. “Uh, thank you,” she said, and took the key.

“Room 33,” she said, and smiled. “Down the hall here on your right. Just let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.” Ms. Taika said. “Oh, and please mind the noise after 10. The gentleman in room 34 is rather ornery about his sleep.”

“Right,” Nicole said, a little slow, and she glanced back at Dolls, who rolled a shoulder and hefted his bags. “We’ll get out of your way now then, thanks.”

“Of course! Sleep well!”

As soon as they were safely ensconced in room 33, which looked almost a twin to the waiting room out front in respect to design style, Wynonna set down her bag and eyed them both in turn. “So, I’m not the only one who thinks that was creepy as hell, right?”
Investigation in a town ("town") like this one involved a bit of a logic game. On the one hand, splitting up would let them cover more ground. Insofar as there was much ground to cover, anyway. On the other hand, splitting up was probably not a good idea. Nicole wasn’t sure what was up with Ms. Taika, but she sure didn’t like it. On a third hand, if they stayed together and went somewhere else in Crossroads Hill, would they look conspicuous? A group of three people looking for a friend in a tiny stopover don’t use the buddy system unless they’re paranoid... or lying.

After they’d been bickering over what to do next for about ten minutes, Nicole hit her limit for patience and got up from her chair. “I want to get Waverly on this.”

“Why?” Wynonna asked. “All we’ve got so far is a creepy woman wearing a pin with a toxic flower on it who works the motel in the town where Troy Brooks was last seen. That’s not really much to go on for research, Haught.”

“Well we... I mean...” Nicole sighed and flopped herself down on the bed Wynonna was not currently sitting on, and then dropped onto her back, staring up at the textured ceiling.

“That Apollo comment was pretty weird,” Dolls conceded. He was sitting reversed in a wooden chair pulled from the room’s far corner, and he leaned on the back of it, rubbing his eyes with the heel of one hand. “We might have more data than we think. I’m not opposed to bringing her in on this.”

“Then why did we bother to leave her behind, Dolls,” Wynonna groused. “You could’ve just brought her along and saved the trouble.”

“I thought you didn’t want her on field missions more than necessary,” Dolls said. “Or did that change again since that time she lost her hand?”

“She lost her what?” Nicole said, jerking upright again. Wynonna winced and Dolls wrinkled his nose.

“Oops.”

“Yeah,” Wynonna grumbled, glaring at him. “Oops. It’s fine, Haught. It was back while she was possessed. That demon was like some... some evil gecko or something. Grew her hand back.” She raised her hand, wiggling her fingers. “My finger too actually.”

“Your finger?”

“Listen, can we focus?” Wynonna said, exhaling a sharp, impatient little breath and shifting to the edge of the bed as if to get up. “Call Waverly.”

“Where are you going?”

“Where else?” she snapped, skirting the edge of Nicole’s bed to head for the bathroom.

“Right,” Nicole muttered, and pulled out her phone.

Waverly picked up almost as soon as it started ringing. “Thank god. Hey baby. How’s it going?”

“We’ve got a little more than nothing,” Nicole noted, glancing at Dolls with a wry smile. “We
found Troy Brooks’ car, tracked him back to a fuel station in a little stopover called Crossroads Hill.”

“Crossroads Hill?” Waverly was quiet for a moment, and Nicole heard the sound of ticking keys, then a pause as Waverly scanned search results. “I’ve lived here my whole life and I’ve never even heard of this place.”

“It’s nowhere special, trust me,” Nicole muttered, eyeing the walls with distaste. “Listen, we’re checked into the motel here, but we wanted to keep you updated with the clues we’ve found so far.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Motel’s run by a woman named Taika. T-a-i-k-a. Can you run some info on her, maybe see if she’s the motel’s owner?”

“Yeah, not a problem. I’ll get Jeremy on that, I think he’s spinning his wheels on his search for the third seal. It’ll probably help him to do something else for a bit. Think she’s BBD-adjacent?”

“We haven’t ruled it out,” Nicole said. “She doesn’t smell off to me, and she looks relatively ordinary, but she set off some bells. Also she was wearing a yew and belladonna lapel pin.”

“Not necessarily supernatural, but definitely odd,” Waverly mused. “Yew and belladonna? Those are both heavyweights, magically speaking. I could get a list of uses together but... that’s gonna be a pretty long list.”

“Hold that unless you’ve got nothing else to do,” Nicole said. “Here’s our potential doozy though.”

“Oh boy.”

“She called me a daughter of Apollo.”

Waverly was quiet for a long moment. She muttered a faint just a second and then Nicole heard her footsteps, a heavy thunk, and then the unmistakable sound of pages being turned. Waverly flipped through whatever book she’d gotten down, muttering to herself under her breath, and then went quiet for a long moment. Nicole plucked at a loose thread on the hem of her sweatpants until Waverly made a soft, concerned noise.

“What is it?”

“Well, the thing is that in much the same way as Artemis is associated with dogs as hunting partners, Apollo is associated with wolves. Some of the ancient Greeks believed that wolves were his messengers.”

She looked at Dolls, alarm all over her face. He blinked at her and mouthed what?

“She knows what I am,” she said, a little slow. She kept her gaze on Dolls as she said it, and his eyes narrowed, understanding. “That’s why she called me that.”

“I’d bet good money, yeah. Be careful, sweetie. If she knew what you are on sight...”

“We’re dealing with someone pretty powerful, yeah,” she finished. “Damn.”

“I’ll do some digging. Anything you can give me will help rule out what she is. Or isn’t. Or whatever is going on up there.”
“Thanks, Waves.”

“Of course. Hm.”

“What?”

“I’m looking at a map of the land around Crossroads Hill. Looks like there’s a pond near you. Well, small lake, really. I’d start there. Sirens and nymphs and the like were usually associated with bodies of water, so if this Ms. Taika is some kind of ensnarer, chances are that’s her home.”

Once they had Wynonna in tow, the three of them set out for Crossroads Hill’s singular water feature, Lamplight Lake. It was a short drive from the town itself, and when they disembarked and finished the trip on foot, they found themselves trampling on through dense pine woods that put Dolls very much at unease. They stopped at the top of a slope overlooking a vast pond. The center was dark and choppy, a stiff wind stirring the surface as they watched, and half-formed ice floes floated at the banks where the shallows had tried to freeze in the prior month’s deepest cold snaps. There was a short pier on the south side, nearer to them, and on the far side shadows prowled.


“Let’s walk the perimeter,” Dolls said. “Keep your ear out, Haught.”

“Understood,” she said, and pulled up the hood on her jacket. Masked by hair and cotton, she changed her ears, reaching up to tuck the furry ends back in and pull her hair forward to make sure they were hidden. She looked out toward the lake, sniffing and otherwise settling in, letting her other senses fade off as she drilled down on her sense of hearing.

And she listened.

“Something’s wrong,” she said, after half a minute.

“That was fast,” Wynonna muttered.

“There’s nothing,” she said, turning to look at Dolls, forcing her eyes to focus again. “No birds, no... no squirrels, no rabbits, no foxes.” She scanned the trees around them. “Just the wind through the branches. Snow falling. But no wildlife.”

“Something’s scaring them off,” Dolls guessed.

“Mm.” She frowned, and crouched down to the snow, sniffing at it, then got up and dusted off her hands. “I don’t think we’re close to it. I’m not getting any...” She waved a hand in a vague circle. “It’s probably on the other side of the lake.”

“Well then,” Wynonna said, clapping her hands together with a muffled whump from her gloves. “Let’s get started, shall we? Maybe we can wrap this up quick and get home.”

Dolls shrugged, but gestured in an after you little display, and Nicole started forward, leading the way through the snow.

And when they’d been walking for ten minutes, she finally heard something. It was distant, soft, and almost inaudible over their crunching boots, so she stopped and held her hand out to signal the others. She pulled her hood down, to make sure there weren’t any obstacles between her ears and the sound.
The noise came again. A faint, choking cry.

“Male voice,” she whispered, ears flicking to try to nail down the direction it was coming from. “Young, I think.” The sound came again, a third time, and she narrowed her range, taking a cautious step toward the sound. “Screaming.”

“One of our missing kids,” Wynonna said.

“Probably.”

The possibility roared through her like a blazing fire. A Purgatory High student, here, so far from home, maybe lured from his car into some fell creature’s home. A witch’s hut, maybe, or some nymph’s seductive, lethal little grotto.

Something was hurting one of her citizens.

Unacceptable.

In the space of a breath Nicole’s face twisted and shifted halfway, fur sticking up from her skin and her fangs bared, golden eyes fixed on the trees at the far side of the lake.

“Haught,” Dolls said, and clamped a hand down on her shoulder.

She snarled, turning toward him. Her skull settled into something that was right halfway between wolf and man, with a short, tapered muzzle and wide, unblinking predator’s eyes.

“Do not. Charge in,” he said, with a slow, forced patience that had everything to do with keeping her calm and nothing to do with his opinion of the case. He watched her eyes, as if searching for understanding, for her humanity. The wolf snarled for vengeance, for rescue, for action. “We need more intel.”

“As much as I love it when you get all K-9 Unit over here,” Wynonna said, “I really don’t feel like telling Waverly that you ran into some mystery creature’s den and got your heart ripped out or something.”

Can’t hurt Waverly.

It was a fierce thought, a terrified thought. Somehow hers and also not hers. The wolf eased back, and Nicole felt her tuck their ears back in submission, her head dipping slightly so that she was almost looking up at Wynonna.

She blinked, and raised her hands to her face, feeling along the warped edges as if only now realizing how far they’d gone over.

“You good?” Dolls asked.

“Yeah,” she muttered. She didn’t so much force the wolf back further as press a little and it quailed away like a flower under the touch of a heavy hand. She wrinkled her nose and stretched out her jaw until the joint gave a soft crack like cartilage popping, and she settled out to a more traditionally human shape. “Yeah, sorry.”

“Okay.”

“That didn’t look like it hurt,” Wynonna said, as they started forward again, though she kept her voice fairly low, to keep their soon-to-be-hosts from noticing they had approaching houseguests.
“Usually there’s a lot more groaning and wincing and, like, horror movie effects.”

Nicole glanced at her, then frowned. Was that true? Now that she thought about it, she’d barely noticed the change, the sensation only hitting her at the edges of consciousness. It really hadn’t hurt that much.

“Huh.”

“Synergy does that sometimes,” Dolls noted. “Getting a bit more cuddly with the animal side lately, Haught?”

“Oh, I guess,” she said, and found it difficult to look at either of them. “Is that bad?”

Wynonna looked at Dolls. “Is it?”

“It is for werewolves who have trouble with more basic self-control,” Dolls said, sounding a little like he were reciting something from a case file. “But I don’t know anyone who would accuse you of that, at least as a general rule. Wouldn’t be too worried about it in your case. But synergy does go both ways. You bleed into the wolf, it bleeds into you.”

“She,” Nicole said, correcting him, and then winced. “Which probably just proved your point.”

Wynonna grinned and slapped her on the shoulder, then looked triumphantly at Dolls. “See? We do outnumber you.”

He grunted in disapproval and Nicole gave her a quizzical look.

“What?”

“He was gloating last week that with Jeremy on the team, we’re an even split of men to women: Doc, Dolls, Jeremy, against you, me, and Waves,” she explained, still smiling her most smug smile at Dolls. “But if your wolf is a she, we outnumber them.”

“You know,” Nicole said, thoughtful. “I almost think I regret asking.”

“Oh shut up, dogbreath.”

“Make me.”

“I brought milkbones, those should keep you quiet for a while, right? So don’t try me.”

“You did not.”

“Five bucks says you’re wrong,” Dolls said, offering a hand to Nicole.

It was an odd statement, especially for him, but she ignored her instincts, scoffed, and shook his hand.

And then Wynonna reached into the lining of her coat and pulled out a small ziploc bag of “large-breed” milkbones.

“Pay up,” Dolls said, grinning.

She grumbled and dug into her wallet for a handful of coins, which she slapped into Dolls’ hand. “You two set me up.”
“No,” Wynonna said, setting a hand to the hollow of her throat as if she were offended. “Us? Conspire to do something like that?”

“Never. And to think that in the process we caught you gambling on a job,” Dolls mused. “For shame, Haught.”

“You know, I think I liked it better when you two were arguing with each other.”

“Yeah,” Dolls said, counting through the coins before tucking them into his pocket with a satisfied little smile. “Yeah, I bet you do.”

They walked on through the snow, and as they got nearer, Nicole walked lower and lower to the ground, bent almost double until her chest was parallel to the ground. Twice she had to bite back a low, rumbling growl in her chest, and the second time she only noticed she was doing it when Wynonna gave her shoulder a light smack.

As they got closer, they began to hear more sounds. Mostly muffled weeping, but occasionally they also caught the sound of someone muttering long, feverish phrases and the very occasional screaming she had heard from across the lake.

Barely a stone’s throw from the tree line, Nicole spotted what looked like a wooden shack, its sloped roof heavy with snow. In front stood three half-finished rows, as if a gardener had wandered off in the midst of planting and forgotten to come back to the task. She saw no one outside the shack, and so crept in a cautious half-circle around it, scouting the exterior of the place. The garden was unfenced, and the only sign that it might have ever been occupied was a lantern hanging from a peg by the door, unlit. The walls were partially overgrown with ivy, and Nicole pointed it out as they shifted to get a better line of sight to the door.

“Didn’t see that from the other side, did you two?”

Wynonna shrugged. “Might’ve seen a snowy green mound but I figured it was a small hill.”

Nicole nodded. “See the door?” She pointed to it, noting an odd carving in the surface of the wood shaped vaguely like an up arrow. “You guys got any guesses?”

“Lambda,” Wynonna offered. When Nicole looked at her, startled, she nodded toward the building. “Greek letter, like our L? Don’t look at me like that, I thought you knew I ended up in Athens after I left town.”

“I... am not sure I did know that,” Nicole said, thoughtful, then turned to look at the door again. “L, huh,” she mused, and frowned. “All right, you two stay just behind me.”

Dolls nodded and raised his pistol, keeping his eyes everywhere as she crept a bit closer toward the front door. Dolls and Wynonna followed her and she crawled nearer, until she could crouch beside the door and press her ear to it. Inside she could hear two young men speaking, mumbling, almost as if they were having a very quiet conversation, except that more often than not they were talking over each other.

“Can’t prepare, not prepared, don’t remember it, don’t remember it,” one of them was whispering.

“Late for something,” whispered the other. “Late for something. What? What was it?”

“Two boys,” she mouthed to Wynonna, and motioned them closer. Wynonna pulled Peacemaker and held it pointed upward. Dolls took the other angle of approach, and Nicole stood up in a slow slide. The door had no knob, so she set a hand against it and pressed it inward, slow, in case the
hinges creaked.

They didn’t, and she scanned the interior of the shack. It was dark inside, with no windows or lamps. She sniffed the air and found the thick, dense scent of two young, unwashed males inside, but she could see very little and heard only the two of them. She leaned back, whispered clear to the others, and stepped inside. Nicole fumbled for her phone to use its flashlight to peer around the room. Once she illuminated the place she found that the interior of the shack, a single room, was so plain the only word she could think to describe it was Spartan: there were no shelves of books, no kitchen, no desk. The only item in the entire room was a small wooden frame and thick mattress, only the size of a camp bed, but so lavishly made and adorned with pillows and thick comforters that it seemed like a bad Photoshop job. It was currently empty, and made up to professional standards, complete with hospital corners.

The only occupants of the room were two boys, sitting in opposite corners from each other. Both were wearing heavy winter parkas, woolen hats, and thick mittens, their boots encrusted with snow. One, sitting in the corner nearer the bed, was so dark-skinned Nicole almost didn’t see him at all in the dark, until the flashlight fell across his face and he flinched, breaking off in the middle of his mumbling to peer up at her, squinting through the flashlight’s light. He lifted one hand to block it from his face, but it was a weak, slow gesture, as if he didn’t have the strength for it.

She frowned and turned around, illuminating next a paler young man with the pointed, hawkish look and speckled complexion of a boy whose metabolism has outpaced his baby fat by an order of magnitude.

“Can you understand me?” she asked, keeping her voice low. The pale boy nodded, and she turned back toward the other as he nodded too. “Good. I’m Officer Nicole Haught, do you know who I am?”

They shook their heads, looking puzzled.

“I’m with the Purgatory Sheriff Department,” she said, frowning when they continued to look confused. “Do you live in Purgatory?”

The boys continued to stare at her, seemingly not noticing that Wynonna and Dolls had moved to the doorway. Nicole glanced up, nodded as Wynonna fell into position with her back to Dolls’, covering the shack while Dolls covered the surrounding lands.

“What’s your names?”

The boys each looked at her, blinking, and almost in unison, they said, “I dunno.”

“Amnesia?” Wynonna asked. “Both of them? At the same time?”

They looked at Wynonna, and each of them said, in voices hoarse from days of disuse, “I dunno.”

Nicole surveyed each of them and then turned toward the one in back, and pointed toward the paler boy, since he was nearer to the front of the shack. “Go sit with him please,” she told the other. The boy went and sat where she’d pointed, and she nodded, satisfied that now she could see them both at the same time. “Are you guys carrying wallets?”

“I dunno,” they said again, and Nicole felt the rising urge to grind her teeth.

“Please check,” she said.

They both fumbled through their pockets, checking various hiding spots for such things. The
The darker boy found his in the back pocket of his jeans, and offered it to Nicole. She thumbed through until she found his license. She glanced to Wynonna. “This is Laurence Reynolds,” she said, and Dolls glanced over his shoulder at her words.

Wynonna inhaled, slow, and let out the breath. “Bet you that’s Tim,” she said.

The paler boy found his wallet in a pocket in his coat’s interior lining, and handed it to her as she returned Laurence’s to him. She opened the second wallet, reading the license with her flashlight, and looked to Wynonna. “Got it in one.”

“So we’ve found our debate team,” Dolls said, though he kept his attention outside. “And they’ve both been struck stupid with, what, precision amnesia?”

“How long have you been here?” Nicole asked Laurence.

He shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Getting tired of that answer,” Nicole muttered, but ran her hand over her mouth, and then turned to Tim. “What about you?” He shook his head. “You don’t know how long you’ve been here... you don’t remember where you live. You don’t remember your names. Do you remember anything?”

“Fire,” whispered Laurence, and Tim got a funny smile on his face, his eyes almost seeming to glaze over.

“Yeah,” Tim said. “Like a flickering candle in the trees.”

“Yeah.” Laurence smiled too, a bit dopey-eyed, like he were remembering something particularly beautiful. “Torches in the woods.”
They left the boys inside the shack and stepped around the side of the structure to talk. Nicole had wasted about a minute straight trying to impress upon them the importance that they not go anywhere, but as Wynonna pointed out, they weren’t going to remember anyway.

“What does torches in the woods mean?” Nicole whispered. Wynonna leaned against the side of the shack, while Dolls watched the little half-finished garden and the tree line beyond, his pistol at the ready.

“Hell if I know,” Wynonna whispered back. “Do you have signal? Try Waverly.”

“She was the one who thought will o’ wisp,” Dolls said, glancing over his shoulder. “So I second that plan. Call her. Keep it quick.”

Nicole nodded and dialed again.

“Talk to me.”

“More evidence in favor of your will o’ wisp idea,” Nicole said. “We’ve found the two debate team kids—both of them seem to have some form of amnesia. They’re confused and have no memory of who they are, how they got here, nothing.”

“The hell?”

“That’s kinda what we thought too,” Nicole said.

“Where did you find them?”

“Tiny shack on the north side of the lake. On the door is an L.”

“Lambda,” Wynonna provided.

“Lambda, sorry. Yeah. Greek L.”

“More Greek,” Waverly said. “I was afraid of that.”

“Why?”

“Well, just what that woman at the motel said. Calling you a messenger of Apollo, rather than calling you a werewolf. I’m thinking we’re dealing with something Greek, or at least something associated with Grecian myth. Which might poke a hole in the will o’ wisp theory. We might be dealing with something else.” Nicole heard Waverly’s pen scratching. “Jeremy? Have a look at this while I report back. Yeah, it’s urgent. Nicole, I have news on the motel front, actually.”

“Oh, perfect. What’d you find?”

“Ms. Aino Taika is the one who owns the motel, but here’s the thing. I can’t find any records dating back further than last December.”

“That’s impossible,” Nicole said. “I mean, this place looks like it hasn’t seen anyone more talented
than a handyman since 1978.”

“I’ll take your word for it, baby, but I’m telling you, there’s nothing. No census data, no zoning information, no sales records, no police filings, not even so much as an electric bill. I don’t think Crossroads Hill even existed before the Solstice.”

“Shit,” Nicole said, and Wynonna raised an eyebrow. “Which would seem to mean that whatever got into the Triangle on the Solstice is powerful enough to create an entire town from scratch.”

“Seems that way. Which, I mean, that’s not unexpected, since Taika recognized you on sight and all. Oh hang on, here’s Jeremy.”

“What?”

“Officer Haught! Hey.”

“Wh– uh, hey, Jeremy.” Nicole glanced at Wynonna, who pointed her finger to her forehead and mimed pulling a trigger. Nicole pressed her lips together in disapproval, then said to Jeremy, “What’ve you got for me.”

“It’s about the Greek symbol you found on the door,” he said. “You said it’s a Greek L. And the boys inside, they’re suffering memory issues?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, frowning. “Confusion, loss of memory... long-term for sure, maybe also short-term, we didn’t exactly stick around long enough to test.”

“That L might be an initial.”

“Okay, sure, but for what?”

“Lethe.”

“Lethe?” Nicole echoed, and Wynonna snapped her head around. “What?”

“The river in the underworld?” Wynonna asked, and even Dolls turned around to give her a funny look. “What,” she groused. “So I hung around in the Parthenon for a while and read a few books. I’ve been known to do that. Occasionally. Are you telling me Jeremy thinks that the lambda stands for Lethe? Like full on river of forgetfulness, Lethe?”

“Yes exactly,” Jeremy said in her ear. “I think whatever’s going on, I mean, Greek myth is obviously in play, and all the pieces line up.”

“But a river can’t cross the border of the Triangle,” Nicole said. “Right?”

“Well, it wouldn’t really be the first time. There was an incident in BBD filings from several years ago involving a manifestation of mud and cow viscera as a vessel for the spirit of the Chicago River, but I think what we’re dealing with here is probably more in keeping with some kind of derivative. The Greeks did love their water spirits. Not to mention their love of poetic justice.”

“Okay, you lost me,” Nicole said, trying not to think very hard about the picture Jeremy had just painted. Mud and cow viscera was not a phrase she was going to be able to forget any time soon. “How is this poetic justice?”

“Strike two debate team champions down off their high horses with amnesia? I’m just saying, if this is some Greek underworld figure out for a little fun and payback with the power to inflict
forgetfulness and confusion on high schoolers, then. That’s a good place to start.”

Nicole frowned, thoughtful. “I suppose, yeah.”

“Hey, Waverly has more, I’ll put her back on.”

“Thanks, Jeremy.”

There was a moment of shuffling sounds, then a clicking noise, maybe as one of Waverly’s rings struck against the phone’s case.

“Hey baby.”

“Hey. What else do you have?”

“It’s about Ms. Taika. Something’s bothering me.”

“About her being here?”

“She doesn’t fit in this puzzle yet. Taika isn’t a Greek name. Or at least not one that has any place in mythology, that I can find.”

“Well that doesn’t make any sense.” Wynonna shot Nicole a quizzical look and she waved a hand to stall the question.

“Not if we assume Taika is Greek, at least.”

“But if she isn’t Greek.” Nicole rubbed her thumb into the spot between her eyebrows, trying to stave off a headache. “This could be more than one creature, working in tandem?”

“It’s possible. Taika could be something completely unrelated, an illusionist maybe.”

“So she makes the town, and then our Greek justice-junkies lurk in the forest.”

“Could be. Or, it could be Taika is just an alias. It’s not even a proper name, but a word. It’s the Finnish word for spell. Like magic.” Nicole heard pages flipping. “Finnish for ‘spell or rune.’”

“That could explain the brooch.”

“My thoughts exactly. I’ll keep looking, in the meantime. Be careful.”

“Always, baby. Talk to you soon.”

Waverly hung up and Nicole pocketed her phone.

“So we’re potentially dealing with some kind of creature of the Olympian Underworld,” Dolls said.

“Looks that’s our best guess for the moment,” Nicole said. “Well, Wynonna? Can Peacemaker take down Greek myths?”

Wynonna considered the question, then shrugged. “Hell if I know.”

“Boy I love working with BBD,” Nicole muttered. “Y’all are geniuses of strategy.”

Dolls smirked and checked his pistol. “Let us not forget that Nedley gave you this case.”

Nicole sighed. “I know. Well, into the forest we go, I guess. And if you see torches, uh. I guess,
don’t look at them. And especially don’t follow them.”

“Not a chance,” Wynonna muttered, tucking a thumb into her ammo belt. “Let’s go.”

The woods yawned before them, the dead trees jutting out like jagged, crooked teeth. Wind whistled among the trunks, but there was no sound of birds or other critters, only the far-off voices they’d heard before, crying out in pain or wailing with some unknown agony.

“Well,” Nicole said, and pushed her hair behind her ears. She let her vision turn, golden sight piercing the midday gloom of the forest. “Sounds like fun.”

“Very cheery,” Wynonna said, agreeing, and followed when Nicole strode forward, across the tree line.

Dolls, muttering under his breath about hylophobia and how he’d never had to face it so many times in such a short span during any other period of his entire life, took up the rear-guard, keeping his eyes roaming the woods.

As they crept into the forest, the temperature shifted, growing slowly warmer. The barren, wind-worn trunks of leafless deciduous trees gave way to a bizarre blend of fir, cypress, and poplar trees, all of which seemed to be, if not exactly in full bloom, definitely out of place.

“Are you seeing...” Nicole muttered, glancing over her shoulder.

Wynonna nodded, her lips pressed together into a thin line.

“I don’t suppose these trees look familiar to you,” Nicole whispered.

“It’s all Greek to me,” Wynonna quipped, and rolled her eyes when Nicole fixed her with a glare. “God, do none of you have a sense of humor? Yes, all right, yes, I think these are varieties I saw while I was traveling.”

A young man, his voice still cracking, screamed, somewhere alarmingly close by. The three of them froze in place, and Nicole and Wynonna stared at each other, struck silent. For a long moment each of them said nothing, just scanning the trees around them. Now that the foliage was thicker, it was harder to see, and Nicole made good use of her wolf’s sight.

“That was close,” Nicole whispered finally. “Really close.”

“No kidding,” Wynonna whispered back, but there wasn’t much heat in it. “Let’s go.”

They crept through the trees with even more care, and Nicole led them on a more winding path. She took advantage of the bed of freshly fallen needles from the mysteriously transplanted fir trees, using them to soften their footsteps.

Finally, where the trees opened up again into a shaded glade, they found two encampments. The first, nearer to them, was an amphitheater in the ancient Grecian style—a shallow earthen bowl carved out of the rock itself, forming benches and stairs leading down to a central stage. Decidedly not in the Grecian style, however, was the fact that the stage appeared to be flooded, all the way up to the first row of seats. Two boys, one wearing what was clearly a costume toga, the other wrapped in a rainbow pride flag, were in the water on their hands and knees, weeping openly, occasionally letting out unearthly, yet somehow horribly human, wails, as if stricken by a despair more piercing than any natural emotion.

The second scene, further away to the left of where Nicole was hiding with the others, was more
grisly. It was a fenced enclosure, almost like a horse paddock, in which the last two missing kids were trapped. One was wearing the tattered remnants of a hockey sweater with the Blue Devils' mascot on the front and his number on the back, while the other was wearing what looked, to Nicole, like a nondescript varsity jacket. Both were bloodstained and torn open in great slashes, as if someone had slashed them open with a sword. The boys, too, bore signs of abuse. Their faces were almost unrecognizable for smeared blood and bruising, and the hockey player, which Nicole presumed had to be Jac Michaels, seemed to have suffered a broken forearm, and he was hugging it to his stomach to protect it from further damage even as he and the varsity boy—Dennis Arden, Nicole reminded herself—ran sprints back and forth across the enclosure.

Shadowy shapes lurked along the sidelines, perhaps balancing on the fenceposts, or merely walking the edges of the fences like horse trainers, Nicole couldn’t be sure. Even with her better sight, the shapes were elusive, almost translucent. But every now and then, one would raise a ghostly limb and what appeared to be a weapon, made solely of smoke, and then snap it down with the sound of a bullwhip cracking. As if it were a real object, a matching strike would appear across one of the boys’ shoulders or back, and he would cry out, screaming and stumbling to one knee before springing back up to continue the drills.

Hanging from the paddock gate was a sheet of metal, on which was painted another Grecian character.

“Okay,” Wynonna whispered. “Now that letter’s a—”

“Alpha,” Nicole whispered back. “I know. I did go to university.”

“Oh god, please tell me you weren’t...”

“No.” Nicole’s mouth twisted into something like a smirk. She’d been approached by a few sororities in her time, but it had left a sour taste in her mouth for reasons that had nothing to do with the girls who invited her. “I never pledged.”

“Phew,” Wynonna said. “To be fair, you don’t really strike me as the type.”

“Maybe not,” Nicole noted, forcing a bit of levity into her voice. Later, she’d find the way Wynonna had blundered into this particular conversation a bit funny. Maybe she’d even tell Waverly about it. She’d probably laugh. “But it all just felt a little too much like a cult to me. I tended to take the stance that I hadn’t escaped one just to join another.”

For a moment, Wynonna just stared at her, her eyes a bit wide, which was pretty much the closest Wynonna Earp could really come to acknowledging that she’d known better and had stuck her foot in it anyway. Dolls, wisely, kept his mouth shut tight.


Nicole flashed her a little smile, if just to convey no harm done, and nodded at a little wooden sign by the amphitheater. “What’s that one.”

Wynonna looked over again. “Kappa.”

“Oh,” she whispered, looking at each in turn again. “Got any ideas?”

“Well if we’re still talking Underworld rivers,” Wynonna said, narrowing her eyes as she surveyed the horse paddock with the bleeding hockey players inside it. “I’m thinking that’s Acheron, the river of pain.” As if on cue, Arden screamed and hit the ground. “And that,” Wynonna continued, pretending that the display hadn’t rattled her as she turned to look toward the amphitheater again,
“Is Kokytos. River of wailing.”

“The river of wailing,” Nicole echoed.

“It’s more impressive in the original Greek,” Wynonna offered, bristling at Nicole’s implication that the Greeks had not been very original when laying out their Underworld.

“Three of them,” Nicole grumbled.

“Hold up,” Dolls said, his eyes on something within the glade. Nicole turned and looked, and where before there had been empty space between the amphitheater and the paddock, now three women were standing in a little cluster.

Wynonna’s hand snaked to cover Nicole’s mouth, and just in time, because she let out a small, but decidedly audible little sound of anger, muffled by Wynonna’s glove.

“Sorry,” she whispered, when Wynonna finally dropped her arm. She glanced at Dolls. “I didn’t hear anything.”

He grunted, but kept his eyes on the women.

The most prominent of the three stood in the center and had to be at least seven feet tall. All three of them were beautiful, but the tallest was a dark-skinned goddess of a woman, wearing a black toga that draped from her shoulder like a shroud. It somehow called to mind a funereal robe and a leather harness all at once, and her long dark hair fell in elegant curls along her bare shoulder.

Standing to her left was a woman tragically beautiful, and also somehow beautifully tragic, her face drawn and statuesque in an expression of something like grief. Her toga wasn’t black and funereal, but fell in stiff, almost shifting sheets of cold blue that seemed to reflect light back in purples and greens, like the aurora borealis at night, icy and unforgiving and so very sad.

The third reminded Nicole of the quintessential Hollywood ingénue, all blonde ringlets and flawless porcelain skin. She was beautiful, but somehow evoked the idea of a blank slate, as if her head was quite empty, ready to be filled with whatever was required of her and then emptied again when she was no longer needed. Her robe wasn’t quite a toga at all, but something in that style, all white ruffles that somehow seemed like soft sheepskin, or perhaps actual clouds.

Each of the three of them held, in one beautiful hand, a flickering torch.

“Come on out,” purred the tallest.

“Please don’t leave us alone like this,” sobbed the second.

“We’ll have fun!” laughed the third.

“Oh,” Wynonna said, as they each fought the urge to step out of their cover at the tree line. “Shit.”

“What?” Nicole hissed.

“Waverly owes the Fuckup Jar a dollar,” she said. “They’re not river spirits, they’re Lampades. Nymphs from rivers in the Underworld.”

“Great,” Dolls growled, all but vibrating in place as several different urges struggled for dominance over him. The urge to run out of the woods was rapidly losing ground to the urge to do as the nymphs asked and the urge to stay exactly where he was.
“That sounds bad,” Nicole said.

“We said,” snarled the first Lampad, which Nicole decided with some confidence must be a nymph of the Acheron. “Come on out.”

The wolf snarled as a power older even than she pulled at the three of them, and they stumbled into the grove. Dolls hit the ground on his knees, but by force of will and spite, respectively, Nicole and Wynonna kept their feet.

Acheron’s nymph smiled, her teeth perfect and flashing brilliant white against her dark face. “There you are,” she murmured. “How good of you to finally join us.”

“We were getting lonely,” said Kokytos’ nymph, her lips curling in a horribly pretty frown, her perfect face streaked with tears. “Won’t you stay with us?”

“Oh it’s perfect,” cooed Lethe’s nymph. “They even brought three of them. It’s like they knew!”

“Which one do you want?” Kokytos’ nymph asked, sounding a bit sullen.

“Who picked first last time?” asked Lethe’s nymph, giggling. “I forget.”

“I did,” said Acheron’s. “Kokytos, why don’t you go first this time.”

Kokytos handed her torch to Acheron, who waited, and then she swept closer to the group. “Hm,” she murmured, pausing for a moment in front of Dolls. She crouched down to look at him on his level, and Nicole snarled, baring her teeth.

She expected surprise, or fear. Usually when she showed her teeth to supernatural creatures they were either weaker than her, and alarmed, or they were more powerful, but aghast that she would dare threaten them.

She had not expected apathy. She had not expected to be ignored.

Kokytos continued examining Dolls, looking into his eyes.

“Not this one,” she said, turning back to look at her companions. Her sisters, maybe? “He doesn’t speak to me.”

Acheron nodded. “He seems more Lethe’s type.”

“I agree, he is full of thoughts,” she said, with a sigh as if the thought held no particular interest to her. “And there’s something underneath. Something that might be compelling, if she set it free.”

Kokytos stood and stepped past Nicole entirely to stand in front of Wynonna, and Nicole moved to take a step forward, to block Wynonna from the Lampad’s stare, but she couldn’t seem to move. She struggled, as if against some unseen force keeping her in place, and growled.

Wynonna, for her part, was merely staring, meeting the nymph’s gaze eye for eye and waiting.

“This one doesn’t speak to me either,” Kokytos said with another, rather melodramatic sigh. “I think she’s yours, Acheron. She has so much turmoil in her. She’s been through much.”

“Are you sure?” Acheron said, with the patience of long rehearsal. They’d had this conversation before. “You do always love the ones with history.”

“Not like this,” Kokytos said, and stepped away from Wynonna to stop in front of Nicole. She
firmed up her will, readying herself for some kind of mental assault or emotional magical working. The nymph met Nicole’s eye, and something happened she couldn’t have prepared for.

It didn’t hurt.

More to the point, it all stopped hurting. All the pain she carried with her, even the ones that were so ingrained she didn’t notice them anymore, fell away. The grief for Mikael, for the family she could no longer go home to, for a marriage that ended before it even began. The buried memories of shame, of guilt, brought on by the actions she couldn’t remember while the wolf was in control. The anger, at Shae, at her father, at herself. The physical pain too. The tiny, ever-present ache in her shoulder where Shae had bitten her. The silvered scars in her chest, her leg, her gut. All that pain sloughed away from her like water.

For once in so very long, she felt nothing.

The nymph didn’t say anything to her, but she didn’t have to. Nicole knew, somehow, deep down, that the only thing she needed to care about was the face before her, so beautiful and so unreachable. So gentle, and so uncaring. Looking into Kokytos’ eyes was like looking into a deep well. A flickering, distant pool of cold greyish-black, shifting and dancing as light played across the surface.

She heard the click-click-thunk of the hammer on Wynonna’s old Colt revolver ratcheting back, and those cold dark eyes slid away from her to fix on the gold glowing barrel of Wynonna’s gun.

The pain came roaring back, so much worse now for the momentary reprieve. The physical pains were shadows next to the emotional ones, stacking up on her shoulders like stones. For a moment, she expected the wolf’s rage, but whatever the nymph had done, it had affected them both. The wolf was quiet. Subdued and a bit tired, weighed down under her own confused grief.

Nicole sucked in a shaking breath and realized that she could barely see through a haze of tears. Her face was wet, and when the breeze shifted she felt the air against the cold wet tracks on her skin where she’d been weeping: down her face, along her neck, even down to the hollow of her throat. Dolls hooked an arm under hers and hauled her back to her feet, though she couldn’t remember falling to her knees.

“Fool,” sneered Acheron, who had surged forward to shield Kokytos from Peacemaker, but she started to laugh. “You cannot touch us while our mistress protects us!”

“Wanna bet?” Wynonna said, narrowing her eyes down the barrel of her gun. “Touch my werewolf again and we’ll see.”

The nymph laughed, and then changed. Acheron’s beautiful face contorted in an inhuman rage, her jaw unhinging to bare long, needle-sharp teeth.

She lunged toward Wynonna, and Peacemaker’s hammer struck with a hollow boom that echoed in the enclosed woods.

Acheron recoiled, screeching like some horrible, enormous bird, but even as Nicole watched, the entry wound in the nymph’s face began to heal over.

“Shit,” Wynonna said, though that seemed a comical under-estimation of the case.

“Time to go,” Dolls said, raising his voice into something just slightly calmer than a shout.

“What about the kids?” Nicole asked, though she let him tug her backward as the nymphs
regrouped. Acheron returned Kokytos’ torch and they surged together, their bodies roiling and shifting as they prepared for pursuit. Nicole wiped at her face as he started to pick up to a jog, Wynonna keeping pace beside them.

“We’ll figure that part out later!” Wynonna said. “Run first!”

Nicole stumbled over her own feet as she spun around to run, her mind racing. They’d walked for probably near a half-hour to get this far, and this was thick woods, supernatural in nature. The Lampades definitely had home field advantage, and they were liable to be much faster than a human runner. And that was even without considering that in their group, they had a pregnant woman. Who while still more than capable as the Earp Heir, might not be best suited for long sprints.

But Nicole did have at least one card up her sleeve.

“Keep going!” Nicole said. “I’ve got an idea!”

For once, they didn’t question her. Dolls and Wynonna just ran.

Nicole had never really tried to shift mid-run before, it couldn’t be that different, right? She pressed her thoughts against the wolf’s, explaining in ideas, more so than in words, what she had in mind. The wolf, her pain and grief rapidly being replaced with more familiar rage and battle-lust, surged into the gaps, almost in sync with her.

The change was almost seamless. Almost. Main body and legs first, matching organs as close to the same moment as they could. The thought of having a heart or lungs too small for the body and the exertion involved was terrifying, but she refused to think about that. It took a little more thinking, but with her brain and the wolf’s instincts, it actually worked pretty well. She did stumble once, and took out a fir sapling with one big shoulder, but it didn’t slow her down. Much.

Dolls never looked back, but Wynonna did when there was a horrible sound of tearing fabric and of a leather boot hitting a tree trunk. Nicole howled, doubling over onto all fours to pick up speed, and within a few more seconds she’d caught up alongside Wynonna.

She snarled, bending down as low as she dared while still maintaining her pace.

“If we survive,” Wynonna said, but whatever her threat was, Nicole didn’t hear it. Somewhere entirely too close behind them one of the nymphs shrieked, and Wynonna screamed out something that was probably supposed to be a battlecry, and jumped.

For a terrifyingly long second she was neither on the ground nor on Nicole, but simply a body in motion. And then she hit Nicole’s back and slid half a foot, her gloved fingers scrabbling to find purchase in Nicole’s fur. Once she had it, she hauled herself up a little higher, looping her arms around Nicole’s neck for leverage.

“Dolls!” Wynonna yelled, and Nicole stretched her stride a little longer, eating up the last few meters until she reached Dolls. He took one look at them and swore, fluently, and then leapt up beside Wynonna in a nimble jump, resting on Nicole’s back with his knees placed right between bones, to avoid digging too hard into her.

Wynonna, braced by one arm around Nicole’s neck and one of Dolls’ arms around her waist, turned around and raised Peacemaker, its barrel aglow and emitting that faint, metallic hum that Nicole had heard before.

She fired it, once, and one of the nymphs—Kokytos, Nicole thought, by the sound of her voice
—screamed in pain, the sound haunting and echoing through the woods.

Finally the tree line opened up before them and Nicole burst out of the woods into open sky, the sun pouring down on them as she kept running, tracing the route they’d taken to get here without so much as slowing down. They blew past Lethe’s little shack, sending up clouds of dirt and loose powder as they raced along the edge of the lake.

“Are they following?” Dolls asked, his head ducked down while he focused on holding onto Nicole and Wynonna both.

For a moment Wynonna was quiet, waiting, but then she called out, raising her voice over the sound of Nicole panting and the rolling drumbeat of her paws pounding into the earth and snow, “No! They stopped at the tree line!”

Only when they were on the other side of the lake, where they’d started, did she slow down, easing back from a dead sprint to a loping run, then a jog, then a walk. “We’re okay,” Dolls said, patting her shoulder. “We’re okay, Haught.”

Finally she stopped. The two humans slid from her back, and she let herself sit back on her haunches, then drop onto her belly like a dog, panting. She was hungry, thirsty, terrified, and really fucking sad, and only a couple of those were things she could solve. The wolf echoed the sentiments, uncharacteristically silent and stalwart in the wake of... whatever it was Kokytos had done to them.

“Now what,” Wynonna said.

“Now we figure out who their mistress is that’s protecting them,” Dolls said.

“Great.”

“After you tell Waverly that Nicole just lost her phone in the woods. Those nymphs are clever. They might try to trick her by calling her from Nicole’s phone.”

Nicole groaned and rolled onto her side, letting the snow cool her down.

“Didn’t you just replace your phone like, last week?” Wynonna asked her. Nicole heaved a sigh and covered her face with one big paw, and Wynonna laughed. “I hope you had it under warranty, pooch.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should offer a disclaimer that Nicole Haught's opinions on sororities are not meant to reflect my own...

Also this thing hit 200k this chapter. What the hell.
“Nicole,” she said, as Dolls was starting the engine and heading back toward Crossroads Hill proper, back to Ms. Taika’s motel.

“Yeah, Earp.”

“Well, first let’s focus on getting back to the motel. Get some coffee, maybe. Warmth and new clothes will probably help.”

“Good,” Dolls said finally. “You’ll need to be careful. We don’t know if it’ll have lasting effects.” Dolls said, all business and practicality. His eyes were on the road, but Nicole could feel that his attention was entirely on her.

“So, Wynonna,” Nicol said, in an absolutely unsubtle move to change the subject. “You’re our resident expert on these Lampades. Who could this mysterious mistress of theirs be?”

“Oh like I know that offhand.”

“Or?” Wynonna prompted.

“Not the way you’re thinking. She didn’t do anything to me. She just—” She tried to put words to it. “Showed me something. Something uh. Something that would be nice. But that can’t ever be true. It’ll hurt, is all. But it won’t keep me from fighting.”

In the rearview mirror she saw Dolls frown. Even Wynonna was uncharacteristically quiet.

“Nicole,” she said, as Dolls was starting the engine and heading back toward Crossroads Hill proper, back to Ms. Taika’s motel.

“Yeah, Earp.”

“Are you okay?”

Nicole pressed her lips together. The question burned, somehow. She wanted to think, just for a moment, that it was because she knew Wynonna didn’t care. That she was just satisfying protocol. If she cared, it was for Nicole as a comrade.

But she knew that wasn’t true.

“Did it look that bad?” she asked, trying to grin.

Wynonna didn’t smile back.

“Yeah, it did.”

Nicole felt a little of the wind sap out of her sails.

“Oh,” she said.

“Yeah, it did.”

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“Oh like I know that offhand.”

“Oh for—” Nicole sighed. “I dunno, Google it or something?”
“Why don’t you? Oh wait, cuz you managed to lose another phone. In the woods. However, as it so happens,” Wynonna said, before Nicole could start contemplating how much jail time she’d get for strangling an extremely pregnant woman. Wynonna stuck her phone back over her shoulder, showing Nicole a text conversation where the contact name was just the emoji version of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Nicole choked on a laugh. She could see the end of Wynonna’s wordy and confusing explanation of what they’d found in the woods, but the part she was clearly supposed to read was the response.

Waverly had sent two texts back. One was a long and effusive string of profanity, including a few phrases that actually made Nicole blush. The second was just one single word.

“Hecate?” Nicole read aloud. “Mother of—”

“Magic,” Dolls provided, cutting off Nicole’s own profanity. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, but it vanished as a thought occurred to him. “And unless I’ve forgotten something, the goddess of—”

“Crossroads!” Wynonna provided, full of faux cheer. “Yup. Goddess of magic and crossroads. That’s our big bad, hiding somewhere in this town that she probably just. Like. *Made.* Because she’s a fucking *Greek goddess* and, I dunno, she can just do that shit.”

“Oh,” Nicole said, letting out a heavy breath. “Taika. Waverly said it’s the Finnish word for *spell,*” She leaned forward, looking at Wynonna, and Dolls glanced toward them. “Taika is Hecate. She’s gotta be.”

Dolls looked out the windshield again and abruptly slammed his foot down. The brakes bucked and kicked back at him as the tires dug into the thin layer of snow covering the road, sending up puffs of powder and steam as frozen water hit hot rotors.

Wynonna cursed and threw both hands out to brace herself against the dashboard as Nicole jerked forward into the empty space between them, dragging her head up to see what had made Dolls stop.

A dark-haired woman, standing in the middle of the road, wearing a red suit.

Nicole growled, the sound coming out entirely too animal. Her vision tinted gold, throwing Taika—Hecate—into sharp relief against the snow. She could see the silhouette of her yew and belladonna brooch. She could see the slim cut of her suit jacket, the crisp line of her black skirt where it came to her knees. Wind made the trees beyond her wave, and flicked her dark hair about. For a moment it whipped across her nose, and Nicole could see something more in her, something deeper, like looking down into a hole and glimpsing the point where it broadened out into a cavern. Any doubts she had about the woman’s true nature vanished. This *Ms. Taika* was old. Very old. So old it defied comprehension.

“Yeah,” Wynonna said, her own voice rough with feeling. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Wynonna pushed the car door open and reached back, opening the rear door. Nicole slid out of it, keeping the blanket around her shoulders.

Hecate looked at her, and smiled that dazzling smile she’d worn in the motel.

“So!” Wynonna said, sauntering out to step in front of the car. Dolls opened his door and stood behind it, pistol at the ready. As Wynonna moved, Nicole kept pace with her, prowling beside her step by easy step. Wynonna stopped in front of Dolls’ fender, spinning Peacemaker idly on one
finger. “You’re to blame for all this.”

“The Triangle so jealously guards its secrets,” she said. “The walls were down. I wanted to see what was inside. Call it... professional curiosity.”

“So the kids,” Wynonna said. “That was just, what, collateral damage?”

“My servants grew restless,” Hecate said. As if summoned by her words, Nicole heard the distant, birdlike shrieking of the Lampades. She didn’t dare take her eyes off Hecate, but she flicked her ears.

“Six o’clock!” Dolls called. “50 meters.”

“Four against three,” Wynonna noted. “I like those odds.”

Hecate laughed. “I assure you, if we must come to blows, the dead will rise to my call. I have an army, Heiress.”

“Yeah?” Wynonna scoffed, and gestured to Nicole with Peacemaker. “Well, we have a Hulk.”

“Earp,” Dolls called, drawing out the word to express his displeasure. He was shifting a little on the balls of his feet, trying to keep his pistol on all three of the Lampades at once. “What does that mean.”

“Oh hell if I know,” Wyonnna snapped, glancing toward him before focusing on Hecate. “But I promised Jeremy I’d say it.”

“You have a thousand dog jokes, but you’ve never seen—okay, nevermind.” Nicole shook her head. “Movie night. ASAP.”

Nicole reached out to the wolf. She was there, as quick as breathing, warm and expectant, arms outstretched like a mother waiting for the school bus with a plate of cookies and a cup of milk. It was the fastest change they’d ever made. Fur burst from her skin, the shift sliding through her from head to toe like a ripple through the surface of a still pond.

By the time the blanket hit the snow behind her she was all werewolf. She fixed cold caramel eyes on Hecate, digging her claws into the packed layer of snow beneath her. Twelve feet of muscle and tooth and claw, primed for a fight and crouched beside Wynonna. Even on all fours she was taller at her shoulder than Wynonna, and she let out a thunderous, rumbling snarl that actually puffed Hecate’s hair back over her shoulders.


“Thank you!” Wynonna flashed her a beaming smile and turned, pressing her hand to Nicole’s ribs, her fingers carding into the thick fur there as the tips of her gloved hands slid across the sleek muscle just under the skin. “We rather like her.”

Nicole grunted, baring her fangs at Hecate.

“Dolls, how ya doin’?” Wynonna called.

“They’re holding.”

“Hey Nicole,” Wynonna said, conversational. “Let’s make a snow angel.”

She pulled her lips back into a toothy grin, and crouched, coiling to jump.
“Oh what a lovely idea,” Hecate purred.

“Quick,” Wynonna said, so quiet it was barely a word at all. And on that command, Nicole leapt forward, paws pounding into the snow.

It all happened so fast.

One second she was running the short distance between them, claws out, teeth bared, ready to pin the woman to the snow and hold her steady so that Wynonna could get Peacemaker into position.

The next, Hecate’s hands were sliding through her fur, stroking across her cheeks, Hecate’s thumbs tracking just below Nicole’s eyes. It was a warm gesture, almost gentle, but it carried something else with it. Her hands looked red in the corners of Nicole’s vision, giving off a haze like smoke, maybe, or like the fog coming off dry ice. Whatever it was, it soaked into her fur, into her skin, and she crumpled. She felt weak, as weak as a blind, mewling puppy, and she fell into the snow in a heap. Her muscles seized indiscriminately, uselessly, making her convulse and shake. Her vision blurred, going dark, and she sucked in a huge, desperate breath, if just to stave off suffocation. Her head was spinning and her stomach churned unpleasantly. Her chest ached, and the thump of her heartbeat was slow, too slow.

Oh god, she thought, the idea somehow frantic, urgent, but also very far away, like she were outside her own body, recognizing the problem from a distance. I’m not breathing.

It was a strange thing, to be suddenly so horribly aware that you could breathe, but that you weren’t. Her airways were clear, her throat wasn’t closing off—she ruled out anaphylactic shock, in that tiny part of her brain that was trying to figure out what was wrong with her—but the automatic, thoughtless act of operating her lungs wasn’t automatic or thoughtless at all. In fact she had to think, consciously, about every breath. In, and out. In, and out. In, and out.

“What did you do to her?” Wynonna snapped, but she didn’t think Wynonna had moved any closer. Pinned, then, between where Dolls held off the Lampades, and Hecate herself.

“Oh,” Hecate said, as if she had already forgotten about it. Her voice got a little louder, and Nicole was vaguely aware that the woman had turned to look down at her where she lay on the ground. Hecate’s face was as distantly, horribly beautiful as ever. “That? Just a little spell. Don’t worry, it’s temporary. Provided we resolve this diplomatically, at least.”

“What did the spell do,” Wynonna said, grinding the words out between clenched teeth.

“Emulated the effects of wolfsbane,” Hecate said. “Don’t worry. She’ll be quite all right, once I release the spell. Why don’t we chat about this, Heiress? It seems you’re quite set on sending me away.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Wynonna said, raising Peacemaker. The barrel hummed, but the sound of it was almost quiet. Cautious. Like even the gun itself didn’t like the plan.

“Please lower that,” Hecate said. “It’s rather undiplomatic. And my servants so hate a failure of diplomacy.” Beyond Dolls the Lampades cackled in high, bestial voices that made Nicole’s skin crawl under her fur.

“Is it about the boys?” Hecate continued, when Wynonna had rescinded the threat. “I’m surprised at you! I never took you for the type to care for the welfare of teenagers. They’re monsters at this age, you know. Have you looked at this generation?” She scoffed, waving a perfectly manicured hand. “By turns they are as cruel as they are kind; as wise as they are fools. They are called lazy by
their elders, while they work harder than any generation in a hundred years, for less in compensation. And yet in the same breath, they so blatantly reject all that has come before them that they court failure because they cannot, will not, learn from past mistakes. They are a generation of contradictions, useless and useful in equal measure. My, but how Hermes would adore them.” Nicole focused on breathing, but watched as Hecate propped her hands on her hips. “At any rate, if you simply must have them back, I suppose I can have my servants return them.”

“I would,” Wynonna said. “They’re a bunch of assholes, or the kids of assholes, but they’re my assholes.” Recognizing how that sounded, Wynonna added, with a bit more haste, “I mean, they’re my townspeople.”

“I see.”

Wynonna glared at her. “Listen, lady. Not even gods get to barge into the Ghost River Triangle and do whatever you please.”

Hecate’s smile seeped into her voice. “I would require a bargain struck, of course.”

“Careful, Earp,” Dolls said.

“You stand at a crossroads,” Hecate said. She stepped toward Wynonna, her elegant boots crunching in the snow. Nicole struggled to make her eyes focus, the picture they showed her swimming golden and blurred. “So many choices before you. So many paths crossing and diverging. You have much to offer me, Heiress.”

“If this is some vague cryptic bullshit about how you want my firstborn, you can stuff it, lady.”

Hecate laughed. “Not at all, dear. Firstborn hardly have the value they once did. The market’s positively flooded.”


“I want what I have always wanted,” Hecate said. “Power, Heiress.”

“Stick around, lady. A goddamn revolution’s coming.”

Hecate laughed. “Perhaps. Well then, Heiress, what do you say? What do you choose?”

If she hadn’t already been struggling to breathe, the thought I’ve heard that before would’ve punched the air from her.

Nicole choked on a sound that was almost, almost a word.


“If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Nicole Haught,” Wynonna said, “It’s that she kinda doesn’t know when to shut up.”

Nicole wheezed, and sucked in a new breath, even as Hecate glanced, intrigued, toward Wynonna.

“But,” Wynonna added. “She usually has important things to say.”

“I see,” Hecate said. “Well. Then as a gesture of goodwill,” she said, and waved a hand.

The wolfsbane spell, Nicole noted, did not go away. She coughed up blood, feeling like something
was stuck in her throat, but the blurring of her vision faded, just a little, and she picked up her head. The wolf pushed against her thoughts and she opened her mouth. Words poured off her tongue like water every time she exhaled. Her voice didn’t sound like hers, but had become a heavy, rasping growl.

It almost sounded familiar.

Almost like the voice of a lawyer in a suit and a golden collar.

“There is no stopping it,” the wolf growled, locking brilliant golden eyes on Hecate. Nicole dragged in another breath and the wolf continued. “There is an evil loose in the sanctuary that will have its way.” Nicole coughed, shivering, all her skin prickling uncomfortably. Hecate watched her with a cold, cold frown. “There is only the effort to be made.” Nicole looked toward Wynonna, who was watching her with an expression of something like horror. “And the choice.”

Hecate made a low, displeased hissing noise deep in her throat, and took a step toward Nicole where she lay in the snow.

“Those are not your words,” she said. It wasn’t quite an accusation, but almost. “They ring with a wisdom that is not yours.”

“No,” the wolf growled, agreeing. She was trembling, though not from cold. “But I think you know exactly whose they are.” Hecate looked ready to rip out her tongue. “You cannot change the outcome, torchbearer. The Oracle has already decreed it.”

Hecate sneered and turned back, and found Wynonna raising Peacemaker again.

“Stop. Hurting her.”

Hecate smoothed out her features, schooling her expression to something neutral again. “Of course,” she said. She waved her hand again, and the speech spell disappeared. The wolf was weak, impossibly weak, but she wrapped herself around Nicole like a living blanket, and they collapsed together back to the earth, trembling and cold despite the fur.

“What was that she said,” Wynonna said. “Whose words were those.”

Hecate ran her hands through her hair, stalling as she considered her answer.

“It seems,” she said finally, with the magnanimous tone of a king who has decided to spare a knight who has aggrieved him, “That Fate’s strings pull even here, in so desolate a place.”

“Any time you feel like talking sense, that’d be great,” Wynonna said. “I’ll wait.”

Hecate sighed. She fixed a mild glare on Wynonna, and snapped her fingers. In the time it took for the echo to fade, the Lampades were gathered behind her, torches in hand, obedient and silent. The three nymphs were as beautiful and unattainable as when Nicole had first glimpsed them through the trees.

“We return to you your townspeople,” Hecate said. “If an Oracle has already foretold what is to come... there is nothing you can offer me that inevitability has not decreed you will use. Though it chafes, I am as much a slave to Fate as you, Heiress.”

Wynonna’s expression did not waver, but something cracked in it, and she steeled herself, bracing her feet better in the snow.
“And you.” Hecate turned around to look down at Nicole, a lofty derision creeping into her voice. “You fool, Apollonian. Take care, in the future, before you go off repeating the words of an Oracle to anyone you please. Those words have weight. It’s quite rude to go throwing that around on whoever you meet.”

She waved a hand, and the wolfsbane spell slid away like water dripping off a roof. Nicole gasped in a breath and choked on it, rolling over onto her side and curling up around her sore and aching body.

“So you’re... leaving.” Wynonna said, cautious. “Because Nicole quoted some freaky prophet at you?”

“I am leaving,” Hecate insisted, “Because the Apollonian has brought the Night Mare’s final prophecy over the border of the Triangle. It is no longer within my power to interfere.” She glanced at Nicole, watching as she rolled over and came up on all fours beside Wynonna. Still wheezing, and not exactly her most threatening, but standing all the same. “Fate smiles on you, it seems, Heiress. Though for every gift it grants, Fate also takes. And it seems Fate means to take quite a bit more from you before this is done.”

Nicole bared her fangs, but lowered her head when Wynonna smacked a fist into her shoulder.

“Until next time,” Wynonna said, covering her apprehension, as usual, with dry wit.

“Oh I doubt we’ll meet again,” Hecate said, with a wry smile. “But then, there is a bit of me at every crossroads. And it seems you’ll find many, many more of those before long.”

Hecate turned, and the Lampades fell into a loose half-circle behind her. She took only three steps, and then the image of her spun, and distorted, and vanished into thin air. The Lampades followed, and before Nicole had even really blinked, they were gone.

“The hell does that mean,” Wynonna said, and frowned up at Nicole. “You okay?”

Nicole grunted in what was supposed to be the affirmative, but she still felt a bit woozy, and she promptly sat, leaning her shoulder against the hood of Dolls’ car.

“Right.” Wynonna said, throwing her hands in the air. “You’re the very picture of health. At least you won’t be hungover this time.”

Nicole grumbled and bumped her nose into Wynonna’s chest, knocking her back a step.

“Dolls,” Wynonna said. “Look, as much as I don’t like the idea of leaving the kids in the woods.” She paused, thinking, then frowned. “Who am I kidding, I love that idea. But seriously, we should head back to town. I think Nicole needs like. I dunno, a nap or something.”

“Fine. We’ll stash her and come back for the kids. Need more space in the car anyway,” he said. “Get her in.” He slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine, and Nicole, with Wynonna’s comically irrelevant hand on her arm, crawled back into the car, downshifting as she went until she sprawled in the backseat of the car. Wynonna tossed the blanket over top of her, then closed the door and got back into her seat.

“Hey,” Nicole mumbled, as they headed back toward town.

“Hm?”

Nicole snaked a hand out from under the blanket and poked at her duffel bag, which was sitting in
the footwell, by her head. “My stuff.”

Wynonna looked over her shoulder, then frowned. “What the hell?”

Dolls slowed the car and looked too, then propped himself up to look into the back. “Yeah, our bags are back there.”

“Let’s figure this out back in town,” Wynonna said.

The longer they drove, the more the effects of the spell faded, and Nicole finally sat up, holding the blanket around her shoulders and peering out the window. When they got back to where Crossroads Hill was, it, well, wasn’t. Just undisturbed snow and old, half-rotted fencing as far as the eye could see. They reached the highway, where it should’ve pulled off into the tiny stopover, and Nicole rolled down the window, sticking her head out and trying to find some evidence the town had ever been there. Dolls slowed to a cautious roll through what would’ve been the main intersection. Nicole pulled herself back inside before Wynonna could comment on it, and started poking through her bag to fish out a new set of clothes.

“Uh. Okay, here’s my phone,” she muttered, scooping it up out of her bag.

“The place is just straight up gone,” Wynonna said, stunned.

“Oh,” Nicole said, and sighed. “Of course it is. Waves said this place didn’t exist. You were right. Hecate made it, but now that she’s gone... poof. There goes the town.”

“Like it never existed, because it didn’t,” Dolls said. “Hey, look over there.”

Further off, roughly where the motel parking lot might have been, sat four cars. Two sedans, two pickup trucks.

“Are those?”

“The missing cars,” he said, pulling over to what should have been the fuel station. “Right where the motel used to be. Wynonna, phone Nedley, and let’s go see if the kids are in there. Nicole, you change clothes.”

“Sure.”

Wynonna dialed, and got out to follow him. Nicole squinted through the snowy terrain once she was dressed, and saw Dolls opening the front door of Troy Brooks’ silver Mazda. A young man stepped out, yawning and visibly stretching, and she recognized him from Kokytos’ amphitheater. With a rather bewildered look on his face, he shook Dolls’ hand, and then Dolls moved onto the next car.

When they came back, he climbed into the driver’s seat and scanned the windows.

“All accounted for?” Nicole said, rubbing one of her eyes with the heel of one hand.

“All there, all in one piece.”

“Mostly,” Wynonna replied, sliding into her seat as she hung up her phone and pocketed it. “Michaels, the kid with the broken arm. He doesn’t remember how, of course, but it sure is broken. Nedley’s sending some cruisers and a med team, so he wants us to sit tight till the cavalry gets here.”
“Cool,” Nicole said. “Till then, I’m gonna take that nap.”

She didn’t really wait for approval, and lay down across the backseat, curling up so the blanket covered most of her.

“What a day,” Dolls said, his voice a low rumble.

“Yeah,” Wynonna said, sounding both amused and a bit tired. “Fate. Damn.”

“Don’t worry,” Dolls said. “Whatever’s coming, we’ll be ready.”

“Yeah,” Wynonna muttered. “That’s what worries me.”
It took longer than Nicole expected it would to untangle all the lingering pieces of what had happened. Parents had questions, of course, though Nedley took care of those with one of the classics from the Purgatory Sheriff Department playbook: just a gang of drifters from the next province, playing a prank on Purgatory locals. The kids are all right, discounting one minor injury, but we’re handling communications with the province the gang was from, and we thank you for letting us handle it and not pressing the issue beyond being glad that it’s resolved.

The second day of that, Waverly came looking for her in the morning, just a bit after dawn. She found her groggily making coffee in the kitchen, and Nicole yawned as Waverly walked in. She added sugar to her mug, and maybe if she’d been more awake, she’d have noticed that Waverly actually closed the kitchen door behind her.

“Hey hon,” Nicole said, stirring her coffee. The spoon clinked against the mug, each impact almost musical. When Waverly didn’t answer, she looked up, concern creeping in and cutting through her tired fog. Waverly was standing on the other side of the island, wringing her hands together in the hem of her jacket. “You okay?”

“Just. Um. Worried.”

“About what?” Nicole asked. She smiled. “If it’s about me, I kept my promise! I didn’t get hurt.”

“No, it’s not that,” Waverly said, then stopped short and shook her head, forcing a genuine, if short-lived, smile onto her face. “No, I mean, that’s really good, baby. Thank you.”

“Must be something big,” Nicole murmured, releasing her spoon to move around the other side of the island and set her hands on Waverly’s shoulders. “What’s on your mind?”

“I told Wynonna. About the not-an-Earp thing.” Her gaze tracked everywhere—the fridge, the counters, the walls, Nicole’s mug, her badge. A couple times she looked up, but then away again, as if the only way she could express her restless energy was in her eyes. “Last night. She was um, she was setting up her ultrasound appointment now that you’re all back from the mission and she was talking about family history and...”

“And it all spilled out,” Nicole guessed, lifting a hand to tuck Waverly’s hair behind her ear. There was a hitch in Waverly’s breath that sounded so heavy. Like all the weight of the world was carried in just that single sound. The wolf hated to hear it, almost as much as Nicole did.

“Yeah,” she said. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. “God, I thought I was done crying.”

“It’s okay,” Nicole said, and brought her in closer, resting one hand against the back of her head, drawing her in until Waverly was against her shoulder. Waverly twisted and turned within her
grasp, burrowing in against her until her forehead was pressed into the side of Nicole’s neck. “It’s okay, baby.”

“I didn’t tell her about the forms. Didn’t tell her I’d heard back from one of them, either. And I didn’t mean to do it right after you guys got home, I just...”

“You’ve been carrying this for so long, Waves.” She inhaled, slow, and let it out, as an example of steady breathing for Waverly to key to. “That’s hard. That’s really hard. It’s okay if you couldn’t hide it anymore.”

“Can I come over tonight?” she asked. “I just don’t think I could be alone in the house with her tonight. I don’t know if she’ll treat me any differently but I just can’t do it yet.”

“If you’re sure it’s what you want,” Nicole said.

Waverly must have heard the note of caution in her voice, because her response came out a bit waspish. “I can make my own decisions, Nicole.”

The wolf whined somewhere in her mind, but Nicole pushed her aside and kept her voice calm, even. “Of course you can, baby.”

“Shit.” Waverly pulled away and looked up at her, really looked at her, for the first time. “Nicole, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Nicole said, and smiled. “You’re going through a lot.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, but she didn’t quite sound like she believed it. “Still.” For a moment, she was quiet, chewing on her lip. “Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“To come over tonight?” Nicole asked, bobbing her head. “I don’t think it’s a bad idea. But I also think it might be good to get Wynonna’s input. Plus...” Nicole pursed her lips, thinking. “What?”

“Suppose, worst-case scenario, you find out you’re not actually related to Wynonna.” Waverly’s face turned a bit ashen, and Nicole gently squeezed her shoulders. “Worst-case. Say that happens though. Do you want her not to be in your life anymore?”

“Oh course not,” Waverly said, with a passion that made Nicole smile. “She’s the only family I have left, Nicole.”

“Yeah. So don’t you think that maybe, just maybe, now it’s time to let the only family you have left see you through this? You can make whatever choice you please, Waverly, of course. But if I know anything about Wynonna, it’s that it would kill her to think that you don’t want to see her just because of this.”

Waverly inhaled, exhaled, and nodded.

“You also don’t have to decide right now,” Nicole reminded her. “You know where I live.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, you’re right.” Waverly chewed on her lip, then hazarded a smile. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll decide later. I’ll text you? But right now I’m leaning toward staying at the Homestead.”

Nicole grinned and kissed her forehead. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Are you okay? You said you didn’t get hurt, but.”
Nicole thought, for just a moment, of Kokytos’ trick. Of how it felt, just for a second, to live without pain. Of how it felt to be normal.

Just for a second.

“I’m okay,” she lied.

“You sure?” Waverly asked, mouth twisting into a frown. “You don’t really sound it. Or look it. You look beat, baby.”

Nicole let out a breath and looked down at where Waverly’s hands had curled around hers. When it rains, it pours, and she didn’t really want to admit that Kokytos’ trick had kept her up the night before.

“Something happened up north, but. I’m still working through it.” Waverly frowned, and Nicole shook her head. “It’s a minor thing, baby. Promise. I’ll tell you about it, I just want to get it straight in my head first.”

Waverly gave her a look of slight skepticism, but nodded. “Okay. Just so long as you promise.”

“I do.” Nicole grinned. “I keep my promises, baby.”

When she got home, Waverly had decided to stick by the plan where she’d stay at the Homestead. That didn’t come as a surprise, and in fact made Nicole smile. She knew Waverly would make the right call, and while she sure did want to see her again, she knew it was going to be important that Waverly stay close to home, at least for a little bit.

What was surprising was a box, a bit bigger than a shoebox, sitting on her doorstep. She frowned, eyeing it from her seat in her cruiser. There was only one box she was expecting, and if that was it...

Nicole scrambled out of her car and all but ran up her front steps, scooping it up off the ground and belatedly remembering to lock her cruiser’s doors. She turned the box over in her hands, making sure the tape didn’t seem tampered with, and then let herself inside, moving to set the box on the kitchen table to open. Calamity Jane was interested until she sharpened one nail to a wolf’s claw to slice open the tape, then made herself scarce.

With a little more caution, Nicole peeled back the cardboard and sniffed at the contents. She could detect nothing of concern. A note, hand-written on surprisingly elegant stationery, sat on top of a small wooden box nestled in crushed-up paper. She took out the note first, surprised to find it was written in a woman’s hand.

Moonsinger.

I will never forget the dust of my brother’s ashes on my fingers, nor that it was your kin that put it there.

But let it not be said that I do not keep my promises.

L

Nicole let out a slow, tense breath. If she had known, when she’d asked Mikael for a favor, that he would turn to his sister for help, she might’ve done things differently. But then again, back then
she’d never imagined Loretta von Holstein would want her head smoking on a silver pike.

She set the note aside and carefully lifted the wooden box free. The lid was engraved with what looked like a smith’s mark, something halfway between a signature and a logo. The empty cardboard shipping box she set on a counter, and then, with a reverence one might reserve for handling a bible, she eased open the lid.

Inside was a set of items resting on a velvet cloth. A leather scabbard, sized for a dagger. A set of straps that looked like they were made of similar leather. And a knife that positively sang with energy against her senses. The blade was pure silver, eight inches long, with a varnished wooden handle and a crossguard of thick leather strapping.

The wolf pressed, first against her, as she carefully picked up the handle of the silver knife. When nothing happened at the touch of her skin to the wood and leather, the wolf’s interest grew, palpable and excited where her consciousness pressed against Nicole’s. She passed it through the air in a lazy, cautious sweep, and then eyed the blade. She looked distorted and strange in the reflection, and the smith’s mark was repeated on the blade, right beside the leather guard. She picked up the scabbard, carefully sliding the knife inside until the leather strapping fit into the throat and held snug. She set the sheathed knife aside and picked up the straps next, and gave them an experimental pull. Though they looked like leather, they stretched easily, as if made of elastic. She grinned and released the tension, letting them shrink back to their original size: precisely the circumference of her calf.

Nicole started to put the straps down, then noticed a single remaining item in the box, which had been hidden under the straps. It was dark, almost blending into the rest of the velvet. The wolf recognized it first, suddenly very, very quiet in the back of her mind.

“Is that a playing card?” she muttered, aloud, and then sucked in a breath, almost feeling silly for having questioned it. She picked up the card and turned it over, and found exactly the card she should have expected to find.

The Ace of Spades.

The last time she’d seen this card, it had been in the dreamscape, watching it slip loose of Mikael’s wrist to rest in her lap.

“The ace up my sleeve,” she whispered, and somewhere in her chest the wolf was howling, a long, terrible sound—no, not quite a sound, but a feeling—that made Nicole’s throat go tight.

She strapped the knife into place around her right calf, perfectly hidden beneath the leg of her pants, and took the card into her room. She fished the box of cards out of her dresser drawer. She’d gone through the whole deck twice when she’d first received it, but it had never occurred to her to count the cards. Now she flipped through it one more time.

In the box were precisely 53 cards.

She put the ace back with its fellows and slid the complete deck into the box. On the inside of the top, just as she went to close it, she saw text, and looked more closely. In a deft, small script, inscribed inside the box, was a single phrase.

*Good hunting.*
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

Damn! This one took a while, both due to real life getting in the way and, well, the content itself being less than fun times.

Also, my apologies to Nicole, for posting this on her birthday. _>_ Sorry hon, but I didn't keep the receipt.

Some days, police work was exciting, validating, and generally made her feel good about her choice of career. Days like that, she remembered what it was that had drawn her to peacekeeping after her family and her father’s work had sent her running from home as fast as she could.

Other days, she thought the clock was moving in slow motion, determined to trap her in the bullpen until the next ice age hit.

This one fell somewhere in the middle. Enough so that she’d actually lost track of the clock for a while. That is, until Sarah spun around backward in her chair at the reception desk and scoffed at her, hands propped on her hips.

“Haught! The hell are you still doin’ here?”

Nicole laughed and tapped across her keyboard before she spared a glance toward the clock, then Sarah. “Yeah, yeah, I see how it is.”

Sarah wagged a finger at her. “That darlin’ Earp has been by our front door four times just this mornin’, so I am obliged to think that something is eating her.”

_Oh, something like that_, Nicole thought, but did not say.

“Just a date at Shorty’s,” Nicole said, saving the file she was working on and closing it. “It’s been a while, that’s all.”

“Hmph,” Sarah said, but smiled. “I’m heading out to get the post, mind waiting till I’m back?”

“Sure thing,” Nicole said. She finished tidying her desk and headed for the reception desk, generally trying to look like she wasn’t just sitting on her hands, even though she was. Thankfully Sarah didn’t take long, and came back in after just a couple minutes, shuffling through a few envelopes.

“Huh,” Sarah said, pausing on the other side of the counter. “Looks like this ought’a go to you.”

“Oh?” Nicole asked, leaning forward on the counter. She tried to pretend the thought of getting mail at the station didn’t fill her with dread, ever since the package from her father.

“Didn’t know Miss Earp was sending anything through us, but there it is all the same,” Sarah noted, and handed her a large white envelope.

“That’s odd,” Nicole said, but accepted it, scanning the front. It was indeed addressed to Waverly
Earp, care of Ofcr. Nicole Haught. “I didn’t think she’d be sending anything here either.”

The return address was a lab, in Calgary.

“Right,” she breathed, and pulled the envelope in close, pressing it to her chest before Sarah could read the sender’s name. “Thank you, Sarah. I’ll make sure she gets this.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow, but shrugged a shoulder. “Suit yourself then. Haven’t seen her in a couple hours, but if you’re seein’ her tonight, that’s all well and good.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, forcing a grin onto her face. “Yeah, I’ll see her in an hour or so. Don’t you worry. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

She hurried to her cruiser, but saw no one of note on her way outside. If Sarah had been telling the truth about Waverly, by now she’d cleared off, which was probably a good thing. She settled in the driver’s seat and pulled the envelope out of her bag, eyeing the lab’s name like it was going to divulge all its secrets if only she stared long enough.

Waverly hadn’t told her she’d sent out a sample. Wouldn’t she have said something? She frowned, chewed on her lip, and wracked her brain. Maybe she’d mentioned it. Hadn’t she said something about hearing back from one of the agencies, after they got back from Crossroads Hill?

Nicole ran a hand over her face and pushed the envelope under her bag on the passenger seat.

On the one hand, her next move was obvious. Give it to Waverly, and let her decide what to do with it.

On the other hand, Waverly had been so tense lately. So quick to anger, so easily driven to tears. If Nicole could gauge how the results would land, she could make a better judgement call about when to share that news with her, right?

God, what was she thinking. She started the cruiser and headed home, trying to wrangle her scattered thoughts. She spent the drive in a bit of a haze, and when she got to her driveway she tried to remember what route she’d taken, but came up with nothing. Damn, that wasn’t good.

She headed inside and focused on unpacking her gear. The envelope, for the moment, sat on her kitchen counter, haunting her even as she headed upstairs to shower and change clothes.

And when she came back down, purse in hand, she still wasn’t sure what to do.

What do you think, she thought, pushing at the wolf to rouse her from her late-gibbous-phase drowsiness.

The wolf’s thoughts were simplistic, but clear enough.

Whatever most protects Waverly.

Doubt prickled at the edges of her—thoughts, but Nicole picked up the envelope, cautiously plucked a letter opener from a kitchen drawer, and slit it open. She pulled out several pages of data, and ignored most of them, focused on the results on the front page.

“This doesn’t make sense,” she muttered, aloud. The wolf pushed at her thoughts, devotion slowly shifting toward fear. “Inconclusive findings...” She flipped through the data. “This doesn’t make any sense,” she said again, under her breath, but mostly for the wolf’s benefit. “Parts of this don’t even look human. But. That’s impossible.”
The wolf’s fear doubled, mingling with her own and rising to something that choked her breath off in her throat. The wolf’s feelings pushed hard against her own. She’d never felt her so afraid, so desperate. The weight of it dragged at her, her skull pounding with an overload of soundless volume.

*Can’t tell her. Will hurt Waverly.*

Somewhere deep down, she knew the wolf wasn’t using words. This was no dreamscape, as much as that thought appealed just now. This would be so much easier if it were just a bad dream. Instead, it was that she was using her words, borrowing Nicole’s fear to give a proper voice to her own. Nicole dropped the papers, half-listening to the fluttering, inconsequential sound of impact as they hit the floor. She pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead, trying to lessen the pressure of the wolf’s panic. “We have to tell her eventually,” she whispered, the sound of her own voice like a drop against an ocean.

*Can’t hurt her, can’t hurt Waverly. Can’t tell her!*

Nicole found the floor with her knees and leaned against a cabinet, wrestling with a fear that wasn’t hers but also was. The edges between their feelings, the strange cocktail of fear, guilt, shame, and regret, had blurred until she couldn’t find where she ended and the wolf began. She thought of what Dolls had said.

*You bleed into the wolf, it bleeds into you.*

“Okay!” she said. The pressure was shifting to her chest, pressing against her lungs to suffocate her as the start of a full-fledged panic attack. “Okay, okay, okay, we won’t tell her yet, we’ll find a better way to tell her!”

The pressure slackened, then faded back.

For a moment, it was all she could do to lean her hands on the floor and squeeze her eyes shut to block out the light and just breathe.

“We’ll find a better way to tell her,” she whispered, checking her face with a hand. Her fingers came away wet and she wiped away tears. She wasn’t sure whose they were. Maybe it didn’t matter. “But it has to be tonight.”

They met at Shorty’s, after the lunch crowd was pretty much gone. The envelope felt like a lead plate in her purse as she carried it, as she kissed Waverly beside the Jeep, as they went inside and ordered food and drinks.

The bar had never seemed so loud before. It wasn’t even that busy, just a couple patrons and Rosita working behind the bar, but the radio was playing and between her lingering anxiety and Waverly’s palpable low mood, everything seemed a little too much.

“Wynonna says she remembers them taking me home,” Waverly said, halfway into picking through her salad. It was the first thing of real substance she’d said since they arrived, beyond some idle chatter, and it caught Nicole’s attention. Even finally distracted her from the envelope sitting in her purse next to her hip, giving off an aura of evil so heavy she would’ve thought it was demonic.

Or possibly radioactive.
“Yeah?” Nicole asked, setting down her steak sandwich. It didn’t make sense yet how that could be true, but she sure wasn’t going to point that out. “Waves, but— that’s great.”


“That’s okay,” Nicole said, and reached out with one hand, stroking along the knuckles of Waverly’s hand where they were tense on her fork, tracing tiny ridges and valleys of topographical tension with her fingers. “It’s okay to still be processing.”

“I know, but, I’m here, with you. I don’t want to think about it, but I still am anyway.”

The wolf almost whined with their mouth but Nicole caught it and turned it into a strangled little, “Well, hey. Let’s uh, let’s do something. Something that isn’t just sitting here thinking about it.”

“Like what?”

“Hm,” Nicole glanced around Shorty’s and spotted the pool table. She gestured with a thumb and grinned. “Fancy a game?”

Waverly followed her eyeline, then snorted, almost a laugh.

“All right, all right. Let’s play.”

For a while, it almost worked, too. Nicole set her purse aside with Waverly’s bag and their coats, and she, eventually, stopped thinking about the time-bomb horrorfest sitting inside it. Instead, she tried to focus on her girlfriend.

Who, judging by the way she scratched the cue ball straight into a corner pocket, for the third time, badly needed her focus.

“Nailed it,” Waverly said, rolling her eyes.

“You’re lucky nobody saw that,” Nicole said. If the laugh in her voice sounded a little too forced, Waverly didn’t seem to notice, but to be fair, she didn’t have much energy to expend on deception—keeping the wolf’s fear to a low roar was taking up most of her background processes.

“You saw it,” Waverly muttered, handing her the cue once she’d retrieved the ball.

“Hey, well, I know why you were distracted.” Nicole said, leaning in a little closer to her to accept the cue. More’s the pity, the reason for that distraction was not the extra button Nicole had left open today. Waverly didn’t seem to notice, but to be fair, she didn’t have much energy to expend on deception—keeping the wolf’s fear to a low roar was taking up most of her background processes.

“You saw it,” Waverly muttered, handing her the cue once she’d retrieved the ball.

“Oh,” Waverly said, tapping out a nervous drumbeat on the edge of the pool table. “I’m hoping I won’t have to trust either.” Nicole started to bend over the table, but froze, and looked up and back at her. “I sent in a sample.” The wolf all but howled in fear somewhere in her chest, and she looked toward the table again, forcing herself to line up a shot and look natural. It was suddenly a lot harder to think geometrically. “Results should show at the Cop Shop soon. Didn’t want them going to the Homestead, though it hardly matters now.”

“Of course it matters,” Nicole said, way too fast, and she slid her gaze away from Waverly’s. “I.” She looked down. She couldn’t bear to see the look of tense unhappiness on Waverly’s face.
“Haven’t seen anything.”

“Ohokay,” Waverly said, and took the cue back.

“I mean, besides,” Nicole said, her mouth moving a step before her brain. “Are you sure you really wanna know?”

“No,” Waverly admitted, pausing at the other end of the table. “But if I’m not an Earp... I have to.”

She wasn’t sure whose heartbreak was louder, hers, the wolf’s, or even Waverly’s.

“In the meantime,” Waverly murmured, setting the cue down across the table and stepping a bit closer. She scanned the bar, but, satisfied no one was watching them, grabbed Nicole’s wrist and tugged her in close. It occurred to her that maybe it didn’t reflect well on her, that Waverly’s so blatant proposition had her switching gears so fast, but when Waverly ran her hands up Nicole’s sleeves, to rest on her shoulders, she didn’t really care. Nor did she care about the sound of boots on the steps down to the basement. “Why don’t you distract me?”

“Oh,” Nicole said, grinning as Waverly slid fingers through Nicole’s hair.

“Just the ladies I wanted to see!” Rosita said, announcing herself. Waverly froze, and Nicole, with a bit more effort than should be necessary, turned to look at her.

“So.” Rosita set a box of new bottles on a nearby table with a clatter of glass that made Nicole flinch. “I had an idea. About your sister. I think we should throw her a baby shower.”

Nicole thought in that moment, that in her entire life, she had never had to expend so much energy not to laugh in someone’s face.

“Seriously?” she managed to say. Even Waverly felt like she was trying to stifle some reaction, and Nicole looped an arm around her, resting a hand on Waverly’s hip.

“I’ll mix up some tequila-adjacent mocktails,” Rosita said, waving a hand, and Nicole couldn’t fault her for enthusiasm. “Hell, maybe even get a damn piñata!”

“Eh,” Waverly said, leaning into Nicole. “She does enjoy whacking things.”

Rosita made a face, as if she knew full well how insane she sounded. “Henry mentioned that she’s... having trouble seeing this baby as a blessing. I just wanna help.”

She lowered her gaze, and for a moment, Nicole had to bite down a wave of paranoia. Rosita was the member of their little... group that she knew the least about, and the only one tangentially connected to BBD who didn’t know her fuzzy little secret. And she wanted to keep it that way. So while she had no desire to get a little too fixated and start growling in public, she also found herself listening hyper-closely to the beat of Rosita’s heart and the pace of her breath, looking for cues that she might be lying.

Finding none, a wholly different thought hit her, encouraged—strongly—by the wolf’s own thoughts. A baby shower would be a perfect distraction from the envelope sitting in Nicole’s purse. She could always tell Waverly after. Right?

“You know, Waves,” she said, eyeing Rosita with only the slightest lingering bit of skepticism, “That is not the craziest idea in the whole world.”

“And it’ll show Wynonna that we’re here for her, right?” Rosita asked, way too quickly.
Now she did sound odd, but Nicole decided to let it go as anxiety about the whole complex mess that was Doc’s love life.

Waverly, however, was hardly one to miss a cue, and she glanced up from the pool table, tone dripping with a skepticism she managed to disguise as polite interest.

“We?”

“Okay,” Nicole said, cutting in. This idea was perfect, so she had to make sure it didn’t fail before it even started. “So what’s the cover? For the...” She waved a hand, to indicate her meaning.

“Surprise?”

Rosita opened her mouth, then shut it again, at a loss for ideas.

“Nachos,” Waverly suggested, and the wolf about leapt for joy that the ploy was working. “She’d never say no to nachos.”

Rosita grinned. “Girls-nothing-special nacho night it is.” Nicole smiled at her, wondering if her gratitude showed on her face. “I’ll get on it,” she said, picking up the box again to head back to work.

“Ohay,” Waverly said, bewildered. “Guess we’re doing this. We. Huh.”

“I guess it gets tiring,” Nicole mused, watching Rosita bustling around the bar. “Pretending not to give a shit that your boyfriend slept with Wynonna Earp.”

“I guess,” Waverly said, and shrugged. “Well, what do we do now? I mean we didn’t exactly have day plans, but still.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Nicole said, and headed over to the bar, motioning for Waverly to stay put a moment. Rosita came back over and leaned in close, close enough that the wolf got a little antsy about personal space.

“Sorry,” Rosita said, in a stage whisper. “I’m not very good at conspiratorial talk.”

Against her better sense, she chuckled. “Fair enough,” she said, in the same obviously audible tone. “Listen, want us to go get decorations?”

Rosita considered that a moment, then grinned. “Yeah, actually, that’d be great. Saves me drowning in streamers.”

“You bet,” Nicole said. “I’ll leave the piñata wrangling to you though, I think.”

Rosita winked and offered a mock salute. “I am an expert piñata wrangler, never fear.”

“Ohay,” Nicole said, and headed back to Waverly.

“What’s the plan?”

“You and I,” Nicole said, setting her warm hands to frame Waverly’s face. It earned her a softer look, something like a smile. “Are gonna go get decorations. We’ll meet back up with Rosita later today. Sound good?”

On the rare occasions that Nicole allowed herself to be particularly dramatic, she thought there was a part of herself that had died when Shae bit her. Not a very big part, but an important part. The part that had liked social get-togethers. The part that liked drinking with her friends, playing board games drunk and arguing harmlessly over the results well into the early hours of the morning. The part that had dreams of a job as a detective and a house and a wife.

The part that believed there were still good things, really, truly good things, in the world. Even in a world that allowed people like her father to run rampant.

Oh she still had her sense of good, that hadn’t gone away. She was, as Nedley himself had said, still a good cop. And it was awful hard to be a good cop without believing, at least a little bit, that all the evil the world could throw at you was surmountable, and that there were good people who needed a guardian against the dark, who needed good cops to push back the evil a bit at a time.

When Shae bit her, she’d lost a lot of that. She’d lost her sense of wonder, her sense of easy joy.

But looking around Shorty’s, hung with streamers and balloons and big colorful fluffy balls that had seemed sort of pointless when Waverly picked them up, she could actually remember a little of what she’d lost. She could remember the ease of it, the simple, stupid fun of it. She forgot about the envelope, she forgot about the silver scars on her shoulder. She forgot about all of it.

The front door opened, and Nicole blinked. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been standing there, mute and blind and very still, looking at the ceiling decorations like they held the answer to all life’s questions. Waverly came inside, and Nicole hastily set to work on one more set of streamers, winding them around one of the wooden columns near Shorty’s main bar.

“Did you hear back from her?” she asked, as Waverly set her purse on the bar and started shrugging out of her coat.

“I’ve set the trap with beef and cheese on tortilla chips,” she explained. “She’ll be here.”

Nicole chuckled. “You think she’s gonna like all this?” she asked, glancing up the be-streamered pole. “Or...”

“She’ll pretend not to,” Waverly said, her smile turning a little smug.

Behind her, Nicole heard the door open again and Rosita blew in like a storm, calling out ahead of her as if it were the announcement at some stately ballroom party, “A whole lotta piñata!”

Waverly’s breath caught and Nicole finally straightened, finished with pinning the streamer in place, and almost laughed at the sight of Waverly pointing, vaguely horrified, at Rosita’s prize.

“Are we gonna bash that?” Waverly asked, as Nicole turned and followed her. “It– it’s a baby!”

“Yes!” Rosita said, with a sly grin. “And this is a baby bash!” She leaned a little closer to Waverly, adopting her faux whisper again. “It’s filled with donuts.”

“I stand a zillion percent corrected,” Waverly said, as Nicole fought not to laugh. “Wynonna will love it.”

“Mm,” Rosita said, a bit too smug, and handed the piñata to Waverly, then the bat to Nicole. “Wait till you see the mocktail list,” she said, pulling off her jacket and heading behind the bar to whip up a batch.

Nicole gave Waverly a vaguely disturbed look, then set the bat on the bar.
“So,” Waverly said, eyeing the piñata and tugging at the crepe paper, setting it on the bar next to the bat. “She’s being real friendly all of a sudden.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said. “She seems to have gotten over the whole... Wynonna may be carrying her boyfriend’s kid thing.” She fetched the step ladder and shrugged one shoulder. “But! Good for her, cuz’ like it or not, you guys are all kinda in this together.”

She climbed up to the first step, and Waverly handed her the piñata to hang.

“Well she’s hardly said one word to me before today.”

“Well, hey!” Nicole said, pausing as she stepped up to the second step. “Maybe she’s intimidated, okay?” She grinned. “You Earps are a party that’s tough to crash. It’s hard not to feel like an outsider, even for me.”

“I’m the nicest person in Purgatory,” Waverly objected. “There was a vote.” Nicole focused on hanging the piñata, and it was a damn miracle she didn’t laugh herself off the ladder when Waverly added, sounding ever so slightly petulant, “I got a sash.”

As it was, she chuckled, and carefully climbed back down. “Okay, well, all I’m saying is I remember what it feels like. To be...” She cast around for the word she wanted. “New. And I wasn’t sleeping with Wynonna’s baby daddy. So.” She grinned as Waverly rolled her eyes. “Hey,” she said, and pressed a kiss to Waverly’s forehead.

“Well that would’ve been awkward on a lot of levels,” Waverly noted, as Nicole put the ladder aside.

“Yeah.”

Waverly heaved a sigh. “Okay, I promise to try.”

“Pregatini?” Rosita offered, and Waverly turned toward her. Nicole busied herself with a last few decorations, but listened in, trying not to look like she was listening.

“Sure,” Waverly said, after looking and recognizing that Nicole wasn’t coming back in the immediate future. “Why not. This baby isn’t gonna bash itself.”

“Mm, d’you mind if I...” Rosita said, and there was a sloshing-clap sound as she tossed a bottle of tequila in the air and caught it. “Cock up these mocktails?”

“Please, cock away,” Waverly said, and Nicole tried not to laugh at the irony in that statement and give herself away.

Rosita chuckled and uncapped the tequila, pouring some. Waverly said something to her, something so quiet even Nicole didn’t quite hear, and she almost chuckled—she’d been found out at last.

“10-4,” Rosita murmured, though Nicole couldn’t say for sure why. “I like this Waverly.”

The time of their nacho night’s start came and went, and Waverly’s insistence that Wynonna would show proved in vain. Rosita, however, turned out to be as good as her word where her skill at throwing parties came into play, and plied Waverly and Nicole both with decidedly non-non-alcoholic beverages. Nicole wasn’t exactly keen to object—besides which, even if she drank as much as they did, it wasn’t liable to touch her.
What was touching her, to her slight shame, was jealousy. Rosita and Waverly were getting along great. Not a surprise, given Waverly’s uncontested status as the nicest person in Purgatory. But Rosita, it turned out, was a rather warm, affectionate drunk. Whenever she set a hand on Waverly’s shoulder or her arm, Nicole felt the wolf stirring, like hackles rising even though she didn’t have fur.

All this led to a somewhat unfortunate result. Nicole, sitting alongside them, and feeling a little bit like an unplanned designated driver as they played the second drinking game of the night.

“Never have I ever swam naked in the ocean,” Rosita said, pouring another shot to replace one of her missing ones. “Waverly?”

Waverly leaned her head back, groaning. “I’ve never even seen the ocean.”

“Neither have I,” Rosita complained, as Waverly scoffed.

“Oh! You girls need to get out more,” Nicole told them, as they both knocked back their shots. Waverly grimaced, at the burn of the tequila, but smiled at her.

“Mm,” Rosita said. “Why— why don’t we play Pregnant Pictionary, hm? Hope you’re as good at drawing a placenta as I am!” She slid off her chair, grinning. “Waves, grab a pen!”

“Mm!” Waverly said, picking up her second shot. “On it, I’m on it!”

The wolf rumbled in her chest, but it was lost under the music on the radio as Nicole glanced aside, unable to keep herself from muttering, “Waves, huh?”

Waverly grunted, setting down her empty glass. “Rosie’s so much fun,” she said, and Nicole watched the warm, goofy smile on her face. “I’m really happy for her and Doc.” She turned, twisting to reach for her purse. Nicole had a hand out even before she’d really started to slip, but Waverly squeaked, startled, and Nicole grabbed her elbow, helping her back up, bag in hand.

Only it wasn’t Waverly’s bag.

“Oh,” Nicole said, stumbling through words. “Uh, just— well, uh—”

“This is your purse,” Waverly said, only noticing as an afterthought, but she had her hand on the edge of the white lab envelope.

“Yeah,” Nicole said. She wiped her palms on the legs of her jeans.

Waverly pulled it out and examined the front. “But. This is my DNA test.”

The wolf was silent, waiting, tense as piano wire.

“You said it hadn’t arrived yet,” Waverly said.

Nicole tried to pull words to mind but all she could hear, beyond the surreal, rushing sound of her own blood pounding in her ears, was Shae’s voice in her head.

*When you find someone who accepts your crazy, you shouldn’t let go.*

“Well have you... have you opened it?” Waverly asked, her voice so thin, so hoarse it was almost inaudible.

Nicole glanced down at the envelope.
Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Because I love you.”

The words spilled out, unplanned, unchecked, unmitigated disaster. It was true, god, it was true and she hadn’t even really known it, hadn’t understood it until she said it, but it was the absolute wrong thing to say and that was written all over Waverly’s face.

“Are you serious right now?” Waverly spluttered, standing, taking a step up, away. She grabbed at Nicole’s bag, almost putting the results back into it before she realized it was the wrong bag and stopped.

“Because I was trying to protect you,” Nicole said, trying to fix it.

But that wasn’t right either.

“Or control me,” Waverly said.

“Once you look, you can’t unsee the result,” Nicole said. Rosita was still on the other side of the room but she kept her voice low.

“I don’t need you to make decisions for me,” Waverly said. “Okay? I’m not a child, Nicole.”

A thought hit Nicole like a knife, slicing in between her ribs. After everything with Dolls, with Doc, with Wynonna, every command she’d chafed at, every demand she’d bent under, every protection she’d rejected...

After all that, Nicole had done the exact same thing.

“From the look on your face,” Waverly said, her voice cracking. “I’m not an Earp either.”

She bent, grabbing up her bag, and as she snatched her coat off the bar, Nicole finally found her voice. The wolf shored her up when the words almost wouldn’t come out as something audible.


“Don’t follow me,” Waverly snapped.

She swept by Rosita in a rush, and Rosita paused, turning to watch her go.

The door slammed shut behind her.

“Who doesn’t like Pictionary?” she asked, hollow. It was a poor attempt, and she knew it just as much as Nicole did.

Nicole turned away from her, struggling not to let the wolf’s whine come out as anything more than a quiet, half-stifled sob.

“You uh. You okay?” Rosita asked.

“I fucked up,” Nicole said, almost a breath. “God, I fucked up so bad.”

“Yeah,” Rosita said, turning to look toward the door. “Okay, well, that’s something that can be fixed. You wanna talk about it?”

She showed Nicole the bottle of tequila, waggling it enticingly.
“Rosita,” Nicole said, but couldn’t quite look at her. “I’ve got nothing against you, but—”

“It’s cool,” Rosita said, shrugging. “I get it. We’re like three steps removed, it’s no big deal.”

Nicole wiped at her face and nodded. “If it’s cool with you—”

“No worries, I’ll clean up. This whole debacle was my idea, anyway.”

“No, um,” Nicole shook her head. “Listen, busy work will help. Could you just uh.”


“Thanks.”

Rosita headed toward the stairs, though she paused on the first step, hand on the railing. “Hey, but if you don’t mind me saying so?”

Nicole looked toward her, but didn’t say anything.

“She’ll come around. I mean, she’s like the nicest person in Purgatory, right?”
This was not Nicole’s first rodeo where “being in the doghouse” was concerned, literally or otherwise. Hell, it hadn’t even been that long ago that their roles were sort of reversed, even if a lot of that had been fabricated to help keep herself away from Lucado’s aura of nosiness and general obstreperousness. Still. She’d upset girlfriends before, and she’d ridden out the initial phases of frustration and anger to get to the “can we just talk about it” stage. That was usually where she could fix things—repair or restructure or revise, whatever it was that was needed—and get things flowing in the right direction again.

After an entire day of Waverly ignoring her texts, calls, and actually turning around to avoid her in public spaces, Nicole was forced to conclude that Waverly knew that about her, and was using it against her. If they couldn’t talk, Nicole couldn’t make any effort to fix anything. Waverly wanted, at least for the moment, for things to stay shaken up and cracked. She didn’t want it to be fixed at all.

Which, for Nicole, was frustrating.

But it was devastating for the wolf.

That first day after the baby shower, she wasn’t sure the wolf was ever going to stop crying. Not only was it depressing, tugging at her own despair and amplifying it to more than double, but the low, crooning howl resonating in the back of her mind was distracting as hell.

“When,” Nicole said, when she finally snapped. They were—she was sitting in her cruiser in a speed trap outside town on one of the coldest days of February thus far, with pretty damn close to nothing to do or distract her from the anguished moaning. “Please just stop. I’m upset too, okay?”

The wolf, to her credit, stopped howling. She made what Nicole could only describe as a quiet snuffling noise, and finally came to rest. Sulking, but quiet, at least.

“You weren’t this bad about Shae,” Nicole grumbled, rubbing her eyes with one hand.

The wolf made an absolutely unimpressed sound at her, which she took to be a stand-in for something like well that was different.

“True,” Nicole offered, scanning the road. “If Shae was mad, it was tooth-and-claw combat I had to worry about, not a cold shoulder.”

The wolf made a faint grumbling noise, like a big dog who’s been denied a favorite treat, but settled down and kept her mouth shut for a while.

Until that night, when inexplicably, in the middle of a very weird dream about chasing rabbits that all had Jeremy’s face, each of them muttering about the impracticality of pocketwatches, she chased one Jeremy-rabbit through an open doorway and found herself instead standing, dressed for once, in the Platonic Ideal interrogation room. She looked to the side, expecting to find her uniquely canine attorney, primly dressed and legs crossed. Instead, she found an empty chair. Behind it, huddled in the corner under a nondescript but perfect video camera, was the wolf. The lawyer façade she’d adopted last time was there, but cracked and coming apart. Still her, but fracturing. A curtain of mussed, unkempt russet hair hid most of her face, which was dark with
grief and shadow like a disease running unchecked. Her clothes were tattered, torn in places as if she had been scratching at herself with her own claws.

“Oh,” Nicole found herself saying. Not saying, really, the word coming out on a slow, heavy breath. “Wow. Didn’t expect you to be going full on sackcloth and ashes in here, but I um. I stand corrected.”

The wolf flinched and tucked into herself even more, bringing up her hands to cover her face.

“You called me, remember?” Nicole said, gentle, like talking to a spooked horse. She took one step, then another, and the wolf slowly relaxed. “You don’t need to hide. It’s just me.” The wolf lowered her hands, and Nicole stepped forward again, then crouched down in front of her. Even in a human shape, the wolf was taller than she was, and even scrunched into a ball Nicole could feel how much bigger she was, how much more powerful and how much greater, both in strength and in her emotions. “Guess you wanted me to see how bad it is, huh. Well, uh, message received.”

The wolf watched her. Silent, languid. Drained.

Nicole raised a hand, moving with deliberate, telegraphed slowness. The wolf didn’t move or object, and Nicole carefully tucked long hair back behind her ear. The collar was still there, but the skin around it was red, bright and shiny, like a burn.

“Jesus,” Nicole hissed, pressing her fingers to the wolf’s face to tilt it, let the light show her the damage. “What is this?”

“Hurts,” the wolf whispered, so empty and tired that she didn’t even sound like herself. “Waverly hurts.”

“Yes, I know that, but that shouldn’t affect you, should it?” Nicole frowned. “What is this, some kind of wolves-mate-for-life thing?”

Her expression softened, brightened. “You understand!”

“No,” Nicole said, and pulled her hand back. “Come on, no. That’s ridiculous. What about Shae? Shouldn’t that have been your one-and-only? We’re still legally married. Kinda thought that was it.”

“Shae?” The wolf snorted, a sharp, derisive little sound that actually made Nicole jump. “No. Didn’t choose Shae.”

“She sure chose you,” Nicole muttered. “Us. I dunno. Whichever.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Nicole eyed her. “Are you actually gonna sit there and tell me that even among werewolves, consent is—”

“Don’t make fun,” the wolf grumbled, her voice regaining some of its usual growl and gravel. “Mate is a choice from both sides.”

“Then...” Nicole hesitated, and a thought made pain curl up in her gut and tighten everything up to a pinpoint of physical sensation. “Then she chose too. Or it wouldn’t hurt you so much.”

The wolf’s irritation subsided, replaced all too easily by sorrow. “Yes. She chose too.”
“Oh,” Nicole said, feeling a bit like a week-old balloon.

“Fix this,” the wolf said, all the gravel gone, subdued down to something so negligible she almost sounded human. Not demanding, but pleading.

“I will,” Nicole said. “Okay? I will. But. Listen, girlfriends do fight. Mates. Whichever. It’ll happen. That’s not something that’s just magically never going to happen because I’m a huge animal half the time.”

“Obviously.” The wolf huffed out a breath and waved a hand that was rough and bloodied, like she’d been scratching and punching at the walls. “Fighting is different. This is...” She frowned, at a loss for words. “It’s different.”

Armed with new but decidedly vague knowledge, Nicole set herself to the task of fixing this. Whatever the hell that meant.

To her slight discomfort, “whatever that meant” apparently meant lurking outside BBD’s office waiting for Waverly to get done with a training session with Wynonna and Dolls. They’d been at it for barely more than twenty minutes when they started sparring, and Nicole had alternated between her desk and taking a bit too long getting coffee before her shift started.

All things considered, it was not one of her finer moments.

“I don’t wanna hurt you,” Waverly told Wynonna, and Nicole, having finally elected to just give up pretending she wasn’t waiting for them and take up a spot leaning against the wall beside the BBD door, briefly contemplated barging in to question who the hell had the idea to let Wynonna spar. Wynonna, who was looking about ready to give birth in days, not weeks. But her storming in would just kick everything off again. And being realistic, the question wasn’t who was letting her do anything, but who had the balls to actually try to stand between Wynonna and something she wanted to do.

“Oh relax,” Wynonna said, and Nicole could hear her grin even from outside. “Mama came to play.”

“Well, I got a big stick in each hand.”

“Been there, done that, ended up with tennis elbow.”

Dolls cut in next, over a brief chorus of grunts and shoes squeaking against gym mat foam. “Nice,” he said. “Solid. Keep the enemy in mind.”

More sounds, more squeaking. Waverly shouted with effort on what Nicole imagined was a particularly vicious swing.

“Bitches in black!” Wynonna called out, echoing Dolls’ instructions. Nicole could hear them both panting. “Demon Clootie! Kegels.”

“Oh, nice,” Waverly noted.

Another moment of quiet as they circled each other. Waverly swiped and weaved and Nicole tried to remember if her father had ever called the demon Clootie before. Was that just a local name? A nickname to dodge his hearing? Worse, could the demon hear that name just as well as his hellfire name?

“Nicole Haught, two days ago?” Wynonna prompted, with a slap like of a hand on skin. Nicole flinched.

“What?” Waverly gasped, one shoe scraping the mat as she regained her balance. “I don’t hate Nicole, we just had a fight.”

The wolf whined at that, but Wynonna said nothing. Nicole heard a shoe scrape on the mat and then there was a heavy thump and a cry, more surprise than pain, as Waverly fell.

“Mmm!” Dolls chided. “Let your opponent get into your head. This happens? You’re a goner. Boom.”

“Awww, baby-bump-apology,” Wynonna said, after helping her up, then cackled.

“Hey,” Dolls reminded her. “You need to learn this, okay? Cuz the Widows are not playing to lose.”

“Well, hell hath no fury like two bitches whose demon husband got shot by your.” Wynonna paused, evidently rethinking. “Ancestor. Sounded a lot snappier in my head.”

Ancestor? she thought, but the wolf was as clueless as she was. Whatever had kept Wynonna from the baby shower had apparently paid dividends on the intel front. That hurt, somehow. If they hadn’t been fighting, chances were she would have been updated on all this already.

“You know, I still can’t get over Constance being their sister-wife,” Waverly mused. “Her outfits were so fiercely non-polygamous.”

“And turns out she was the nice one,” Wynonna said. “Demon Clootie rises, the other two are going to wreak havoc. So much revenge.”

“We have to find the third seal,” Waverly said, all resolve and fire.

“Uhhh, yeah,” Wynonna said, drawing out the words. “I’m. Gonna put a pin in that.”

“What? We don’t have time to put a pin in anything.”

“Just the tip.”

“Hey,” Dolls said, cutting in, “I think it’s best that we stick—I mean. Focus. On the uh, Widows.”

“Uh, do that,” Wynonna said, “I need a favor.”

“Yeah. Anything. What’s up?”

Wynonna cleared her throat. “Uh... the night off?”

“Why,” Dolls said. “Is it because of the whole—”

“Dying and coming back to life?” Wynonna asked, and hopefully none of them heard Nicole choke on her own breath. What? “No, I’m just glad I didn’t reincarnate as a dung beetle.”

“Yeah,” Dolls said, chuckling. “Me too.”

“Yeah, I’m... gonna need the house, too,” she said, to Waverly.
“More nesting?” Waverly asked. “I just think we’ve hit maximum capacity in the decorative pillow department.”

“Okay fine, listen,” Dolls said, presumably to extract himself from an estrogen-laden conversation. “Everyone will have the evening off.”

“Boom shakalaka!” Wynonna said, cheering, and high-fived Dolls, but almost immediately thereafter, protested with a loud “Hey! After we finish training, quitters. Come on! With great belly comes great responsibility. Eyes on the prize, peeps. Eyes on the prize.”

It was a great deal later that Waverly finally came out of the office. She hadn’t changed, other than to throw a jacket on over her crossfit shirt, and the smell of her, all sweat and warmth and exertion, threw a handful of confusing, non-sequential thoughts at Nicole’s brain like spilling marbles in the middle of a Looney Tunes bit. Primed to slip and fall in a cartoonishly overplayed but, if she were lucky, ultimately nonlethal fiasco.

“Waverly,” Nicole said, springing up from the wall like it was a thousand degrees.

Waverly pivoted, saw her, and her expression flicked from self-satisfied to angry like a lightswitch. “What the hell, Nicole, are you stalking me now?”

She turned, heading down the hall toward the main doors, and Nicole followed.

“Come on, Waverly. Waverly.” She jogged up to walk beside her. “You know it’s not like that. If you want space I get it. We need to— I mean— I just want to talk.”

“Now you want to talk,” Waverly said, pushing open the station doors and heading down the steps. “Not when you first got my mail, of course, but now.”

“Waverly.” There were people, a little ways off, and Nicole ducked a bit closer to her as Waverly headed for her car, just to keep from making a scene. “I know I messed up, okay, but—”

“No, you don’t know,” Waverly said, turning as she got to her door. “And you don’t get it. I don’t want to do this yet, Nicole. I’m not ready to just talk it out and be done with it. I don’t want to hear your perfectly reasonable explanation, which I’m sure you have, because it’s you, and you always have a good explanation for what you do. I know you have one, but right now I’m still angry. And knowing that at the end of this you’ll have your stupid sensible reason makes me even more angry. I can’t turn that off right now, and I’m not ready to be done. So right now the only thing I need is for you to just back off.”

Nicole stepped back, and for a flash of a second she almost felt the burn of Waverly’s collar around her throat too. “Okay,” she said instead. “Okay. Sure.”

Waverly looked like she were on the verge of saying something else, but she just cursed under her breath and hauled herself up into the cab of her Jeep.

Nicole moved aside, stepping away from the car. Waverly started the engine without looking at her, and pulled away. Tires crunched in the snow, and Nicole directed her focus a little more inward.

“Wolves are patient hunters, right?” She felt her voice crack as she said it. “Like cats? So we just. We just gotta wait.”
She didn’t have to wait very long, but as had tended to be her luck lately, it was bad news. In the form of Nedley’s voice crackling over her car radio.

“Haught.”

Nicole frowned and reached for the display. “Go for Haught.”

“Nicole, we got something up in the mountains.”

She considered his phrasing for a moment. “Let me guess, it defies the list of police codes.”

“And they say Randy Nedley picks officers just for their looks.”

“No disrespect sir but it can’t be for their brains, or Lonnie wouldn’t have a job.”

“Ha ha,” he said, without a trace of laughter in his voice. “Sending you the details. I want your team on it.”

Nicole sighed and rubbed at her eyes with her thumbs. She didn’t have to ask what your team meant.

“10-4 sir. I’ll get them.”

She knocked on BBD’s door, though not out of habit. She didn’t really think her fight with Waverly would turn Dolls against her that fast, but there were mundane folks around, civilian and cop alike, and there was, after all, an image to maintain.

“Hey,” Dolls called, but not before Waverly muttered something so quietly she couldn’t hear it through the door. “Come on in!”

“Hey,” she said, letting herself inside. Waverly had changed clothes since the argument in the parking lot, but she was still cold, maybe even colder. Talking had, in this case, done the exact opposite of repairing any damage. “Sorry to interrupt...” Dolls, Waverly, and Jeremy were standing in front of a computer, watching a sports match. “Uh. Whatever this is.” She stopped next to the desk, unconsciously standing at attention.

Dolls noted her stance and met her gaze, visibly puzzled, and nodded for her to speak.

“A body’s been found.”

“Oh!” Waverly said, without even a moment’s pause. “You sure it wasn’t someone else’s body that you stole and hid because you thought you had the right to make that utterly not-your-decision?”

The wolf was howling for her to say something, anything, to make this better, but Nicole pushed her aside and kept her expression flat. The last thing she wanted to do in front of Jeremy and Dolls was drag on this soap opera display.

Jeremy, for his part, watched her reaction, then turned toward Waverly. “Why would Nicole steal a body?” Waverly’s glance and cold fake smile could have frozen an open flame. “‘Shut up Jeremy.’ Yup, got it.” He turned toward Nicole again, his face twisting with a very genuine sympathy that made it harder to pretend to be apathetic.

“You think this is a BBD case?” Dolls asked.

She thought of Nedley’s email, vague but also pretty specific about the jurisdictional issues. If it was weird, she was to hand it off. If it was murder, it was theirs. If it was both, well, that’s why she
was Purgatory’s unofficial liaison with BBD.

“I think it’s an *everyone* case.”

Chapter End Notes

Anyone want off this ride? Yeah, me too. :(  

Also, for your consideration: if I could get my ideal cast on this, I'd love to get Sharon Belle to be the dreamscape wolf. Cuz damn.
Waverly didn’t ride in her cruiser, which was neither surprising nor particularly abhorrent to Nicole. As much as she wanted to have a chance to talk, trapped in a car where neither of them could walk away if things got too hot was not going to do either of them any favors.

Besides, the wolf was still spending an awful lot of her time crying and pawing at mental walls, and that wasn’t going to win her any points with Waverly. The wolf was her problem, not Waverly’s problem.

The wolf scratched at the back of her mind, something that was almost painful, and Nicole hissed and settled both hands on her steering wheel. Dolls was driving behind her, and she didn’t feel like worrying the man any more than he already was by suddenly swerving on a snowy country backroad.

“I know,” she muttered. “But it’s not fair to tell her about what you showed me.”

More scratching, which she took to be the wolf’s version of why the hell not.

“I don’t want to be the kind of person who guilts her partner into being nice to me because my supernatural animal side is sad,” she said, watching the road with only half her focus. “Because that’s manipulative. It’s abusive. Or at best, it’s really easy for it to cross a line and become abusive.”

The wolf didn’t scratch this time, but she didn’t seem to quite understand the distinction, so Nicole chewed on her lip, looking for a way to explain it.

“It’s only a step removed from ‘don’t break up with me, without you I’d kill myself.’ Which is not something you do to someone you care about. You don’t threaten people to make them stay with you. Or at least I don’t. That’s not okay.”

She was met with quiet skepticism, and she sighed.

“You know who’s the kind of person to say ‘but my wolf will be so distraught without you! I don’t know if I can control her if you leave’?”

Skepticism shifted to wary interest.

“Shae.”

It was the conversation’s nuclear option, and as she’d expected, that got her wolf’s hackles up with distaste. As suddenly as it had started, the debate was over, her wolf pacing and grumbling—not at Nicole exactly, but at the very thought of becoming something that could be, or should be, compared to Shae and her wolf.

“Sorry,” she said, pulling off the road toward the flares the rest of PSD’s team had set up. “That was a low blow.”

She pulled up next to the coroner’s truck and for a moment, realized how crazy it was that she was apologizing for something she’d said to her wolf. If someone had told her back when she first got to Purgatory that someday that would happen, she’d have laughed in their face.

Dolls’ SUV pulled in alongside her cruiser and she got out to meet him, pulling on her ballcap and
waving as he and Waverly climbed down out of his car. The sound of their shoes crunching in the snow was almost cacophonous in the thin mountain air. The air was crisp, bitterly cold, and carried the scent of cigarette smoke, pine and fir, and distant game, too. She tucked her hair behind her ears, sniffing. Rabbits and foxes, mostly, but further away there was a small herd of caribou, probably spooked into new territory by the crime scene technicians and their vehicles. Crows and ravens were in attendance too, their voices ringing out across the silent, frozen landscape.

Most of the crime scene techs were clustered around the coroner’s truck, a few of them passing a cigarette lighter around, one of them occasionally talking into a radio and listening raptly to the crackling, haggard response. One of them pointed, but she didn’t really need it—the stench of burnt and rotting flesh was plenty strong.

“This way,” she told Dolls, leading across the snow and tire tracks to what Nedley had said defied categorization. He nodded, following, and Waverly came up behind him, silent and staring daggers into the center of Nicole’s back.

The trees fell away into a bit of a clearing, though whether it had been overly clear before the techs got there was anyone’s guess. Lying in the snow, amongst a small collection of evidence markers, was a body. Maybe around six foot, she thought. And so burnt they were probably going to need dental records to identify the poor bastard. Clothes and skin alike had burnt black and peeling, and she could smell the gasoline and lighter fluid from yards back.

“Whoa,” she said, walking closer to the body. She tilted her head, examining the bloodied, scorched mess. The skin had burned down to the bone, especially on the face, giving the corpse a ghastly, skeletal look. There was a glinting silver ring hanging from his neck that caught her eye. “Someone wasn’t taking any chances.”

“No kidding,” Dolls muttered, tugging a pair of gloves out of his coat pocket and pulling them on.

She crouched, sniffing at the body now that she was closer, then recoiled, gagging. “Oh Christ,” she said, scrambling away to get to clearer air.

Dolls grabbed her shoulder to steady her, and Waverly stayed a few feet off, watching. Nicole grabbed a handful of snow and pressed it to her face, using it as a filter, focusing on the scent of pine needles and that uniquely clean, damp smell of melting snow.

“What is it?” Dolls asked, as Waverly moved around them to look at the body.

“Vervain,” Nicole said, coughing. “Something on that body reeks of vervain.”

“Guess Nedley was on the right track calling us in,” he muttered, glancing over at the techs and then looking to her again. “You okay to keep going?”

“Yeah,” she said, rising and dusting off her hands. She reached for her own gloves. “Just won’t uh. Breathe very deeply.”

Waverly let out a heavy breath, compassion breaking through her cold façade for a moment. “Poor thing.”

“Hey, recognize this?” Nicole asked, crouching down again and reaching for the ring. “And that,” she said, pointing to a bit of metal glinting from his wrist. She squinted at it, holding her breath to lean over the body and read. “He’s allergic to... penicillin?”

“Yeah, I’m like,” Waverly quipped, “Ninety-nine percent sure that’s not what killed him.”
“There’s usually a name,” Dolls noted, and stepped around the body’s feet, placing his own carefully to avoid knocking anything over, and bent down, turning over the tiny steel medical bracelet. “Oh,” he breathed, and looked up at Waverly, then Nicole. She looked at the bracelet, seeing what Dolls had seen, then stood. Well this case just got a lot more interesting.

“What?” Waverly asked.

Nicole grimaced. “I think you mean who.”


“Oh,” Waverly said, and looked down at the corpse. “Oh my god.”

“Guess we’ll have to look more deeply back at headquarters,” Dolls said.

“Right, I’ll just um.” Waverly nodded at each of them, then hurried back to Dolls’ car, not exactly keen to watch the sheriff department techs haul his rotting, charred carcass away. As soon as she was out of earshot, Nicole turned to Dolls, frowning.

“Something about this bothers me.”

“You’d better not be about to accuse me, Haught.”

“What?” she asked, startled. “No! Of course not. Whoever did this, they used mundane accelerants. Yours smell different.” He pursed his lips, perhaps unhappy with her phrasing, but she forged ahead anyway. “Look. Whoever our guy is, they used gasoline and lighter fluid. They wanted overkill. How come his jewelry didn’t melt? There’s no marks, nothing. A plant, maybe?”

“Well…” He shook his head. “But in this cold, chances are it never hit a heat that would touch the metal. Especially not if it’s stainless steel. The ring might be silver, but even then.”

“Fine, but something about this just feels weird.”

“Okay, well, where are you going with this?”

“Does this seem like the Widows’ MO? I’d buy it being them trying to keep him from talking, but fire doesn’t seem like their purview.”

“Cold does seem to be more their style, but it wouldn’t be the first time,” he said. There was a hard, almost lethal edge to his eyes.

“Dolls?”

He glanced at her, then frowned and shook his head. “Yeah, uh, few nights back, Wynonna and I took sanctuary in a church. They torched it. Nearly killed us.”

“Jesus, Dolls.”

“I’m fine. I mean Wynonna kinda died, for like, a minute, but it all worked out. So, what, you think it might not be the Widows?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, and sighed, pulling her gloves back off and pocketing them. “Just. Something about it doesn’t feel right. We can’t even be sure it’s Tucker. That stuff he’s wearing doesn’t even have soot on them. They’re practically spotless.”

“You think it’s faked?” She shrugged. “And you can’t tell by scent because of the vervain.”
“Exactly.”

“Damn. Well, you did say vervain is how he ditched you at the Homestead. It still could be our man.”

“Maybe,” she said, twisting her mouth up in a frown. “Maybe. Just. Have Jeremy run some tests, will you?”

“If you signoff on it, BBD’ll handle the autopsy, and we’ll uh,” He glanced over one shoulder as a tech came nearer, then smiled at her. “Leave no stone unturned.”

“Thanks, Dolls.”

“Sure.”

They moved aside, and Nicole signaled the techs to come and gather up everything else. Dolls turned his back on them as she watched, and kept his voice low enough that only she would hear.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, a little too fast. He said nothing. “Okay, no, I’m not.”

“Anything I can do?”

“No, not... not right now.” She glanced at him, catching his eye for a moment. “I’ll keep you in the loop.”

Dolls nodded. “I’ll let you know what we find.”

“Yeah. I’ll get the paperwork together once I get back to the station.”

That part, it turned out, was easier said than done.

Jeremy was either just as much of an idiot as everyone else acted like he was, or else he was about a million times more perceptive than he looked. As they wheeled Tucker’s body into BBD, Jeremy tugged Waverly aside and said “Listen, it’s gonna get pretty squeamish in there, how about you wait out here and we’ll call you back in later?”

Waverly, still looking a little green since the revelation of the corpse’s identity, nodded, fussing with her necklace with one hand. “Yeah. Yeah, Jeremy, sure. Beth will be here soon anyway and.” She waved a hand in a vague circle. “She won’t know which one’s our door.”

“Good thinking,” he said, smiling his kind little smile, and ducked inside. Leaving Waverly out in the hall with nothing to do, and Nicole across the room, at her desk. She kept her eyes on her work, but there was a part of her, not so cleanly classified as just the wolf but something heart-deep and aching, that was pulling toward the hall. Like a lost dog on a leash, a part of her soul trying to tug toward its rightful owner.

Waverly paced back and forth in front of the door, pulling at her sleeves, tugging at her necklace, a ball of anxiety palpable even from across the room. Beth Gardner came up the hall after a couple minutes of that, and Waverly showed her inside, then returned to the hallway. Nicole realized, as an afterthought, that she was holding her breath.

“Nicole.”
She looked up. Waverly was on the other side of the reception desk, her face a cool mask, like before, but there were cracks in it now.

“Yeah, Waves?”

She hesitated, weighing words. Nicole wondered if this hurt Waverly as much as it hurt her. Did she feel the same pull? Did she feel the mate bond the way she and the wolf did?

“Nevermind,” she muttered, pushing herself away from the desk.

Pain lanced through her chest and Nicole forced herself to nod, focusing on the computer again. “Okay.”

Jeremy yanked the BBD office door open. He was still wearing his safety glasses from the lab. “Water!”

“What?” Waverly said, turning around, all too eager for a distraction.

“Uh, Beth fainted,” he said.

Waverly went into business mode as easy as breathing, and it hurt, somehow, how fast she could flip away from whatever was happening between them. “Okay. Jeremy, get her onto the couch in Nedley’s office. Nicole?”

“Yes?”

“Can you get a cup of water for her?”

Nicole looked up at her, frowning, but found herself moving before she could check in with her body.

“Sure,” she muttered, already halfway out of her chair. “Whatever.”

Jeremy caught up to her in the kitchen as she was filling a coffee cup from the sink, caution radiating off him as a tangible aura.

“Nicole?” he asked. It wasn’t the first time he’d used her first name, but it still surprised her a little, and she looked over her shoulder at him. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Why?”

His eye flicked down to the hand she was resting on the lip of the sink. A dusting of red hair had grown over her wrist and the back of her hand, and she cursed under her breath, closing her eyes and breathing, pushing down the instinctual anger that had been simmering under her conscious attention.

“I don’t know a lot about that whole arrest thing with Tucker, but it’s okay if you hate Beth, you know.”

“It’s not her,” she said, and sighed. “Just. Still fighting with Waverly.”

“Oh,” he said, and shuffled his feet. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I mean. It’s not, but.” She shook her head. “Thanks.”

“Sure. I should. I should get back to work I guess.”
“Yeah,” she said, and smiled a little. “Thanks, Jeremy.”

He nodded and left the kitchen, and she headed back toward the sheriff’s office, suddenly glad he was out today.

“Your father, your sister,” Beth was saying, as Nicole slipped through the gate and headed for the door. “How are you not bitter?”

“Mmm,” Waverly said, sounding stricken with irony. “I have my moments.”

“You’re so lovely,” Beth murmured, and when Nicole stepped into the room, she saw that Beth was upright, her fingers stroking along a curl of Waverly’s hair.

It took an effort of will to keep from growling, but she kept her mouth shut and stepped up behind Waverly’s right shoulder, offering Beth the cup of water. She took it.

“Thank you,” she said, and Nicole rested a hand on the back of Waverly’s chair, leaning slightly, to put herself in Waverly’s sphere. It was a protective, maybe even possessive gesture, but at least Waverly wasn’t looking directly at her. “I’m sorry,” Beth said, glancing up with an expression that was almost snidely knowing, as if she was fully aware of what Nicole was doing and was letting her know with just the wry twist of her mouth. “That Tucker was so awful to both of you.”

“It’s fine,” Waverly said, her voice gentle and compassionate.

“No, it’s not,” Nicole said, half under her breath.

Waverly heard, and turned to glare at her over her shoulder.

“Well,” Beth said, her ears apparently not impacted by her brief brush with unconsciousness. “You of all people should understand why Tucker was drawn to Waverly.” Waverly shifted in her chair, looking away from Beth in discomfort. Nicole’s skin crawled, her shoulders itching with the growth of fur. “Love takes on many forms. What’s deviant to some,” she added, looking to Waverly with a smile that made Waverly shift, pretending it didn’t make her squirm, and made Nicole’s stomach twist into a cold, furious knot. “Is normal to others.”

“What’re you trying to say?” Nicole said, barely on the human side of a snarl.

Beth’s smiling face turned to her instead, simpering and so fake and bright it made Nicole squint to see through it. “I know that Tucker was... odd. But in his own way,” she looked to Waverly again. “He loved Waverly.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Nicole,” Waverly snapped, turning to look at her. “Stop.”

Nicole looked away, clenching her jaw so tight it ached.

“You’re right,” Beth said, with a “warmth” that left Nicole freezing. “I should go.”

“If you need anything,” Waverly said, “At all. Let me know, okay?”

“You’re an exceptional girl,” Beth murmured, and got up. She handed the cup of water back to Nicole with a lofty, dismissive little sigh, and then showed herself out the door.

Nicole looked into the cup, noting that she had never taken so much as a sip. The lip of the cup warped as she tightened her grip on it. “I cannot believe she’d try to rationalize his behavior,” she
growled, dropping the cup into Nedley’s trash can.

“Uh,” Waverly said, rising and pointing in the direction of the BBD office. “He’s lying on a table, burnt beyond recognition. Sometimes lying is a kindness.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, spinning to face her. It didn’t even seem possible that Waverly could say something like that to her, with a straight face, and yet here they were. “I tried that. With you.” She looked her up and down for a moment. “And look at us now.” Waverly’s gaze slid away, uncomfortable, but not sure what to say. She crossed her arms over her chest and Nicole curled her hands into fists to keep from reaching for her. “Waverly,” she said, lowering her voice. “That girl Tucker kidnapped and brought to your room? He wanted it to be you.” Waverly met her eye, but didn’t object. That much, at least, Waverly did understand. “Trust me, okay? If you had seen the look in his eyes, you would never—”

That had been the wrong thing to say. Waverly’s eyes turned hard and flinty. “You know what I’d never do?” she said, and stepped closer. Nicole stood her ground, but said nothing. “Tell you what to think or feel.”

Waverly stepped around her and left.

The wolf howled a long, mournful cry that rattled against her rib bones, and Nicole sighed, wiping a hand down her face. She went back to her desk to finish filing the paperwork for BBD, but Waverly was long gone. Maybe that was a blessing. She didn’t think she could handle one more good right hook in the boxing match they’d been playing out, drawn out to the pace of a chess game played by snails. She finished up her shift in a haze, barely aware of what was happening around her. She filed the papers to hand off the autopsy of Tucker Gardner to BBD, wrapped up other things she’d been putting off, and left the station as soon as her shift ended, every motion robotic, every step blind.

Her evening became a stretch of time defined only by the idle things she tried to accomplish in between sending texts to Waverly. She sent one before making dinner, then another before starting some laundry. There wasn’t much that kept the wolf quiet and kept her own brain peaceful, but there was something about the monotony of tidying up belongings and sorting mail, something about the heavy chemical odor of cleaning supplies, that kept her mind from wandering back through each of their arguments yet again.

When she’d run out of rooms to clean and shelves to reorganize, she sent one more text—Waves, I’m sorry. Can we please talk?—and settled at her kitchen table to clean her pistol, disassembling it and meticulously oiling and wiping down every piece before putting it all back together again, wishing she could do the same for her relationship.

Her phone beeped with a text and she nearly dropped the gun mid-reassembly, scrambling to scoop it up.

Dear Control Freak. I will talk to you when I want to talk to you. Until then, have a nice life hurting the people you love.

The wolf, for once, was silent, almost awestruck, as if she couldn’t believe it either.

“Okay,” Nicole said. She finished installing the slide, set the gun down, and got up, feeling numbness crawling through her like a morphine drip. “No. I’m not going to deal with this right now.”

She felt the faintest pressure from the wolf, a wordless question.
“I’m going to bed.”

Another curious press, like a pet pawing at her leg.

“Like what Waverly said,” she said, heading for her stairs, forgetting the gun on the table. “Sleep first. Healing starts with sleep.”

The wolf whined, but didn’t push, and she headed upstairs to her room with almost mechanical motion. Sleepwalking while awake.

“So that’s what we’ll do first.”
It was a miracle she got any sleep at all. Twice during the night she woke up from nightmares. Nonsensical, confusing nightmares.

The first was about Shae, hunting in full wolf form, hulking and red-eyed in the darkness, a horrible, looming shadow against the snow. Maybe in the dream she didn’t have her knife, or maybe she had lost it? She was just running, running through the woods, her lungs burning, her heart pounding, the hollow sound of it deafening in her ears. Her left thigh, where in the real world Loretta had stabbed her, burned with pain and silver. She was limping, her gait unsteady, her bare feet thumping the frozen earth on every staggering step. She remembered the fight in flashes—her shoulders ached where Shae had clawed her, scratches along her shoulders and her chest bleeding sluggish where the wolf couldn’t heal her, too subdued from the silvered wound in her leg to shift back.

She heard a bellowing roar that picked up into a hunting howl, vicious and bloodthirsty. She heard the creak-crack of a huge tree branch being torn from its trunk, and she looked back over her shoulder with a snarl. Shae, massive and way too strong, holding up what was more a small log than a branch. She hauled her huge arm back and launched the log like a spear, and Nicole heard the deadened whistling sound of it flying through the air.

It caught her flat across the back and slammed her forward twenty meters and then down, crashing into the ground, kicking up brush and clumps of snow and dirt. She screamed, pain ravaging through her entire body.

_They are closing in_, she heard someone say.

And then she was awake, panting and lying on her front with her hands, half-shifted for a fight, curled so tight she’d torn through her sheets. Calamity Jane was on her perch in the corner, back arched, hissing. Nicole looked her way, and the cat hesitated, relaxing by degrees, as if she could see, right away, that it was her human again, not the beast that lived inside her.

“Sorry, Jane,” she mumbled, too tired to think about her sheets. She shifted herself back, and slumped back down onto her pillow, slipping right back into sleep. “Sorry.”

The second dream was about Waverly.

Waverly, her hair wet and tied in a tail, wrapped in a robe, walking through a doorway. She stopped short with a gasp, and Nicole felt like Waverly was looking through her—as if she were not really in the room, but witnessing something else. Waverly’s face twisted with terror, then a false calm that had nothing to do with staring down demons and everything to do with avoiding notice by a man on the street in the dark.

“And there was nothing she could do.

The image of Waverly disappeared, fading into darkness.

The whole world around her went black, a barren void of empty space. Pale white lines spread all around her, slowly at first, then faster and faster until she was standing at the very center of an enormous, infinitely complex spiderweb, standing on strands of horrible greyish-white silk.
Her father’s voice echoed across the space.

*You can’t stop everything. You can’t save everybody.*

It was familiar, somehow. Had she heard that somewhere else?

This time she didn’t wake in a panic, but with a slow, exhausted fear that was so different from simple terror. It wasn’t the rabbit-heartbeat fear of the unknown, but rather it was a slow, creeping dread. Fear of the known, fear of the inevitable. Like fear of death, or fear of confusion, or of aging. Something constant and omnipresent. Panic, if used properly, got you out of bad situations. Panic got you away from a source of fear, got you out of a fight. But *dread* didn’t solve anything. It didn’t escape anything. Because things that caused dread couldn’t be escaped. Not forever. Maybe not even for long.

It took her a long time to get back to sleep. She watched clouds pass by through her window and counted stars.

Even with the nightmares, the sleep actually did help. She woke up feeling a little bit less hopeless. After all, nothing was ever so broken that it could *never* be fixed. Waverly wanted to be mad a little longer? That was fine. She could work with that. Waverly had picked her, and she had picked Waverly. And that would still be true when Waverly decided she was ready to talk.

Calamity Jane wasn’t asking for breakfast, so Nicole took her time. She didn’t have anywhere so pressing to be that she couldn’t take a moment, and things felt a little brighter this morning. She stashed her knife under her mattress while she showered, and spent an extra couple minutes drying and fixing her hair. Maybe it was a cliché to say it felt like a new start, but for the first time in days, she felt like she could grab hold of her life and live it even while she was waiting for Waverly to cool down.

She headed downstairs and saw her gun, still sitting on the table where she’d left it.

“Shit,” she muttered, heading toward it. “Should’ve put this away last night.”

Someone knocked, three hard double-taps, like a frantic heartbeat. She turned toward the door, and hope unfurled wings in her chest like a phoenix, warming her from the inside.

“Waves?” she called, reaching for the doorknob.

Waverly was not the one standing on the other side of her front door. Instead, what was standing there was a tableau of horror and nightmare, stinking of rot and spidersilk and death. Mercedes Gardner, Tucker’s elder sister, wearing some horrible black costume dress. There was a festering wound on her head and gashes along her jawline like someone had taken a knife to her, and her teeth were rimed with gangrenous black. She stank of supernatural influence and magic, but that... that didn’t make sense. The Gardners were mundane.

“Mercedes,” she said, at a loss for anything else to say, “God, your face.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of that going around,” Mercedes said, storming forward and slamming ice-cold hands into Nicole’s shoulders with a strength that was certainly not human. It took her off her feet, and Nicole hit the ground on her shoulder, gasping. The touch of Mercedes’ hands *hurt*, and icy cold seeped into her chest, settling on the wolf like a blanket of frost. Impossibly it dulled their senses, tamping down their shared strength. She struggled onto her side, pushing against the floor to try to get herself upright again. *Why couldn’t she stand?* She crawled toward her desk. If she
could just get a hand on her desk chair, grab the central column and slam it across Mercedes’
head...

“My husband, my lord, has illuminated the path,” Mercedes said, with that hollow, intoned weight
of prophecy, “And the path leads to you. The law!”

Nicole grabbed for the chair but Mercedes caught her by the ankle and yanked her back across the
hardwood floor. She slid, as easy as a child’s stuffed toy. She curled up instead, reaching for her
calf, pawing at the leg of her jeans to find the line of her knife’s hilt.

But it wasn’t there.

*Dammit,* she thought. Her wolf struggled through the layer of frost and cold to reach her. *It’s still
upstairs.* She felt weak, impossibly weak, and fragile.

God, no, that wasn’t it. She felt *human,* as if the bite of Mercedes’ cold hands had stripped the wolf
away.

“How foolish must the Earp wench feel,” Mercedes said, taunting her. She grabbed a handful of
Nicole’s hair, metal-tipped nails scratching at her scalp. Mercedes slammed her head into the
ground and for a moment Nicole lay there, struggling up through the pain like it were the sea and
she a drowning sailor.

*Move,* she told the wolf, told herself. *Move! The gun’s still on the table!*

“How knowing you had the seal,” Mercedes kicked her in the stomach, hard enough to slide her over a
few inches. “All this time!”

Mercedes crouched over her, sitting astride her hips, and Nicole pawed at her, shoving at her arms
and her face to try to keep her away. Her hand caught on embroidery, on decorative lace and
buttons. Victorian costume.

*No. God, no, Mercedes is one of the Widows.*

She slid her hands up to Mercedes’ wrists and twisted, trying to dislodge her, but Mercedes—no,
not Mercedes, or at least not anymore, it was the Widow now—pinned her wrists to her chest with
one arm. Nicole snarled, the only bit of the wolf that could break through, and the Widow grabbed
her face with her other hand, her metal claws digging into Nicole’s skin.

“Yes, please,” she wheezed, lying through her teeth, “I don’t know anything about that, or I would’ve
told Wynonna!”

“You may not know you have it,” the Widow purred, leaning closer into her space. God, her breath
stank of death and blood. Had she eaten recently? More priests? It was enough to make her gag. “It
could be metal. Or precious. And very, very old.”

The wolf struggled against the Widow’s power and Nicole squirmed and writhed beneath her and a
single thought, crystalline and horrible in its clarity, passed through Nicole’s mind.

*Damn. I’m gonna die, aren’t I.*

She thought of Mikael, and wondered what he’d think. She could almost imagine his voice,
sighing, but satisfied. *Well hjärtat, at least you gave it your all.*

Well, if she was going to die, she was going to go out properly: with a stupid, sarcastic comment on
her last breath.

She slid her head to one side in something like a shrug. “I’m more of an IKEA kind’a girl,” she said, and imagined Mikael rolling his eyes.

“My lord does not make mistakes!” the Widow roared, and frost gathered around her mouth.

There was an odd sound, just outside. Shoes pounding on wood. And then Waverly’s voice rang out, as clear and noble as a churchbell.

“Get away from her, you bitch!”

She broke a broom handle across one thigh and the Widow finally got up off Nicole, lurking and watching as Waverly spun the two sticks in tight, whistling circles.

“Pick on someone your own size.”

“Ohhh,” the Widow murmured, laughing as she said it. “That’s cute.”

Waverly swung and hit. Two solid strikes, one in the chest, another across the face, and the Widow staggered. Nicole dragged herself out of range, panting, trying to reach through the witch’s fell magic to the wolf, but she hissed at the touch of the spell, the ice so cold it burned. The gun, she thought, trying to get her legs to move. I can still get to my gun.

“Neither of us know where the third seal is, Mercedes,” Waverly said, and to hell with the DNA results, it was Earp sass in her voice, through and through, “But we are available for nose jobs.”

“Mercedes isn’t here right now,” the Widow snarled, rising to her feet. “You’ll have to play with me.”

Waverly swung again, grunting with effort, and Nicole was suddenly grateful for Dolls’ training. Nicole dragged herself toward the kitchen as Waverly exchanged blows with the Widow. She had to turn her back on the fight, and she heard Waverly shout, heard her coffee table shattering under Waverly’s body. Nicole dragged herself up the doorframe, hauling herself up along the dark wood.

There was a horrible sound like rushing wind, then of Waverly scrambling across the broken wood, her voice low and hoarse with real, gut-deep terror.

“No!”

The gun was almost in reach, it was right there—

Waverly screamed.

“No!” Nicole turned. The Widow crouched over Waverly like a vulture, like a spectre of death, grabbing at the back of her coat even as she readied another blast of arctic, paralyzing breath. Nicole abandoned the gun. She planted a hand on the back of her couch and vaulted it, looping her arms around the Widow’s shoulders. She snarled in the Widow’s ear, vicious and animal.

“No!” Waverly yelled again, crawling away even as Nicole hauled the Widow backward, forcing her back to arch.

For a single, crucial moment, she forgot she was fighting something ancient and evil. She forgot she was fighting something cold, desperate, and all too willing to fight dirty.
Waverly rolled back over, startled she had not been pursued, and watched as the Widow opened her mouth wide and slammed her head down. Flat human teeth and sharp, inhuman incisors sank into Nicole’s arm.

She screamed. There was something on the Widow’s teeth. Saliva, maybe, or venom. Something that passed the torn barrier of her skin and went directly into her blood—god she could feel it as it slid inside her, the sensation horrible and intensely violating. The pain was unlike anything she had ever felt, agony and despair in liquid form, flaring from the wound like a flame catching to paper.

“Nicole! No!”

Nicole collapsed backward onto the rug as it burned through her. It was like the first change, like Shae’s bite, but worse, if only because now she had the wolf but the wolf could do nothing. She was howling and screaming too. They were in perfect sync, and powerless to do anything with it.

The Widow spun away from her, wiping her mouth with one hand.

“You’re telling the truth,” she said, mystified, as if the taste of Nicole’s blood were some horrible truth serum. “You don’t have it. Well. That’s embarrassing.” Waverly dragged herself to her feet, her boots thumping on the floor. The sound was distant, but somehow way too loud. Nicole wrapped a hand around the bite, trying to put pressure on it. She could feel the blood pouring down her hand, streaming down her arm in thick rivulets, staining her jeans, her sleeve. “My husband’s rings told the future;” the Widow said, understanding. “The one who holds the seal is still coming here!”

And then she was gone, even as Waverly spun around, Nicole’s pistol in hand, aiming at empty space.

“Oh my god,” Waverly gasped, finally turning around when she’d cleared the ground floor. The Widow was gone, vanished into thin air. “Baby!” Waverly collapsed at Nicole’s side, one hand moving immediately to her shoulder to pull her close, her other hand fluttering between Nicole’s hand and the curve of her jaw. “Baby stay with me, okay?” Nicole looked for words, but she couldn’t find any, and Waverly knelt at her side, pulling Nicole against her. Nicole looked at her, Waverly’s face swimming in her vision. “Shh, you’re okay.” The words still sounded distant, somehow. Surreal. Or maybe just not real.

Maybe she only thought that because her blood wasn’t clotting right. She could feel it, still pouring out between her fingers. Like trying to hold water in your hands, or trying to remember a dream when you wake up.

“Please don’t die,” she breathed, scrambling for her phone. Nicole was vaguely aware her breath was coming in high, wheezing tones, louder even than Waverly’s frantic breathing. That probably wasn’t good, right?

“Shh, baby, stay with me, okay?” she said, tapping out three digits on her phone, the muted, ancient beep-beep-beep of it somehow nostalgic. It made her think of her father, dialing for takeout when she was a little kid, the almost musical tones of repeated digits in a phone number. “Okay? Shh...”

Waverly held the phone to her ear, waiting, and Nicole thought maybe her eyes weren’t all the way open, because her vision of the room looked funny. Waverly kissed her cheek. Her lips were warm, almost too warm after the cold of the Widow’s power, but it felt nice.

"Don't die, baby," she said, her voice cracking. "Don't die."
“Wave m’sorry,” she mumbled.

“What? Shh, shh, baby, don’t talk, it’s okay.”

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“We need an ambulance!”

“What’s your address?”

She gave it, the numbers and words swimming in and out of Nicole’s focus like trying to take a sight test drunk. She only barely followed the rest of the conversation, and then Waverly set the phone to one side, the screen still lit up with an active call.

“Shh, baby,” Waverly said, petting her hair with one hand. “Help’s coming, okay? Stay with me, help’s coming.”

“M’sorry,” she said, trying again.

“Shh, baby, it’s okay, whatever it is, it’s okay.”

“Broke my promise,” she mumbled, sagging against Waverly’s side. Her head was resting against Waverly’s shoulder, and she could feel Waverly shaking.

“Broke what promise, baby, what are you talking about?”

Nicole let herself lean on her a little more, too tired and in too much pain to keep sitting upright. It was all she could do to hold her hand to the wound in her arm. Waverly’s body shook hard on a silent, stifled sob, but she didn’t buckle. She held fast, cradling Nicole’s weight against her body. Nicole felt her lips again, pressing to her forehead, her cheek, her hair, anywhere she could reach.

“Said I wouldn’t get hurt.”

Chapter End Notes

WHOOF. Finally out of the worst parts of the argument. If you’ve been paying attention to my posting schedule you might have figured out that these past few chapters were really hard to write. Further evidence of that might be that I posted 60 like six hours ago and yet like magic, poof, here’s 61, finished in an evening. Who knew that physical fights would be way easier to write than emotional ones?

62 is gonna be hard in a different way. I'm not 100% sure how much time I'll need for it, and my schedule is super weird right now cuz of stuff at home, but I'm hoping to have 62 for you guys next week. If I can pull this off, it's gonna be one hell of a ride.

(heh heh heh, and some of you thought the dramatic irony in chapter 52 was about the missing kids mission. I've been waiting to reveal this for AGES.)
Waverly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waverly could count the number of institutions she’d visited on one hand. There’d been the courthouse, to get custody issues squared away when she and Wynonna were going to go and live with Aunt Gus and Uncle Curtis. That had been a stone monolith of paperwork and stern-faced clerks who all had about as much capacity for human empathy as particularly ornery beetles. She’d been barely seven years old, and so many people scowled at her that when Wynonna muttered, really more to herself, careful, if we’re here for more than a couple hours we’ll get stuck like that too she had dissolved into sobs, absolutely inconsolable until Gus took her outside for some fresh air and a break.

Then there’d been that one visit to see Wynonna in the mental hospital, after she was admitted and pulled out of high school. She didn’t think Wynonna even remembered it. Something she’d done (to a doctor or a patient Waverly had never quite been sure) made the orderlies dose her with so many anti-psychotics that for once Wynonna actually looked like she was supposed to be there. She’d been nearly catatonic for the whole visit. Even at age ten, Waverly had known that something was very, very wrong with her sister—something that had nothing to do with what she’d gotten admitted for. Waverly still couldn’t quite look at a straitjacket without flinching.

And then there were the two hospital visits. She’d been thirteen when Uncle Curtis was mauled by some animal on a trip onto Earp land and hospitalized for almost a month. When he finally got out of rehab, he’d been a shadow of himself, though he’d bounced back, eventually. When she was eighteen, she’d ridden in the ambulance alongside Champ after he got thrown off a bull into a steel gate.

If she’d known then what she knew now, maybe she could’ve figured out a lot earlier that she didn’t really love Champ. Oh sure, she’d ridden next to him and held his hand, but she’d also been tuning out his moaning and groaning and letting her mind wander, thinking about when she could call Chrissy to get a ride home later and when she’d do her homework for her online university courses. She hadn’t really been that worried about him. He’d be fine, they’d patch him up and maybe he’d never ride rodeo again but he’d get back to the rest of his life without much trouble.

All things considered, Waverly was not a fan of institutions. But all that had been nothing, compared to this.

One of the EMTs was asking her questions. She thought she might have been answering them, at least well enough that he’d leave her alone and only come back with a new question after a minute or so had passed. She couldn’t have said for sure what any of the questions were or if she was even giving accurate answers. All her focus was on Nicole, watching as they loaded her onto a gurney and strapped her down. Her lip hurt, and she realized as an afterthought that she’d been chewing on it.

“Are you riding or staying.”

She looked up. Blue eyes. Dark hair. Kind face. She blinked.

If she stayed, she could contact Dolls, or Wynonna. Or Jeremy. Someone needed to know, right? Someone needed to know that not only were the Widows still active, not only were they still searching for the seals, but they also knew that Nicole knew something about them. They must
have known that she knew something about the demon Clootie in his tomb. She should share that information.

Except that in the entire fight with the Widow, for some reason Nicole hadn’t wolfed out. If she did in the ambulance? Under such stress, surrounded by strangers? God, someone could get killed.

She thought of bright yellow-gold eyes behind a wall of tungsten bars. She thought of those eyes, animal eyes, watching and listening to her in the middle of the night on a full moon after Nicole had fallen asleep.

She was the only person she knew who could keep the wolf calm. She had to.

“Riding. I can’t leave her alone.”

“Saddle up then, Ms. Earp. Northern Memorial, Hi-Ho Silver, etcetera.”

She thought it was supposed to make her laugh. She didn’t, but she didn’t think that was the EMT’s fault.

Waverly didn’t know what all the Widows’ powers were, but apparently it was enough to really, really hurt a lycanthrope. Nicole was thrashing, moaning, her hands clawing at the straps holding her down. Waverly tucked herself in as close as she could and took her hand, her good hand, and squeezed.

“I’m here, baby,” she whispered. Nicole’s face turned toward her, warm brown eyes tracking, scanning, locking on Waverly’s face like a lifeline. “I’m here.”

“Waves.”

“It’s me. I’m here.”

The door shut behind them and Nicole winced at the sound, grimacing as the engine revved and the truck moved, rumbling beneath them. One of the EMTs leaned over her to check the bandage over her bite and Nicole threw her head back, choking on a scream. Waverly leaned closer, trying to block the man’s view, and when Nicole opened her eyes again they were gold, bright and full of pain.

“Hey honey,” she whispered, switching names, just for her wolf. “Hey, focus on me. Don’t worry about them.”

The wolf looked to her and Waverly wiped away tears forming at the corners of Nicole’s eyes. Her throat worked but she didn’t speak, as if even the wolf knew that if she said something, growled or did much more than whine, someone would hear. Someone would ask questions.

“Focus on me, it’s gonna be okay.”

The wolf nodded, silent, and shut her eyes again. The next time she opened them they’d evened out to that warm caramel color that Waverly associated with equal control. She glanced down Nicole’s body, but could see no fur, no evidence of a shift. Or at least not yet.

“Baby, you can’t—” Waverly hesitated, understanding dawning like a cold, creeping frost. “You aren’t.” Nicole shook her head, just enough to take as an answer. Waverly smoothed a hand over her forehead, pushing hair away from where it was sticking to her skin, her own vision blurring on tears. “You’re sharing the pain.”
The corner of Nicole’s mouth quirked in something like a smile. She bucked forward with another broken cry, shoulders straining against the straps, and Waverly squeezed her hand again, earning an almost bone-crushing grip in response.

Long, long minutes passed before Nicole started to relax at all. They were almost to the hospital when she settled, so calm it was almost scarier than the pain had been. She looked so quiet, peaceful, almost as if she’d fallen asleep. The ambulance stopped, jerking as the brakes engaged. Waverly leaned over her chest, pressing her ear to Nicole’s blood-stained shirt, listening as long as she was able to. There was something almost familiar to it, listening to Nicole’s heartbeat, but she heard something else. Or more accurately, she didn’t hear something else. Something she should have. The EMTs took to motion like a flock of birds around her, wheeling Nicole out onto level ground and handing her off to the ER team. Waverly scrambled to catch up as they moved her to another cart, and she ran alongside as they wheeled her into the hospital.

“Please! Somebody help her, she’s not breathing!”

A pair of hands, she wasn’t sure whose, pushed her away and she tried to stay out of the way, hovering, as the nurses set up her oxygen. The idea that the wolf might make a reappearance never crossed her mind as she watched Nicole’s face get paler and paler. Dying in fast-forward.

“Stay with me baby,” she said, moving again as two more people—a nurse and a doctor, maybe? they were barely more than blurs of color—took her down another hallway. “Stay with me. You’re gonna be fine, okay? You’re gonna—”

Another pair of hands, pulling her away from the rail.

“Step back, please.”

This time, for once, the voice was actually a bit familiar. She pulled away and looked up. A dark, beautiful face and a long black braid loomed over her shoulder, with a familiar cold, stern expression. It was like looking at a ghost.

“Mattie?” she said.

A doctor moved up beside Waverly and set his hands to Nicole’s chest. “Gretta, bag her.”

“On it.”

“Oh,” Waverly said, taking another half-step back and watching the nurse’s face. “Her sister.”

“Get her into Trauma One. Start an IV and get her vitals.”

They were moving again. She stepped forward, following for several paces.

“Miss,” he said, his voice firm, but hurried. “I need you to stay back here.”

“What?” she said, but with the robotic obedience of a well-trained civilian, she stayed. Gretta met her gaze, as silent and cold as a Berlin winter, and Waverly watched as they wheeled Nicole through a pair of doors and out of sight.

“Hey. I’m here.” Wynonna’s voice was soft with strain and exertion, as if she’d run to get here, and when Waverly turned around, she took one look at Waverly’s tear-streaked face and opened her arms. “Tell me everything.”

Waverly tried. She looked for the words. But all she could do was duck her head and bend into the
curve of Wynonna’s shoulder, sobbing as Wynonna looped an arm around her shoulders and held her, pressing a hand to the back of her neck to keep her steady.

No matter what Wynonna might think, Waverly knew there were parts of being a mom she’d be great at.

“Take your time,” she said, pressing a kiss to the top of Waverly’s head and holding her tight as Waverly shook on another sob. “It’s okay. Though fair warning, Dolls is somewhere on this floor and he might be back soon. So, y’know, if you’re worried about your image, that’s something you should probably know.”

The sound she made wasn’t a laugh, but it was close enough. Wynonna let her go as she tugged backward a little and wiped her eyes.

“Okay. Should probably get him. He should know this too.”

“Okay. Sit here a second, I’ll get him.”

She didn’t sit. She had way too much restless energy to sit. Instead she paced in the tiny waiting area, twisting her fingers together until she almost thought a couple of them might break. The last time she’d been here, with Champ, she hadn’t noticed all the different smells. Frankly she wasn’t sure why she noticed them now. Maybe because now she could imagine that for everything she could sense, Nicole could sense ten other things. Now it felt unavoidable and choking, even to her human nose. Antiseptics were the lion’s share of it, but there were so many others. Plastic. Vinyl. Cloth. Blood. One of the rooms she passed once and then avoided, the scent of human waste and disease clinging to her heels like wet leaves. As she walked tight, frantic circles around the waiting area, Nicole’s gun thumped against her leg. She’d almost forgotten about shoving it into the pocket of her coat. She hoped no one asked her about it. Never mind the fact that it wasn’t her weapon, she really didn’t want any of the staff to know she’d brought a loaded firearm into a hospital. Even if it had been an accident.

Everything was so clean. So white. Surfaces polished till they shone, floor tiles rubbed so smooth by the tread of a million shoes that they gleamed. So clean, and yet so irreparably stained with death and decay and human suffering.

It turned her stomach.

“Okay,” Wynonna said, standing and crossing her arms over her chest. Dolls sat in one of the chairs. “Walk us through it.”

“I was on my way over because we were fighting,” she said. Neither of them reacted to that. They’d seen, of course. They knew. God, now it seemed so tiny, so petty. She’d treated Nicole so badly, and they both knew it. “Oh god,” she breathed, moving to face Wynonna. “She can’t die while we’re still fighting!”

“Okay,” Wynonna said, visibly struggling to keep herself steady, playing anchor to Waverly’s rocking ship. “I know it’s hard. Just try to breathe.”

It was so much more than hard and this time it spilled out of her in a flood. Someone had to know the truth. Wynonna had to know what was going on. She’d kept so many things from her sister and this time, that had to change.

“I cheated on her.”

Wynonna’s eyebrows jumped.
“Yeah,” Waverly said, before Wynonna could say anything. “I’m a cheater. Rosita. I kissed her.”

“Okay, one kiss is not—” Wynonna stopped, finally registering what she’d said. She blinked. “Rosita’s...”

“What, Doc’s girlfriend? Yeah!” Self-hatred warred with fear for top spot in her emotional list. “Oh, and a revenant!”

Wynonna looked to Dolls. He raised a hand, placating. “Later.”

Waverly leaned back against a column, and some part of her recognized that Wynonna was angry, but was tamping it down. If Dolls had known the truth about Rosita, or at least suspected, then Wynonna was probably one of the last of their circle to know. Why wouldn’t she be livid?

“So,” Dolls said, steering them back to the conversation at hand. “Mercedes attacked Nicole. Why.”

“Widow-Mercedes thought that Nicole had the third seal,” Waverly said, tapping her hands together as she thought through it.

“Not possible,” Wynonna said, a little too fast for Waverly’s liking. “It’s safe and sound, and it’s the only thing keeping Clootie from resurrecting.”

Anger surged ahead of self-hatred and almost knocked fear out of its top position. Waverly stepped away from the wall. A spike of frustration took her breath away, stabbing through her chest like a physical thing.

“The Widows won’t find it,” Wynonna insisted. Trying to reassure her, of all things. “Ever. They can’t.”

“You know where the third seal is?” Waverly asked, finally dragging together enough air to speak. “And you didn’t tell me?”

How long had Wynonna known? Was this some game they’d all started playing, to keep her in the dark as often as possible? This had to stop. She was trying to keep them in the loop, the least they could do was return the favor.

Wynonna squinted at her, as if the question was absurd. “Nobody can know where it is but me,” she said, staring Waverly down. As if she thought Waverly’s anger was completely unfounded. As if she didn’t realize that maybe, just maybe, Waverly having that knowledge could have prevented a knock-down drag-out fight with a demon in Nicole’s living room. “That way nobody gets hurt.”

“Nicole got hurt!” she snapped, pointing toward the doors where she’d disappeared. Nicole was so much more than nobody, and now, yet again, keeping secrets had gotten someone badly injured. Maybe killed.

No. Nearly killed. Nicole wasn’t dead yet, and she wasn’t going to be.


“Nicole was bitten because of me, Wynonna.” Wynonna’s expression was impossible to read, but the cold in her eyes faltered like a sudden spring thaw. “She saved me. And now I...” Dolls looked at her, then down. “I need some air.”
Outside was almost worse.

The air was cold, sharp, clawing at her like daggers through her shirt. Snow was falling, flakes sticking to her hair, her hands, her nose. The air was so cold it hurt to breathe, but she sucked in breath after painful breath. Nicole hadn’t been breathing and now it felt like she couldn’t either. Like she’d given all her breath to keep Nicole alive another few minutes.

“Oh god this can’t be happening,” she heard herself muttering as she lurched away from the hospital doors. “This can’t be happening.” Her head was spinning and she kept moving, her body on autopilot, until she reached a bench. She rested a hand on it and bent over. “This can’t be happening.”

“Oh, but it is.”

She spun, standing. A woman was behind her, familiar, yet foreign. Cold, and alien, and garbed in modern clothes, instead of that horrible Victorian garb. Waverly wanted to take that stupid blue scarf and garotte her with it.

“Beth,” she said. “No. Not Beth.” The Widow smiled, none of her teeth showing. Smug, as if she was pleased Waverly had finally worked it out. “Who are you really,” she said. “What are you?”

The Widow gave an exaggerated sigh. “Hungry, mostly. And you smell...” She eyed Waverly up and down. “Rare.”

“Your sister attacked my girlfriend.”

“She’s not really my sister,” the Widow mused. “She’s more like.” She tilted her head, looking for the words. “My demon husband’s other wife.”

“I don’t care.”

The Widow gasped, offended. “But I thought that we were bonding.”

Waverly moved past her and the Widow caught her elbow, forcing her to turn.

“You can stay, or I can make you stay.” Waverly remembered the sensation of frost on her face and icy cold crawling through her blood and stopped, trying to read the Widow’s intention behind those stolen eyes. “Mercedes thought that Nicole had the Stone Witch’s seal. Dumb bitch. But she was right about one thing: she got lucky when she bit Nicole instead of you.” Waverly watched her. Those dark eyes had nothing behind them. No emotion, no empathy. Just cold, brutal efficiency. Sorcery and hatred, diabolic plans and lust for power. “Because now,” she said, and she sounded cheerful of all things, “The heir’s sister has motivation.” Waverly’s mouth twitched, and the Widow smiled. “To help me.”

“I would never.”

“Only I can cure her.”

“What? But the doctors are—”

She laughed, bright and airy and so inhuman it made Waverly’s skin crawl. “Human doctors! How adorable are you?” A wave of sick, twisting fear ran down Waverly’s spine. Did it matter that Nicole wasn’t human? Did that make her odds better, or worse? The Widow beamed at her,
unfazed by her sudden nausea. “Why don’t you ask your marshal what happened to Juan Carlo? Or, better yet, why don’t you go take a look at his body for yourself? See what our venom does to human flesh.”

Waverly could almost hear Nicole’s voice in her head. *Mikael said that since we still have human outsiders, the boundary doesn’t block us. Did this work the same way?*

She didn’t have time to question the mechanics. She yanked Nicole’s pistol from her pocket. For all that the heavy pistol was a fraction of the size of her preferred 12-gauge shotgun, it was so much larger and heavier than the .22s she was used to that she felt a little like a child holding her father’s gun. It wasn’t her fastest or most impressive draw, but the Widow just stood there and watched as Waverly disengaged the safety and grabbed her arm, unfazed as Waverly prepped a shot and pressed the muzzle to her chest.

“Tell me how to save her.”

“Oh,” she murmured, almost sounding regretful. As if she felt bad that Waverly’s plan wasn’t going to work. “No, bullets can’t kill us.” She laughed again. “I admire your bravery though!” Waverly hesitated. Lowered the gun. “I believe your sister knows where the last seal is. Find it, give it to me and only me, and I’ll save your little lover’s life.”

She clicked the safety back on and pushed the gun back into her pocket as the Widow headed down the sidewalk. “I would never betray Wynonna.”

“Well,” the Widow said, turning and giving her a look of mild disappointment. “Then I guess you better get to picking out a casket, say...” She lifted a hand and raised it about four or five inches over her own eyeline. “Yea tall?”

She spun around and walked away.

Could she do it? Could she sacrifice the final seal, Clootie’s resurrection, and Wynonna’s ire, to save Nicole? Did she dare?

Could she weigh one woman against an apocalypse?

Put another way, could she face down the rest of her life, no matter its length, without Nicole at her side? Without being able to rest against her strength, hear that heartbeat, stroke her fingers through her hair each night? Without being able to push her face into reddish-brown fur and breathe in power and woodsmoke and warmth?

The thought made her chest ache like someone was pressing her into the ground with a steel block. Suffocated and compressed.

Moving like an automaton she went back inside, her mind still racing. Even if she could get to the point of being willing to do it, she didn’t know where the third seal was. For now, at least, it was a moot point. A thought experiment going nowhere.

“Hey,” Dolls said, ducking out from behind a nurse’s station as she passed him. “There you are. Wynonna’s in there with her.” She barely noticed him, and he set a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, you all right? You’re shaking.”

“Yeah,” she lied. “Just cold. What did the doctor say?”

“They can’t identify what bit her,” Dolls said, heading down the hallway with her. “But I ordered a tox screen.” He showed her a vial of Nicole’s blood.
“What?” she whispered. She didn’t dare say anything here, near a crowd of nurses, but if someone other than BBD analyzed that blood, what could they find that would point to her true nature? “But– Dolls.”

“They want to induce a coma. Slow the venom’s move through her system.” He blew out a breath and met her eyes as she stopped, trying to figure out why he looked so sad. “But Nicole said that she won’t go under.” He gestured to her with the vial. “Until she sees you.”

She touched his arm, hoping that conveyed all the words she didn’t have time to say, and took off at a run.

Chapter End Notes

Many many thanks again to Mischiefess for looking over this chapter (and the next few!) for me. You are a gem!
Wynonna was really starting to have enough of hospitals. The OB/GYN visits were bad enough, but today she had Mercedes, faceless and dodging death a corridor away... and now Nicole, who was one stupid conversation away from a medically induced coma.

Where the hell is Waverly?

Focus, dammit. Focus. No matter how much it feels like a whiskey would help right about now.

They’d finally brought Nicole out of trauma and into another room. No one told her where, at first, but the distant and all too familiar sound of Nicole gasping and screaming drew her as easy as following Theseus’ string.

She shoved past two nurses to get into Nicole’s room.

“How’s she doing?”

Nicole’s doctor pulled the stethoscope from his ears, giving her an ugly look. That. Well, that wasn’t actually surprising. She was pretty sure she remembered him from a prior visit of her own sometime as a teenager and unless she was remembering wrong, it had ended with a couple tongue depressors in absolutely the wrong orifices (mainly because they were his, not hers).

“Just.” She flashed her badge at him, and had never been more grateful to actually have a badge, because he sighed and stepped back to let her get closer.

Christ, Nicole was whimpering, her eyes red with strain and tears and her face pale, way too pale. Wynonna had never seen her look so bad. Not in the unofficial BBD infirmary after the crocotta incident, not after fighting Mictian, not high on adrenaline and fighting demons, not even wolfed-out and fighting the stuff of honest-to-god Greek myth.

“Oh my god it burns,” she cried, writhing in her bed, both hands curled tight into the thin hospital sheets. Her face was streaked with sweat, so much that the fluorescents reflected off her skin. She wasn’t shifting, at least, her wolf either too subdued to fight or too self-aware to risk revealing herself in front of civilians. “Please, make it stop!”

“Get her something for the pain,” Wynonna snapped, glancing at the doctor, but she couldn’t quite muster up her usual Wynonna Earp-grade steel and fire. Nicole’s agony tugged at her heart in a way she hadn’t imagined the stupid K-9 could. She’d let her sister in, she’d barely let Dolls and Doc in, but sometime when she wasn’t looking, Nicole had wiggled her way in too. Dammit.

The doctor left the room and Nicole was wheezing, dragging in breaths too deep, too fast, struggling to keep her eyes on Wynonna even as she convulsed with the pain.

“Mercedes says the path leads to the law.”

How did that bitch know where she’d hidden the seal?

“Oh, shh,” Wynonna said, pressing against Nicole’s arm to hold her down. It worked, which scared her more. She shouldn’t be able to restrain a werewolf with one hand. “Save your strength,
“Wynonna—” Nicole’s eyes tracked to her arm, then back up. “If this gets bad.”

“This ain’t bad?”

Nicole coughed out a laugh and pressed her head back into the pillows behind her, gritting her teeth. “Just listen for once, Earp, okay?”

Wynonna swallowed, hard, and nodded.

“I don’t wanna be a burden, and I don’t want a machine keeping my body alive.” She sucked in a breath. “And we both know Waverly’s not gonna let me go.”

“Nicole, please.” She only barely kept her voice above a whisper. Wynonna tried to imagine struggling to keep a comatose werewolf hidden from the hospital staff three nights a month. That was hard. But it was harder to even consider what Nicole was saying. “Don’t ask me to do this.”

“You’re the only one I can,” she whispered.

Peacemaker suddenly felt a hundred times heavier in its makeshift holster in her boot. Wynonna shook her head, readying a protest.

“And you’re the only one she’s gonna forgive.”

Wynonna felt her resolve crumbling as Nicole’s eyes searched her face.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please.”

For a horrible, frantic moment, Wynonna could actually imagine it. Failing to get the antivenom. The doctors giving up. The machines keeping her comatose, standing on that fragile line between life and death. She could almost see the shape of a trademark Earp harebrained scheme. She could imagine convincing Doc to help her spirit Nicole away from the hospital under cover of night. Taking her into the woods, maybe. Somewhere where she could see the sky and feel the wind.

She could imagine laying Nicole out on the ground. Pressing Peacemaker to her heart until the barrel glowed.

Would it glow orange? Or would it turn blue, like with Willa?

Nicole’s mouth worked but she didn’t say it again, begging with just her eyes.

“Okay,” she said, finally, and felt her stomach twist with distaste that she’d actually agreed. “You have my word.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Waverly’s shoes clacked on the floor as she ran up to the doorway.

“I’m here! I’m here.”

Wynonna nodded to Nicole. “I’ll go get the doctor.”

She tried not to look at Waverly as she fled the room.

The last thing her baby sister needed was to see her crying.
I know, I know, I'm drawing this out, but come on, I *had* to let Wynonna have a POV chapter of her own for once. Especially for this scene.
Waverly

Waverly’s shoes slid on the tiles as she skidded around the corner and into Nicole’s room. Despite the pain she was in, despite the fact that she was lying in a hospital bed, sweating and feverish and in agony, despite everything, Nicole’s face lit up when she saw her.

“Hey!” Nicole breathed, her relief making her look less drained, just for a moment.

“Shh,” Waverly murmured, perching on the edge of her bed like a bird, ready to take flight. She stroked her fingers along Nicole’s cheek and hair and scanned her face, reading the doom hiding behind Nicole’s eyes.

“You give Calamity Jane to Nedley, okay?” she said, and despite the deathly pallor to her skin and the weariness in her eyes, she grinned. Almost laughed. “He’s gonna pretend he doesn’t want her, but he loves that damn cat.”

Waverly ducked her head. Couldn’t quite meet her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Nicole whispered. “I am so sorry Waverly, for everything, I made a huge mistake—”

“No,” Waverly said, cutting her off. “Forget about the DNA results, okay? It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does. It does matter. Especially now.” Waverly watched her face, trying to read her thoughts in the twist of her mouth and the tears in her eyes. “I just really thought I was doing the right thing but I lied to you and I shouldn’t have!”

“Shh,” Waverly said, fussing with her hair. Nicole shut her eyes, pushing back tears, and Waverly fixed a curl on her forehead a second time, then a third. Against the blue sheets and her ghost-white face her hair was like a halo of flame. Waverly thought of the last time she’d seen Nicole anything like this, when she’d been silver-poisoned in BBD. Except that this time, moonwater probably wouldn’t do anything. God, at this rate, Nicole might be dead before nightfall anyway. She’d never even have time to try.

“Hey.” She waited until Nicole looked at her again. “I’m gonna be here when you wake up, okay? And we’re gonna do all of our sorrys then. ‘Kay?”

Nicole nodded, but there was no strength in it, no real conviction.

Waverly smiled at her, and it was almost all fake, but she did it anyway, forcing herself even when she thought her smile would crack open and let out all her pain like a horrible piñata. “We’re gonna have a big old Sorry Party, and I’ll make hats!”

Nicole laughed, breathless with pain and fear, and it was hardly comforting, but Waverly let it bolster her own smile. She set her hand on Nicole’s shoulder and her thumb picked up a rhythm all on its own, stroking over the sharp line of her collarbone through the thin blue gown.

“But if I don’t,” she said, and Waverly’s smile fell away like soap washed off a car. “No matter what happens. I need you to know. I have never loved anyone the way that I love you.”

“Ohhh.” Waverly shook her head. Blew out a breath. “You know what? Nope. We’re not doin’ this.”
Nicole turned her head, jarring Waverly’s hand off her cheek, and pressed a kiss into the curve of her palm.

“We’re gonna find—” She hesitated as the doctor came back in, syringe in hand, and she stroked her thumb over Nicole’s skin. “We’re gonna find a way to stop the toxin, okay?” Nicole nodded, though Waverly wasn’t sure how much she actually understood. Waverly tried to focus on her, tried not to watch the doctor administer the drugs. “You’re gonna be just fine.” Nicole’s convulsions slowed as the medicine took effect, her body slowly settling. “You’re gonna be fine.”

The doctor slipped away again as Nicole’s movements slowed even more, her body finally falling still as she went limp. Not so much relaxing as just collapsing, no longer able to hold her own weight. Her eyes slid closed, still focused on Waverly’s face until the end, until her head slid to one side. Waverly reached for her, cupping her face in both hands. She leaned closer, ghosting her lips over Nicole’s, so light it was barely a kiss at all. As if the slightest bit of pressure would wake her.

Waverly knew intimately what Nicole looked like when she was asleep. She knew the slope of her nose and the way her breath whistled when her winter allergies picked up. She knew the way her short hair flared around her head like sunrise on her pillow. She knew the way the corner of her mouth curled in a smile when Waverly wriggled closer into her arms in the middle of the night.

She knew, from watching her sleep, that Nicole’s perpetual calm wasn’t inherent. She didn’t go through her life with ease, but rather with carefully maintained restraint she used to keep the wolf just behind her conscious thoughts. She muzzled her rage. She checked her strength. That was easy enough to tell by watching her, but it was even more clear at night. When she slept, she finally relaxed. She grumbled at bad dreams and she twitched sometimes, like a dog dreaming of chasing rabbits, but asleep she was finally at ease. Only then were her thoughts quiet. Only then could she set aside her regrets. For the mother Waverly knew only a handful of things about, for her relationship with her father, ruined once he started worshipping demons. For the people she’d hurt, and for not knowing if she’d ever killed someone by mistake. For all the possible futures she’d had and then lost, when she was bitten.

Sometimes when she reached for Waverly in the middle of the night, her grip was hard. Without her human, conscious mind to leash her wolf’s physical power, her arms curled firm and tight. She pulled Waverly close without any of the shame or guilt that made Nicole hesitate and only politely tug in daylight. It wasn’t painful—she’d never hurt Waverly and Waverly knew that, trusted it as deeply as she trusted the sun to rise each morning—but it made her feel wanted, made her feel owned in a way that, despite itself, made her feel free.

At first, this looked the same. But there were little things. Little details that were wrong. The way her jaw fell slack, lips parted. The way her eyes didn’t move, tracking dreams. The way her fingers just sat, limp, in Waverly’s grasp, instead of curling slowly, instinctively, to hold Waverly’s hand in turn. The way her chest rose and fell with horribly long pauses in between, so slow that between breaths, she looked like maybe she were already dead.

Waverly found herself breathing at the same pace, matching her without thinking about it.

“Waverly.”

Her lungs burned with it, but she couldn’t get herself to take breaths when Nicole wouldn’t.

“Waverly.”

Wynonna’s hand grasped her shoulder and shook her once. Not hard, but enough to jog Waverly, break her eye contact with Nicole’s slack, unconscious face. She turned slow, stiff, like a machine
grinding, awakened to long-forgotten motion. Like surfacing from some spell. She breathed.

“You’re scaring me, babygirl.”

Waverly blinked, registering Wynonna’s face. Pale, worried. Her grip was strong but her eyes said she was exhausted. Even though it was barely nine in the morning.

“Right,” she said, running her free hand through her hair. “Wynonna.”

“Mmhm.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. But we need you outside. Jeremy’s here.”


She took Nicole’s keys from the table and followed Wynonna back into the waiting area. Jeremy was commandeering a little table for BBD’s use, and dumped onto it a veritable stack of papers and printed research out of a messenger bag. His coffee mug and his headphones were already arranged, sitting proudly in front of the papers, though the mug, for now, was empty. Waverly had a feeling he had several mugs of coffee in his immediate future.

Waverly crossed her arms over her chest, as if she could hold in all her fear with a hug. Dolls leaned against the column she’d picked earlier, looking over Jeremy’s shoulder, and Wynonna propped her hands on her hips, the very picture of an unimpressed mom.

“Jeremy, is this everything you’ve got on the Widows?” Wynonna asked, narrowing her eyes as she scowled down at his work.

“Yeah,” he said, setting down his bag, now emptied.

“Okay. The effect of the poison was immediate,” Waverly said, clasping her hands together instead. Business mode. That she could do. That would keep her from falling apart. “But, uh. She could still move.”

“Yeah,” Dolls said, tucking his thumb into his pocket. She longed for the ability to look so calm under so much strain. “My guess? It’s the same toxin they spray as a paralyzing agent.”

Jeremy nodded. “But in that case, the poison is inhaled.”


“You mean,” Wynonna cut in, exasperated with the technobabble, but hastily lowered her voice when she saw other patients wandering around, “Instead of freezing you in place it. Kills you?”

“Exactly,” Jeremy said. “Th– the widows are basically super-predators. Like Komodo dragons, which are...” He grinned, a bit doe-eyed. “So cool.” He looked at Waverly and the smile fell away from his face. “Shit. I am. I’m sorry.”

“No, Jeremy,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s– it’s fine. Um. You know, Komodos are really cool.” Suddenly no one was making eye contact with her. Wynonna’s mouth had twisted, almost a smile, like she’d laughed but felt guilty about it. Jeremy was looking at his papers. Dolls was
looking at Wynonna. “Okay but this is good, right?” she said, reaching for some of Jeremy’s research. She scooped up some of the pages and flipped through them. Some of them were photos of actual Black Widow spiders. One of them even looked like a copied page from an illuminated manuscript. “I mean– I mean you’ve already been experimenting with the venom?”

“Well, creating a vapor guard against their mist, yeah, but,” Jeremy said, “This is a whole different Quidditch game.”

Wynonna hissed out a breath. “I don’t need Star Trek references, I need you to tell me what to do.”

“Get more venom,” Jeremy provided, and looked like he had a correction on the tip of his tongue but was choosing to ignore it.

“Yeah, and a test subject,” Dolls reminded him.

“I’ll do it,” Waverly said, without hesitation. Without even thinking about it. Nicole would do the same for her, no question.

“No,” Dolls and Wynonna said, almost at the same time.

“No, you’re uh– you’re human,” Jeremy said, and Waverly had never wished so fervently that that weren’t true. “The cure is worse than the poison. It’ll kill you like it’s killing Nicole—dammit,” he said, just as Dolls punched his shoulder and Wynonna slapped his arm and hid her face in her hand. “Sensitivity training, Jeremy.”

“Oh,” Waverly said, and slapped down the pages she’d been holding on Jeremy’s work table. “Everyone just stop walking on eggshells, okay?” Fear choked her, strangling her words, and she knew she was on the verge of tears but stormed ahead anyway. “I know Nicole is dying and there’s a really piss-poor chance that we’re gonna save her, okay, but can we all just. Act like we’re winning. For once.”

They nodded, and she ran her hand through her hair. There was paper everywhere, scattered across the table, and she knew part of that was from her moving things around, but it was so disorganized, so haphazard, and there was no time for clumsiness when Nicole was relying on them. She started gathering up the paper, and words came pouring out of her mouth before she could check in with her brain.

“Jesus, Jeremy, how can you even work like this?”

He didn’t say anything, didn’t move, even as she grabbed his research and shoved it all into a pile. Her elbow hit his mug, knocking it off the table, and too late she realized it was in motion, realized it was headed for the floor.

Jeremy didn’t even flinch when it hit the floor and shattered into a couple dozen pieces of ceramic.

“Ohhhh god,” she breathed, crouching beside the table. “Your Optimug Prime.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” he said, dropping to one knee so he could look her in the eye. His voice was gentle, far too gentle for someone who’s just lost a treasured belonging. Like he knew. Like maybe he actually understood. “It’s okay. It’s not important. It’s just a mug. I’m basically a genius,” he said, with a grin that even she could tell was all for her. “I can fix it.”

“But what if you can’t?” she said, and she wasn’t sure anymore if she was talking about the mug. Nicole was far more complicated than ceramic and superglue. Could Jeremy fix her?
Waverly Earp’s life had been a long-running lesson in transience. Her father dead, her mother missing. One sister dead, one sister for so long just slightly out of reach, like a star you use to guide your ship. Her boyfriend had been a dud, her uncle now dead, her aunt retired and living somewhere else. Nothing stayed, nothing lasted. Nothing except Nicole, and now even that was in jeopardy.

She turned, searching for the only remaining constant in her life.

“Wynonna,” she said, and she could feel the tears burning in her eyes. “What if he can’t?”

“He can,” Wynonna said, shoring up Waverly’s fragility with Earp steel. Waverly stood, and Wynonna came to meet her, taking both her hands and squeezing. “We will.”

Nicole’s keys felt so heavy in her pocket. Mercedes believed the person who had the seal was still coming to Nicole’s house. What if that had been true?

“This third seal,” Waverly muttered. “Constance’s seal. Is it worth all of this?”

“Okay—”

“Maybe we could use it to lure the Widows?” Waverly suggested.

“We all love Nicole, babygirl,” Wynonna insisted, shaking her head. “And there is no way in hell she is dying today.”

Waverly tried to summon words, but they wouldn’t come.

“Do you trust me?” Wynonna asked, her voice cracking. “Trust us?”

“Yeah,” she whispered. She did, she knew she did. But if there was an easier way, a faster way, why not try it? But she couldn’t do that to Wynonna. Not like this. If nothing else, Wynonna needed to know that Waverly trusted her. After everything that had gone wrong, she needed that. They both did. She nodded. “Yeah.”

Wynonna turned back to Jeremy, reluctant to let go of Waverly’s hands. “Do what you can with the last of the veil juice,” she said, and Jeremy nodded. “Let me worry about a test subject.”

“Yeah, and I’ll speak to Ewan and his jokers in the Order,” Dolls said. “They know Juan Carlo, Juan Carlo knows the Widows.”

“Yeah, and in that case,” Jeremy added, “They bit him, meaning his body’s pumped full of venom. Might also help. Gross as that sounds.”

“Man I’ve seen you eat,” Dolls said, grabbing his coat. “I don’t get grossed out.”

“Okay, what about us?” Waverly said, watching Dolls leave and then looking to Wynonna for answers.

“You stay near your girl,” Wynonna said, turning back to her. “We need updates, timelines. You’ve already done a lot, all right? Faux-cedès is injured, thanks to you. That means we can track her from Nicole’s apartment.”

“Okay,” Waverly said, then frowned. “Who’s we?”

Wynonna sighed. “He’s a pain in my ass these days, but dammit, Doc could find a dildo in a nunnery.”
She said it with such flat candor that Waverly couldn’t help but breathe out a laugh. Wynonna squeezed her shoulders before she turned back to Jeremy.

“You want venom?” she said. “We *will* find her, and when we do.” She shook her head, and Waverly thought the bloodlust in her voice might give even Nicole’s wolf a moment’s pause. “I’m gonna *milk that bitch like a snake.*”

Jeremy looked to Waverly as Wynonna left the room, maybe looking for guidance. She shook her head, at a loss.

“Guess I’m off too,” he said.

“Thanks, Jeremy.”

“Hey, I mean.” He chanced a smile, a tiny, fragile thing, even as he started pushing his research back into his bag. “I know I’m sort of the new kid on the block, but. She’s my friend too. No thanks needed.”

It was such a simple thing, but it broke her heart a little more to hear it. She hoped Nicole knew how much an impact she had on other people. She hoped Nicole knew how many people loved her.

God, she loved her too. Had loved her for months. And she still hadn’t said it.

*How could she have never said it?*

Nicole’s keys felt even heavier now, and she could still hear it in her head. Mercedes’ voice, cackling and triumphant.

*The one who holds the seal is still coming here!*

She took the keys out of her pocket, staring at them in her palm. She gathered her coat and headed outside, poking through the keyring. The snow had stopped, finally, which was a relief, but there was still a storm inside her head. Did she dare even think about giving up the seal? Did she dare going back to Nicole’s place, alone, to face whoever had the seal, and Mercedes, who might still be lying in wait? She flipped past Nicole’s car keys, the key to her house, to her gun safe. One she thought might have been a key to the cage, and one, plain and strangely angular, she could swear might pair to a safety deposit box.

A hard, heavy hand slammed down on her shoulder and she gasped, halfway into an evasive twist before she saw the cold, stolen face.

“Jesus,” she whispered, and pulled her shoulder away from the Widow Beth’s hand. “If you’re trying to pass for a normal human, maybe don’t *jump women* in broad daylight.”

The Widow smiled. “Just came to play Let’s Make A Deal.” Waverly glanced aside. How the hell did she know? Was she psychic, too? “Did you get it?”

“I don’t know where it is.”

“You’re a clever girl,” the Widow sneered, “*Find it.*”

“Yes, I *am* clever,” Waverly noted, tapping the key to Nicole’s apartment against her palm. “I know I can’t *trust* you. I know that breaking the final seal will unleash—*"*
“My husband Clootie?” The Widow smirked. “So what? Your family’s already in hell. Always in
constant danger.” Waverly’s stomach twisted and she looked aside. That was true. Way too true.
“And you’re about to lose your girlfriend.” She didn’t even pretend to look sympathetic. She just
looked mocking. Patronizing, somehow. “But salvation,” she mused, and plucked a glass vial from
her pocket, showing it to Waverly. Inside were two secondary chambers, each of which held some
sort of viscous liquid that was brighter than blood. Redder, somehow. “Is just a drop away.”

Waverly reached for the vial, and the Widow pulled it away, tucking it into the lining of her coat.

“Or not.”

Waverly stared her down, searching for rage. She couldn’t find it, and went with the next-best
thing: cold, smoldering determination.

“We’ve put down demons, witches, even Bobo del Rey. You’ll join them in the ground soon
enough.”

The Widow regarded her with a sly, smug little curl to her mouth that made Waverly’s skin crawl.

“Nicole will get there first.”

Waverly’s resolve twisted, faltered. Fear sent ice through her belly.

“Ta ta for now,” the Widow purred, and turned aside, her heels clicking as she walked.

Dammit. Dammit. That cure was so close, all Waverly had to do was take it, or stall, or promise
and then fail to follow through, something, surely there was something. She had options, didn’t
she? She still had Nicole’s keys, and Mercedes’ prophecy, could she bargain with that?

She moved forward, started to run after her. “Wait!”

“Waverly!” Sheriff Nedley raised a hand to stop her, moved to intercept her, and she almost cursed
at him. “Hold up.”

“I,” she said, but he stopped in front of her and she hesitated.

“You got the key to Nicole’s place, right?”

“Wh—” She leaned to look over his shoulder. Just like that, the Widow was gone, as if she’d never
been. “Yeah,” she sighed.

“I gotta pick up that mongrel cat o’ hers,” he grumbled.

“Well if you hate it that much, I’ll take Calamity Jane,” she said.

“No,” Nedley said, a bit fast. His voice hit a pitch she didn’t think she’d ever heard him hit before.
“Randy Nedley’s a man of his word,” he said, then muttered, maybe embarrassed to tell her, “And
I got her a new scratching post.”

Well, Nicole had been right about that much, at least. She handed him the keys, and looked past
him again, scanning for any sign of where the Widow might have gone.

“Hey,” he said, shifting to put himself in her path again. “Hey.” He raised his arms, hands hovering
by her shoulders, and for a moment she remembered him as he had been a decade prior, before
Chrissy’s mom had died. He’d been a bit thinner, a bit less grim-faced, but still just as awkward
around teenage girls, his own daughter included. He took hold of her shoulders and pulled her to
his chest. “Ah,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. He was warm, and solid, and it actually was a little comforting. “Chin up,” he said, and patted her twice on the back before stepping back again, resting his hands on her elbows and looking her in the eye. “Officer Haught’s the strongest deputy I’ve ever had.”

She almost opened her mouth to spout something sarcastic—well yeah, you usually don’t hire werewolves, do you?—but she thought if she did she might start crying again. So she just nodded, and ducked her head. It had been a long time since she’d had someone looking at her like a father. It felt good, but also alien and uncomfortable, like trying on a piece of clothing that isn’t meant for you.

“Look I know that you two are um.” He gestured to her. Swallowed. “You’re uh.” She eyed him, a bit wary. She knew he knew, so why was he making such a big issue of trying to find a nice way to say whatever the hell it was he wanted to say? “But, you know, procedure says I had to call Nicole’s next of kin.”

“But.” Waverly almost flinched at the thought of Nedley calling Nicole’s mother. Or god, worse, her father. The thought was almost comical. Hey there mister cult-leader sir, your estranged lycanthropic daughter is kinda dying, mind coming by to at least say goodbye? Come to think of it, why would she have even given either of those phone numbers to human resources? “She doesn’t speak to her parents.”

His expression was odd, and hard to read, and for once she wished for Nicole’s sense of hearing or smell or sight. Never before had she so desperately wished she could look deeper into whatever he was feeling. He looked her in the eye with something like... maybe pity? Sympathy? Confusion?

“Neither did I,” he said. He showed her the keys again, gesturing in a vague little wave with them. “Thank you, for these.”

“Sure,” she said, feeling somehow a bit more hollow. He nodded, and headed back to his car, and she sighed. The Widow wearing Beth’s face was gone again, she had just given away Nicole’s keys and, while she had her own spare to Nicole’s home, there was no way to avoid Nedley asking a whole slew of questions she didn’t want to answer, if she just mysteriously showed up at Nicole’s place at the same time he did.

Wynonna had said she wanted timelines so, feeling a little like she had made a mistake somewhere, Waverly went back into the hospital and up to Nicole’s room on the second floor.

A woman was standing there that she didn’t recall seeing earlier. Tall, with dark hair and skin that looked bronzed by the sun. She all but loomed over Nicole, who was still too limp and way too unconscious in her bed.

“Oh hey,” Waverly said, and tucked her coat over a chair. The woman was holding one of Nicole’s charts, flipping through the pages. “Hey. You’re a doctor?”

“Actually, yes,” she said, and turned, idly tapping her hand against the clipboard. “Ah... and you are?”

“I’m Waverly,” she said, and hazarded a smile. The doctor nodded, and Waverly glanced toward Nicole. She was so pale that even the white walls seemed blue by comparison. “How’s she doing?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said, and Waverly’s confusion must have shown on her face, because she winced and elaborated. “Oh, uh, sorry. I’m not her doctor, I’m a doctor.”
Waverly blinked, smiling, halfway to a question.

“I’m Shae.”

A lifetime of lying, of putting on a face for the town, had brought her to this one, pivotal moment. Fifteen years of being the nice Earp, the bubbly Earp, of being Waverly, who never had an unkind word or a scowl for anyone no matter how mean they were or how drunk they were. A lifetime of making Willa believe that she wasn’t worth hurting, of making Wynonna believe that she had been happy at home, of making Gus believe that she was well-adjusted, of making Curtis believe that she would ever do anything but lust after the burden and responsibility of being the Earp Heir.

All of that had brought her here. Standing in front of a werewolf and pretending she didn’t know who and what she was. Pretending she didn’t know that Shae could hear the slight inflections of a lie. Pretending she didn’t know that if she wanted to, Shae could be across the room and tearing Waverly’s skin from her flesh in barely more than a few seconds.

“Nice to meet you,” Waverly said, smiling and inwardly praying her heartbeat hadn’t started hammering, praying she seemed only as tense as one would be in a hospital setting while your lover is dying. “Are you a friend of Nicole’s?”

“Sort of,” Shae said.

Anger prickled next, and maybe that was better. Maybe anger sounded different, smelled different, from terror. Sort of friends, says the bitch who bit a woman she supposedly loved at just 26, and tried to drag her into a demon cult. Right. Sort of.

Shae’s smile twisted, bitter and self-deprecating. “I’m her wife.”

She said it like it was obvious. Like it was nothing. Like it didn’t throw a gear so hard into Waverly’s heart that she stopped worrying about Shae hearing it pounding—she was pretty sure it had skipped three or four beats.

Shae moved closer, and Waverly was too stunned to move away.

“She didn’t tell you,” Shae murmured, her voice low, dangerous. “Did she.” Her words were like the Widow all over again, but somehow worse. The Widow had something to gain from Waverly, so all her threats had been indirect. To get to Waverly, she had targeted Nicole.

Shae though. Waverly wasn’t sure what Shae wanted. Was she here to finish the job, kill Nicole in her sleep? Was she here to hurt Waverly, leave her dead or dying for Nicole to find if and when she woke up? Shae’s eyes were dark, but glittered with something Waverly didn’t like. Violence, maybe. Bloodlust. Shae circled her, prowling around her with a subtle, easy grace that Waverly had seen sometimes in Nicole when she and the wolf were most closely in step.

It was awfully convenient that she swooped in so soon after Nicole was hospitalized, but then again. Next of kin, Nedley had said. Damn. He really could’ve been more specific.

“Interesting. I figured she’d tell you a lot about me. You obviously know the big secret,” Shae said, and she stopped circling when she got between Waverly and the door.

Blocking her exit. Shit. She hadn’t been paying enough attention. Waverly twisted to keep Shae in front of her. God, what she would’ve given to have Nicole here, awake and alive. It would be worth it to hear Nicole at her most furious just to have all of that vicious werewolf rage between her and Shae’s terrifyingly quiet façade of normalcy. Nicole wore her emotions on her sleeves, but Shae was so calm it tripped something in Waverly’s brain. Something that set off every alarm bell
and red flag she possessed.

“I can hear it in that adorable little rabbit-heartbeat of yours.” Shae grinned, and her front teeth were too long, shining under the fluorescents. “You’re so scared I’m surprised your heart hasn’t stopped. She must have told you quite a bit, then. About how I bit her. Made her a monster. About how awful I was to her. I don’t suppose you’re interested in my side, but then again, she’s not that far off.” Shae laughed. “Even if she’d wanted to spin some story for you, Nicole always was a terrible liar.”

Waverly had no weapons. Nothing. She’d started keeping vervain in her car, but she hadn’t driven here. Hell, she didn’t even have her purse. Wynonna was searching for Doc. Dolls and Jeremy were off to work. She was alone. With Nicole, and now with Shae. All she had was Nicole’s gun, in her coat pocket behind where Shae was standing. Out of reach, and besides which, loaded with normal rounds.

Perfectly mundane, and perfectly useless against Shae.

“She did, tell me all those things, I mean.” If she could keep Shae talking, that was good. Talking wasn’t fighting. It’s hard to hold a conversation with someone you’re eviscerating, right? “She told me about your little alliance with her dad, too.”

“But she left out the marriage,” Shae mused, and clicked her tongue in disapproval. She stepped around the chair again, and Waverly moved away, backing up step for step. “Guess that mate bond didn’t mean as much after all, if she kept that secret.”

“Mate bond?” Waverly asked. She almost didn’t register the words, too focused on trying to keep space between them. She kept her eyes on Shae even as the woman started herding her toward a corner. Shae grinned, her eyes flashing gold.

“She didn’t tell you that either? Goodness, you two are really not doing so well in the communication department lately, are you. But then I guess you’ve been so angry with her, you wouldn’t let her close enough.”

“How do you know—” Waverly bit the inside of her cheek before more words could pour out, and she jumped as her shoulders hit the wall.

Shae grinned and closed the distance, fast, leaning into Waverly’s space. She didn’t raise her arms to pen her in, but maybe that was only because the door was still open. Anyone walking by could have seen them.

“Don’t worry,” Shae murmured, and there was just the slightest hint of a growl in her voice. It didn’t sound the same as Nicole’s. Nicole’s growling ranged from comforting to unnerving, but Shae’s was on another level. That quiet, subtle sound in her chest made Waverly want to grind her teeth and cover her ears. “We’re on your turf here, after all. I’m a loner, wandering in another werewolf’s hunting ground. I wouldn’t dare kill on her land.”

Nicole wasn’t like that. Had never been like that. But Waverly didn’t have the nerve to object. Especially if some ancient sense of werewolf propriety was keeping her alive.

“No matter how much I might like to,” Shae added with a sigh, and then she grinned, showing all her teeth. “This is a hospital, after all. Civilians everywhere, not to mention they’re all mundanes, except those of us in this room.”

“I’m mundane,” Waverly whispered.
Shae laughed and leaned in a little closer, sniffing at the side of her neck. “Oh darling, don’t be silly. You’re not like them. You smell too... different. You’re something else. Something rare.”

“I’d really like people to stop saying that about me today,” Waverly said, under her breath.

“So here are my terms,” Shae said, ignoring her. “You keep your little rabbit mouth shut about me, and as long as you play along, I don’t drag you into a supply closet and rip out your throat.”

Possessed by the spirit of her sister, she opened her mouth and let something stupid pour out. “Sounds like a really unconventional new methodology for tracheotomies,” Waverly mumbled, and it probably would’ve sounded more impressive if her voice didn’t shake the whole time. “Have you considered going into medical research?”

“Oh I much prefer hands-on work,” Shae purred, and now a true growl crept into her voice, turning the words into a lethal rasp. “Nothing like getting your hands dirty.”

“Right,” she said, though it came out hoarse and way too quiet.

Shae pulled away, smooth as breathing, and smiled at her. “Want some coffee? I’ll get us some from downstairs, if you’d like.”

Waverly blinked at her once, twice, and Shae winked, raising her voice just slightly, so that if someone were walking by, they’d hear.

“I’ll go get us those coffees, Waverly, it’s no trouble.”

“S-sure.”

Shae swept out into the hallway, and then she was gone, leaving Waverly alone in the room with her comatose girlfriend. She looked at Nicole, then the door, and almost sank to the floor in her corner. Instead she moved, crossed the room, and pulled the chair over to Nicole’s bedside. She collapsed into it, feeling very much like her knees had forgotten how to be solid material and had instead swapped out cartilage and bone for pudding and raspberry jam.

“We always have the worst timing, don’t we,” Waverly said, and she wasn’t sure if she was talking to herself or to Nicole. She reached out to touch Nicole’s arm, her fingers stalling in the crook of Nicole’s elbow. “Always too early or too late.” Nicole didn’t move, didn’t even twitch at her touch. “I need you here for this,” she whispered.

Hospital chairs, Waverly was pretty sure, had not been designed with comfort in mind. Maybe whoever had made them had wanted to distill the hospital experience—tension, general unhappiness, and the ache of long hours spent waiting for answers—into the seating. One could not, after all, properly experience the dismal hopelessness of a hospital waiting room or bedroom while sitting in a comfortable chair.

So Waverly sat, and suffered, and tried to calm herself down before Shae returned. She tucked one of her hands into Nicole’s, curling her fingers around Nicole’s fingers, and patted her arm with the other.

“We’re doing everything we can,” she said, and wondered if Nicole could even hear her. The machines tracking her heartbeat and her oxygen levels beeped slow, sluggish notes, and for a moment she imagined Nicole growling and rolling over and tucking her pillow down over her head to muffle her ears. Surely with that low, incessant sound she’d never be able to sleep. Hell, Waverly didn’t dare to heat a pot of water in the house when Nicole was asleep, convinced she’d hear any and every sound and wake up in a grumbling, confused haze.
But this wasn’t sleep, and Nicole looked frozen in that moment from a half-hour prior. No longer actively dying, but hovering somewhere in the middle of life and death, waiting for change.

How could she just sit here and watch Nicole die, knowing the third seal was out there somewhere, waiting to be found and bargained away, or used as bait, or... or something, she didn’t know what.

“Almost,” Waverly admitted.

She traced her fingers along Nicole’s forearm, avoiding the wires that monitored her heart. She shifted her hand, found herself checking Nicole’s fingers on a paranoid, foolish impulse. There was no ring on her finger, but really she’d already known that. Nicole had kept the truth of her marriage to Shae a secret all this time. She wouldn’t have missed a detail as obvious as a ring. Why had she said everything else, but neglected to mention that the woman who’d bitten her had been more than a lover? It wasn’t exactly a minor detail. Had she been afraid of admitting it? Had she wanted to keep them separate for some reason? Waverly was not so mistrusting as to think that Nicole secretly wanted to repair things with Shae without losing Waverly. Nicole wasn’t like that. She and her wolf had made their opinions of Shae very clear. So why not just come clean? Why not tell her everything?

Had she been, what, ashamed?

“How didn’t you tell me?” Waverly whispered.

If she’d known, if they’d just talked about it...

She didn’t hear Shae enter the room, but maybe that wasn’t a surprise. Her ears weren’t nearly as good as Nicole’s.

“I talked to the toxicology specialist,” Shae said, and Waverly jumped, spooked, and turned to look at her. Shae was, in fact, holding two coffee cups, and was speaking clearly. Not loudly, but enunciating well, putting on a show for anyone in the hall. “They’re still trying to ID the poison.”

She offered one of the cups, and Waverly stood. The thought crossed her mind that it could be tampered with, maybe poisoned, but she didn’t think Shae would work like that. She was a hunter, in tune with her wolf for probably a couple decades. She wouldn’t sneak around and mess with a cup of coffee. Especially not in the middle of a hospital.

Waverly took the cup and tried to smile.

“You called it in, right? You were with her when it happened?”

“Yeah.” Waverly hesitated, not sure how much truth she should share. Until she knew why Shae was here, there were just too many question marks in this whole awful scenario. “I. Found her. She’d already been bitten, or. Something, I don’t know.”

Even if she hadn’t already known that Shae could tell when she was lying, the rampant skepticism on Shae’s face would have made that obvious. Shae inhaled, then let her gaze track to Nicole as Waverly fussed with her lid and took a sip of her coffee. It didn’t taste off, but then if you could taste it, it wasn’t a very good poison, was it.

Shae was quiet, her expression hard to read. She had gotten used to reading Nicole, but it didn’t seem as if there were any really common elements between werewolves. At least not when there was no growling or flashing eyes in play. At a loss for anything else to fill the silence and feeling more and more uncomfortable by the moment with the way Shae was staring at Nicole, Waverly decided to continue their hospital-audience performance. To pretend this were a perfectly ordinary
conversation between the wife and girlfriend of a dying woman.

As if that was something she had any experience in.

“So,” she said, smiling. “How’d you guys meet?”

Shae blinked, as if surprised she was being asked a question, and let her attention drift back to Waverly. “Uh. Rock-climbing, in Nevada,” she said, and moved to the foot of Nicole’s bed. Waverly turned, keeping her in her eyeline, but said nothing. “Not far from Vegas.”

“Oh,” Waverly said, then paused, understanding striking a moment later. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Shae said, with a wry smile. “We got married in a fever. Britney Live and a big win at the slot machines will do that to you.” She almost sounded genuine, and Waverly found herself smiling a little. If she didn’t know the rest of the story, it would almost be sweet. “But then,” Shae said, and her gaze flicked to Nicole again. “Things cooled off.”

More like you did something stupid and she hated you for it, Waverly thought, but kept firmly to herself.

Nicole gasped, stirring. Her eyes were shut, not slack and under sedation, now, but with strain, her brow furrowed, her breath coming faster, and one of the machines was beeping louder, faster, more invasive.

“What’s going on?” Waverly asked, leaning over Nicole to touch her face.

“She’s waking up,” Shae said. She set a hand on Waverly’s shoulder and pushed—not hard, but enough to make her intention clear—and Waverly fell back a step on instinct. She was not about to try to muscle past a werewolf. She wouldn’t win that fight.

The doctor from before brushed past Waverly to get to Nicole’s other side, and Waverly hovered over Shae’s shoulder, uncertain and feeling a bit like a sparrow, too small and too alone to be of any real weight.

“She needs something stronger,” Shae told the doctor, and Waverly felt stupid for not expecting that. Nicole was a werewolf. Her metabolism had always been too fast, too strong. Of course the drugs wouldn’t keep her out forever.

“Nicole,” the doctor said, taking her right hand and resting his other hand on her shoulder. “Can you hear me?”

She panted, tilting her head back. “It’s burning,” she said, and Waverly felt like something cold and tight and hard had curled around her heart, squeezing like a steel band.

“Any known allergies to anesthetics?” the doctor asked.

“No,” Waverly said.

“Yes,” Shae said, talking over her. “Uh, Thiopental could kill her. Give her Propofol.”

He nodded and skirted around the bed again.

Waverly was staring at Shae. She glanced at Waverly, and for a moment, just a moment, her eyes glinted yellow and somehow smug.

“Rock-climbing incident,” she said. “She needed surgery.”
Nicole was whimpering, not thrashing yet but tossing her head back and forth. Waverly watched her breathe, watched her frown, as if she’d heard something unpleasant.

For a moment, just a moment, Waverly imagined it was because she’d heard Shae’s voice.

“Kinda ruined our honeymoon.”

“Right,” Waverly whispered, trying to remember what Nicole had told her. Would it still be so dangerous to her now that she’d been changed? Hadn’t that been why Shae bit her at all, to save her from the injury and the allergy?

Maybe it didn’t matter. Maybe with the venom already moving in her body, she was so weakened that the anesthetic mattered as much as it had then. Maybe it was all just Shae, playing it up to maintain the illusion.

“I didn’t know,” she said.

“How could you?” Shae said.

Or maybe it was just Shae trying to get under her skin. The words stung. It shouldn’t, and she knew it shouldn’t. Shae was everything Nicole hated about werewolves. It shouldn’t matter what their history was. Who cared if Shae knew more than she did about Nicole?

But it still hurt.

Nicole started to go still again, quiet, and Waverly stepped back.

“Oh, god,” she muttered, as the doctor moved again, checking Nicole over as Shae hovered over her. “I’m just making this worse.”

The thought of leaving Nicole alone with Shae made her feel sick, but the doctor was still there, and a nurse besides. Shae was too smart to risk exposure in a crowded civilian hospital like this. No one who finished university and a med program while also being a werewolf for some twenty years would be that stupid as to throw it all away, even on something like this.

She backed out of the room and down the hall, trying to breathe, trying to clear her mind without thinking of that woman mocking her, patronizing her. Judging her at a glance and finding her wanting.

What did she know about Nicole, anyway? Nicole had come leaps and bounds since she’d left Shae’s company. Her view of the world was so different. Her view of her wolf was different. And Waverly wasn’t so self-effacing as to pretend she’d had no part to play in that change. She believed she’d been good for Nicole. If Shae had ever cared about Nicole, ever, couldn’t she see that?

But maybe that was the whole point. Maybe she’d never cared. Maybe it had all, always, been a lie. Somehow that hurt, even though it wasn’t her pain. Nicole had kept something huge from her, and she certainly didn’t like knowing that, but the idea that she might have kept it secret because it had all been some fraud made her heart hurt. She knew Nicole had said Shae had been working with her father. Had it all been a big scam? How many more scars did Nicole hide on the inside that Waverly had yet to see?

“Hey,” Dolls said, his boots clicking on the tile.

“Hey,” she breathed, and wiped her face. God, couldn’t she have more than thirty seconds to herself to get her thoughts together? Better question, would Dolls just once find her when she
wasn’t crying or on the verge of tears?

“Thought I’d stop by on my way to the office,” he said, watching Waverly’s face. “How is she?”

She shook her head, the soft, genuine warmth in his voice tugging at her until she stepped forward into his arms. His cologne was some woody scent that seemed more than a little ironic and which she’d smelled in Wynonna’s room at least once in the past month. It wasn’t Nicole, but she needed something real, something to ground her.

“Oh, Dolls,” she breathed, as he wrapped his arms around her.

“All right,” he murmured, resting his chin on her head. “It’s okay.” He paused as she buried her face against his chest. “Who’s that?”

She glanced back toward Nicole’s room, to see who he was talking about, but really, was there any question? Shae was standing in plain sight of the doorway, talking to the doctor.

She wanted to tell him. God, she wanted to tell him so badly. But they were still in Shae’s earshot, and while she didn’t trust Shae, she was pretty confident the only reason she hadn’t been dragged out of sight and violently gutted was that at least for now, Shae believed she would play by the rules.

So she panicked.

She lied.

“It’s just uh,” she said, and turned, leaning against the doorjamb of another bedroom. “Another doctor.”

Dolls nodded, but if he thought she was acting strange, he didn’t show it.

“So,” she said, desperate to change the topic. “Did you find the Order? Get anything from Juan Carlo?”

“Yeah,” he said, sighing. “Something, but.” He shook his head, and wouldn’t quite meet her eyes. “Well, I should probably get going now.”

He moved, and for the second time in an hour she found herself saying, “Wait.”

He turned back, eyebrow raised.

“How about you come with? I’m useless here.”

He watched her, and for a moment she was sure, terrified but sure, that he was going to say no. That he was going to tell her to stay.

But instead he just nodded, silent. Understanding, maybe, that she couldn’t sit by on her hands while everyone else rallied to save her girlfriend.

Waverly had expected Dolls to be quiet on the ride over, but he proved to be a hard man to predict. At a stoplight she felt his gaze. He glanced over at her, saw the way her eyes were glistening with
unshed tears, and without segue, without context, he started talking.

“Did you know,” he said, facing the windshield again when she looked at him, startled and blinking and hastily wiping at her face again, “That she pegged me from day one?”

“What?”

“Mmhm,” he said, nodding, scanning the intersection before he pulled forward. He was nothing if not bound by procedure. “Didn’t know at all what it meant, but she knew about me. The fire thing. She said if I tried to blow her cover, she’d pin some arson cases on me to make life difficult for me.”

Against all sense, against even her own self, she grinned. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely. Said she smelled butane and sulfur on me.”

Her laugh was a bit like broken glass, fragile and sharp-edged, but it made him smile. “Yeah, that sounds like her.”

“She ever tell you what she smells on you?”

“I’ve asked. She didn’t really say.”

“No?”

“Nah, she just.” She tucked hair behind her ear. “Always said I smell like me. Why?”

He smiled. “Had a conversation with her once about what emotions smell like. Grief, joy, anger. That kind of stuff.”

“Sure. She told me once that fear smells like pre-dawn frost. Like chain-link fences in the dark.”

“Yeah. Ever ask about any of the others?”

She wondered why he asked, but the conversation was a good distraction, so she didn’t press. It was nice, to remember Nicole at her best: a big romantic, full of poetic lines about things inherent to human beings, and yet things they couldn’t quite relate to.

“I guess. She said happiness smells like sugar melting on a wooden park bench in the sunshine. Anger smells like electricity burning through plastic, sort of that ozone burning smell. And hope.” He glanced at her, but didn’t interrupt. “Hope smells like thread burning. Like flame, catching to the wick of a candle.”

“Did you ever ask her what love smells like?”

It didn’t seem possible, but as she wracked her brain, she realized it had never occurred to her to ask that. “No, I didn’t.” She looked at him. “Did you?”

“I did.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she didn’t think love was as simple to codify. Love is more than one emotion. More than one set of chemicals.”

“Hm.”
“So I said, all right, but if you had to say one thing. What is it.”

“Sure,” Waverly said. He watched the road, but she didn’t think that’s where his focus was. His mouth was caught in a tiny smile, even as he pulled into the PSD parking lot and put the car in park. “What’d she say then?”

He looked at her, his eyes hard to read, his mouth still curled in that small, sad little smile. For a fraction of a second, she didn’t want him to answer her. She could feel what the answer was going to be even before he opened his mouth, and it made her chest feel raw and cracked open like an egg.

“Warm air. Soft, worn leather. And a dirt road, edged with wildflowers.”
Dolls hesitated outside the BBD door, frowning and leaning his head toward the glass so he could listen.

“What is it?” Waverly said.

“Shh.”

She waited, impatient.

“Jeremy’s in there with.” He frowned. “Sounds like Rosita.” He looked at her, his face a mask.

“Ros—” She froze, seeing the shape of Wynonna’s plan. Who better to be a test subject for a horrible, maybe lethal cure, than someone who was extremely hard to kill?

God, and she was the one who told Wynonna about Rosita.

This was her fault.

“We could take a break,” Jeremy was saying, as she pulled Dolls out of the way and shoved the door open.

“No, don’t,” Rosita was mumbling, waving a haggard hand at Jeremy. “Just—”

“Jeremy stop!” she called, dumping her bag on a table and crossing the room in a handful of tense, clacking strides. Rosita looked like she was on the verge of passing out, her tanned skin gleaming with sweat, hair sticking to her forehead. She otherwise looked almost comfortable, lounging in a chair with one arm propped up, a needle and tube taped to her arm as a makeshift IV drip.

“It’s not me!” he objected. “Rosie insisted because Wynonna insisted. Who I’m not blaming, because someone has to test the antivenom, but this is total bullshit and makes me feel like horfing.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, “It should. This is not who we are.”

She reached for Rosita and Dolls grabbed her by the shoulders, yanking her back. “Hey, hey, whoa. Whoa. Hey.” He pulled her in close to him and she fought the urge to elbow him in the side, right between his ribs. Teach him to regret training her in self-defense. “It’s the only way we have to save Nicole, okay?”

“No, it’s not,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, gentle, easy, like he were dealing with someone who was not fully grasping reality.

Which she could understand, but still made her feel like screaming at the injustice and irony of her entire life.

“It’s not,” she said again, with more force.

He sighed, but released her, and she leaned forward, carefully setting her thumb to Rosita’s arm to
brace it as she removed the needle. She handed it back to Jeremy, who looked torn between gratitude and regret, and she straightened up again as Rosita stirred.

“Beth-face Widow came to me,” she said. “She. Offered to save Nicole. As long as I give her the third seal.”

Dolls’ eyes went wide. “Did you?”

“No,” she said. “Of course not.”

“Okay, good,” Jeremy said with a relieved sigh. “Cuz that seal is the only thing preventing the Widows from unleashing MegaDemon3000.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Waverly snapped. “But Nicole’s running out of time and if this experiment isn’t working—”

“What if you did?” Dolls said, his voice soft, thoughtful, almost dangerous in how smooth and calm he sounded.

Waverly snapped around to look at him. “What?”

“I mean, you’d do anything for the woman you love, right?”

Her resolve cracked. She still hadn’t told Nicole and it burned, to hear him say it so casually. “Dolls.”

“So what if you made the deal. And gave Beth the third seal...”

Jeremy sighed, looking away, as if he knew he had no hope of swaying Dolls’ opinion and couldn’t bear to watch. Looking away from a train wreck.

“And she actually followed through and saved Nicole.” She couldn’t look at his face. Seeing the quiet, understated fear of losing a friend reflected in his eyes was too hard. Too hard to remember that while she might be the closest to Nicole, she was far from the only one who would grieve her if she were gone. “When they raise their dead demon husband, she’d be there to help us put him back where he belongs.”

“After everything Wynonna’s done to get that seal,” she said, her voice cracking. The thought that she was actually arguing against the only solid way she knew of to save Nicole, seemed incomprehensible. “How could I?”

“You can say I made you,” Dolls said, so utterly serious it made her heart skip a beat in muted fear. “I ordered you.”

_Of course_, she thought, in a small corner of her brain. _Of course now is when you decide to make up your mind on whether I’m an agent or a consultant for BBD. When it most serves your ends._

She shoved that aside and tried to focus. It was tempting, God, was it ever tempting. To hand over responsibility of that betrayal to someone else. To save Nicole and let him take the fall for it. There was just one problem.

“I don’t even know where it is.”

“Yeah, neither do I,” he said. He shrugged out of his coat and set it on the desk. “Jeremy,” he said, shifting his attention away from her. “Think outside the box.”
That’s what she said,” Rosita mumbled.

“That’s what she,” Jeremy gestured to her, maybe realizing the joke a second too late, because he pressed his lips together and just nodded.

Waverly turned to look at him as he was rolling up his sleeve.

“Dolls, no. What are you—?”

“What’s the point of being different if you can’t use it, right?” he asked. She covered her mouth with her hand, stifling some irrecoverable expression of her regret as he stepped past her and patted Jeremy on the shoulder. “Hook me up. We got a ginger to save, boy, let’s go!” He sat on the edge of Jeremy’s work table and offered his arm. “What the hell is taking Doc and Wynonna so long.”

Jeremy sighed, clearly displeased by the way his day was going, but set to work prepping Dolls’ arm.

“I um,” she said, trying not to watch. “I should go see Nicole one last—” Dolls glanced at her, met her eye. Jeremy turned to look at her, and where Dolls was sending covert signals, Jeremy’s expression was a goddamn open book. “One more time.”

“All right,” Dolls said.

She stepped closer. “Hey,” she said.

“Hm?”

“I’ll never forget this,” she said, and leaned in, pressing a kiss to his cheek. Hoping that said all the things she wanted to say.

“Ready?” Jeremy asked, as she turned away.

She tried not to listen to Dolls’ screams.

They chased her all the way out anyway.

Waverly knew Shae would still be there, hovering over Nicole like some horrible modern cousin of Black Shuck. But at a loss for any other ideas, she made her way back to Nicole’s hospital room. Little had changed. Nicole lay in her bed, limp and pale in medically-induced sleep. When Waverly reached the doorway, she found Shae sitting in the chair Waverly had left, her hands tucked together and her head dipped forward in something that under other circumstances might have been sweet: a woman haggard and exhausted, sitting vigil by her wife’s bedside.

If it weren’t for everything else, it would be inspiring.

“Ah, you’re finally back,” Shae murmured, without lifting her head.

“I see you’re still here.”

“Nedley called. I couldn’t very well not come.”

Waverly sighed and slipped past her. Headed for the window. Being near Nicole settled her thoughts a little. Helped her think, helped her focus. Even with Nicole asleep, it made things a little easier, just being near her.
“I’m surprised administration had your number as her emergency contact. I can’t imagine Nicole gave it to them.”

“Oh she didn’t,” Shae said, with an idle shrug of one shoulder. “You should probably talk to that tech-happy friend of yours about upgrading the security systems on the department’s personnel records. It was alarmingly easy to switch von Holstein’s number for mine.”

Waverly sighed and leaned her shoulder against the glass. “Right. Of course.”

“What, don’t you want to hear what the doctors had to say?”

Waverly rubbed her eyes with her hands and turned to look at Shae. “All right.”

“The iron count in her blood is too high,” Shae said, and frowned, as if she were actually puzzled by it. Waverly wondered where the line was between I don’t care if you live or die and But this medical mystery is fascinating. She almost thought she knew the answer, too, except that then Shae’s voice shook, just a little, as she added, “Her organs are shutting down.”

“There’s gotta be something else,” she whispered.

“They pumped her full of Deferoxamine, but she’s not responding.”

“I’ve got everyone working on this,” Waverly said, mostly to herself.

“I read her tox screen,” Shae insisted, her frown deeper now, brow furrowed with confusion. “It doesn’t even make any sense.”

That, Waverly thought, might have been the only honest thing Shae had said all day.

She looked at Waverly, and Waverly wasn’t sure if it was genuine or if it was just another part of the façade. “What exactly do you people do?”

Either way, she certainly wasn’t going to answer. She moved to the foot of Nicole’s bed, muttering the only thing she could think to say.

“I tried to keep her out of danger.”

“Well if you thought that’d work,” Shae said, with a wry smile creeping into her voice, “You don’t know her at all.”

Waverly flinched. Looked away. “Right.”

“Hey,” Shae said, with a foreign gentleness that didn’t sound right coming out of her mouth. “What we had was. Fun. It was great, but. It wasn’t real.”

Waverly frowned at her, trying to hold her own emotions at bay long enough to read into Shae’s. God, what she’d have given for Nicole’s instincts.

“But you,” Shae said, looking her up and down. “She really loves you, Waverly Earp.”

Waverly’s throat went tight. She ground her teeth together, stunned into speechlessness. Why even say all this? Why do this, why comfort the woman who loves your wife more than air, more than sense? Was this just more mockery? Why would Shae be pushing them closer, if her real goal was just to rip them apart?

Was it some sick game, or was it something simpler, something more real?
Was there some part of Shae that actually did want Nicole alive, even if it meant she was happy with someone else? Was there some part of her that cared? Some part of her that wasn’t here for a fight?

“We have to save her,” Waverly said. Even as she said it, she wasn’t sure if it was born of defiance, or of a bid to try and get Shae to help.

“There’s nothing anyone can do,” Shae said.

Shae, who knew of moonwater to clean silver and knew to wear necklaces to keep her keys with her during a shift and probably a hundred other tricks. A werewolf since she was a teenager, far more knowledgeable about the whole supernatural world, and yet there she sat, at a loss. Supposing it was even the truth, that thought hurt worse than Jeremy testing on their friends. If she didn’t know what to do, what chance did they really have?

“Unless you have a miracle up your sleeve.”


“The doctor told me that.” Shae looked toward Nicole again, and once again Waverly wondered why she was saying all this. “If she wakes up again, I should say my goodbyes.”

There was a crack in her voice that Waverly didn’t expect. A tremor that sounded so real that Waverly hesitated, wishing yet again for Nicole’s ears, for her sense of truth.

Either way, she had a plan, and Shae would have to wait.

“I’m not saying goodbye,” she said. Spitting in the face of god.

She left the room, scanning for a twice-familiar face. She found her target, chased her down a hallway. Not daring to run, but picking up to almost a jog.

“Gretta!” she called, waiting for the nurse to look back over her shoulder, waiting for the moment of recognition. “Gretta,” she said again, catching up as Gretta slipped through a door.

“I’m sorry, this isn’t my floor,” she said, the words grinding between her teeth as she tried to dodge Waverly.

“I knew your sister,” she said.

“I don’t have a sister,” she lied, easy and sharp. She slipped past the counter of the nurse’s station and gathered up a file.

“You did,” Waverly noted, leaning her hands on the counter. “A twin. Mattie the Blacksmith.” She slid along the counter until she was facing Gretta. Read her nametag, G. Perley, RN. “And I’ve heard rumors about you, too.” She glanced to either side. Lowered her voice to something conspiratorial. “The Iron Witch.”

Gretta glanced to the side and leaned in closer. “I know who you are,” she murmured, her voice just as soft, but lethally cold. “Don’t presume to know me just because you saw my sister die.”

“Please,” Waverly said, her voice shaking, betraying her as Gretta snatched up a file, ready to ignore her. “I need your help. My love, she.” She hesitated, the word sounding so right, but so horribly desperate in this context. “She’s got iron, in her veins, okay? She was—”
“Bitten? By something not of this world?” Gretta guessed.

“Yeah,” Waverly said. Well. That had happened twice, technically, but she kept that part to herself. “A demon.”

Gretta rolled her eyes. “Did you see this demon?”

Waverly watched her dead on, and for the first time all morning, she felt like she had a foot on level ground. Like she was on the right path, dealing in the parts of this whole horrible scenario where she knew what to do, what to say.

“A widow in black that can levitate and steal faces.”

Gretta actually met her eye, finally, one eyebrow arched. Intrigued.

“Not just one,” she said.

“You know them?” Waverly said, the relief that she was being taken seriously so heavy and tangible it almost knocked her over.

“There was a story my great-grandmother used to tell,” Gretta said. “Two twisted spider sisters. They’d attack pretty girls. Ate them whole but for their faces. These, they wore as masks, to lure the girl’s remaining family members, one by one, to their deaths.”

“Yeah, well, they’re real,” Waverly said. “And it’s not just my family they’re after. Your great-grandmother, did she.” She swallowed, steeling herself for the worst. “Know how to save someone who was bitten?”

Gretta pursed her lips, thoughtful. “An antivenom? Maybe.” She considered it. “Yes,” she said, and hope filled up Waverly’s chest like a floodlamp. “Yes, I could get this for you. But my price will be steep.”

“Whatever it takes,” Waverly said, immediately.

“You make a promise to an Iron Witch, it’s binding,” Gretta reminded her. “I get anything I want.”

She offered a hand. Waverly glanced at it, inhaled, and took it, shaking.

“You have my word.”

Gretta smiled, and just for a moment, a flicker of fear trailed down Waverly’s spine, erased almost immediately by apprehension and quiet, terrified hope.

Gretta pulled her hand back, plucked up a pen, and clicked it. She glanced around, checking for witnesses, and then closed her eyes, inhaling, slow.

“Wo ist die Antwort auf dieses Lieben?” she murmured.

Waverly frowned, suddenly wishing that German, modern or otherwise, had been one of her university picks. But no, she had to go with Ancient Phoenician.

Gretta opened her eyes and scribbled a phrase onto a post-it.

“You will find a cure for what ails your love in here,” she said, and handed the note to Waverly.

“Thank you.”
Gretta nodded and slid away, rejoining foot traffic as she headed down another hall of the hospital. Waverly opened the note.

**Mug. Sheriff.**

Waverly almost called out after Gretta, but bit down that urge.

“Is this a joke?” she muttered, but pocketed the note, and gathered up her coat. There was no use sitting here, and if that was what the witch’s spell had given her, well. She’d have to trust it, at least for the moment.

She resolutely did not go near BBD’s office door when she returned to the station. She couldn’t hear Dolls or Rosita, but that didn’t necessarily mean they weren’t still testing, and she didn’t think she could bear seeing the results of Jeremy’s work. As it was, neither Wynonna’s nor Doc’s cars were out front, and if they still hadn’t arrived, then there was precious little chance that Jeremy had made any real headway.

She crept past the bullpen—empty, despite it being a normal day, thank god—and headed for Nedley’s office. He was missing, probably still fetching Calamity Jane and getting her set up at home. She slid in past his door, trying not to remember the last times she’d come into Nedley’s office when he wasn’t present. Thoughts of Nicole hurt too much, even as they shored up her resolve. She read over the note again, then stepped to the side of his desk, plucking up his trademark Dad mug, the one Chrissy had decorated for him when they were about 11 years old.

She peered into it, trying to make out something against the dark interior, and then tilted the mug over. A ring fell out, heavy, silver, with gold inlay in the band and a red stone. She set down the mug and picked it up, looking closer at it.

“Doc—Doc’s ring?” she muttered, if only to fill the silence. “He never takes this off.” A thought struck, slow, quiet in the back of her mind. “Unless. The Widows have rings, too.” She tightened her grip on Doc’s ring. “*The cure for what ails my love.*” She inhaled, slow, and shut her eyes, as if not seeing it would block out the truth. “The third seal.”

When she got back to the hospital, she waited out front, lingering on the sidewalk until the Widow with Beth’s face sauntered up, wearing a smug little smile and that stupid scarf.

“Well? You’ve kept me waiting an awful long time. I sure hope your dog is extra durable. Have you been feeding her her Greenies? I hear Purina makes some fabulous immune-boosting product now.”

Waverly pulled her hand from her pocket and showed the Widow her prize. Doc’s ring, sitting quiet and ordinary in the palm of her hand.

The Widow was suddenly very quiet, her gaze fixed on Waverly’s hand like it were a particularly tasty morsel.

“What, all out of jokes?”

“I’m impressed,” the Widow murmured. “I didn’t think you’d actually have the nerve.”

Waverly pushed her hand back into her pocket. “Cure her first.”

“You’re hardly in a position to bargain.”
“That may be, but you’re the one who offered a deal. And I still don’t trust you.”

“Fine,” the Widow drawled. “Shall we?”

She turned for the doors, and Waverly jogged to catch up to her, until they walked in side by side. They passed doctors and nurses and patients alike, none of whom seemed to notice them striding through the halls, all purpose and level gazes. When they were halfway down the hall to Nicole’s room, she heard sudden motion, as of someone springing out of a chair. Shae appeared in the doorway, sniffing at the air, and when she spotted them, her manner suddenly changed, so polite and calm that it gave Waverly whiplash to witness it.

The Widow paused just inside the doorway, eyeing Shae with amused disinterest as Waverly slid in after her, standing just to the Widow’s side.

Shae dipped into a low bow, her head lowered until she was gazing up at the Widow, a wolf offering subservience to a pack leader.

“Of course this is your work,” she murmured. “I should have expected you, my lady.”

The Widow sighed and looked away from her, donning an expression of apathy as easily as a parka. “Honestly,” she said, and Waverly actually thought the comment might have been directed at her, “Some things never change, no matter how long you’re locked in a box.”

“My people and I, we’ve been preparing for what’s to come.” Shae grinned, a touch of reckless violence in her eyes. “We’re trying to help open the gates.”

“That’s so sweet,” the Widow said, dripping with sarcasm. She stepped forward, patted Shae on the head, and Shae grimaced, offended but pretending she wasn’t. “But I have no interest in dogs begging for scraps at my husband’s table.” She flapped a hand in dismissal. “You can go now.”

“But—”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. My husband does not require servants. He binds slaves. Do you understand?”

Shae frowned and looked to Waverly, who tried to look as uninvolved as possible.

“Fine,” she said, and slid past the Widow. She stopped in the doorway and caught Waverly’s eye with a sneer. “This isn’t over,” she growled.

“It looks an awful lot like it is,” Waverly said.

Shae bared fangs, pointed white teeth a full inch long, glared murder with bright gold eyes. And then she was gone.

“Shut the door,” the Widow said.

“What?”

The Widow turned, looked at her with Beth’s false, vapid smile.

Waverly swallowed and obeyed. The door shut with a thud and a click.

“Move back.”

She did, and the Widow stroked a hand around the seam of the doorframe, blueish white energy
like smoke or fog trailing behind her fingers, sealing up the cracks.

“What is that?” Waverly asked.

“Soundproofing,” she said.

Waverly got as far as opening her mouth to ask before thinking better of it. While she was all too happy to look a gift spider in the mouth, she wasn’t actually sure she wanted to know the answer. She didn’t know why the Widow might care about sound getting out of this room, but only god knew what the cure would do to Nicole. The last thing they needed was some doctor running in while she wasn’t perfectly in control of her wolf. Or, for that matter, while the wolf wasn’t in control of Nicole.

“Unbind her arm.”

Waverly chewed on her lip and moved to do as she was told, carefully unwrapping the bandage from around Nicole’s arm. The bite marks were still visible, not actively bleeding but not healing, either. The Widow pulled from her pocket the vial she’d mocked Waverly with before, pulled off the stopper, and moved to stand beside Nicole’s bed. The vial leaked off a foul crimson smoke as it hit air, and stank of something acrid and toxic.

“As much fun as it would be to see you splatter all over the wall,” the Widow said, sounding bored, “You might want to step back.”

“Why do you even care?” Waverly asked, frowning. “Is it dangerous?”

“No,” the Widow said, ignoring her first question. “But she is.”

Waverly knelt on the floor beside the bed and wrapped an arm around Nicole’s shoulders. She breathed in once, twice, and watched Nicole’s slack face.

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Your funeral,” the Widow muttered, and upended the vial over Nicole’s arm. The liquid inside was viscous, and moved like molasses, sliding out of the vial in a sticky stream until it found the open wound in Nicole’s skin. It squelched in under Nicole’s flesh like a conscious thing, drawing itself into the open cuts.

For a moment, nothing happened. The Widow capped the vial, tucked it into a pocket, and offered out a hand.

“Did– did it work?” Waverly asked, looking at Nicole.

“It will, once you uphold your end of the deal,” the Widow said. “I’m not running a charity for lost puppies.”

Waverly let out a breath, but dug into her pocket, shoving Doc’s ring into the Widow’s hand.

The Widow beamed. She pocketed the ring, and then snapped her fingers. She disappeared, and in the same instant, the toothmarks on Nicole’s arm suddenly hissed and popped, like oil hitting a hot pan.

Nicole’s body bucked and she sat halfway upright, making a sound like nothing Waverly had ever heard before. Some horrible mix of snarl, howl, and all-too-human scream, strangling in her throat and grating. Waverly grabbed onto Nicole’s shoulders and held on tight, praying Nicole wouldn’t
She had asked for an antivenom, but it seemed clear she should have asked for something fast-acting. Nicole screamed, screamed until she choked on it, until her voice went hoarse with it and she simply writhed and thrashed in her bed, her face twisted with agony and her mouth open in a horrible, soundless expression of despair.

For a minute, a horrible, endless minute, Waverly actually hoped that the Widow had lied. That it would kill her. Just so long as it would end her suffering.

Jeremy’s voice echoed in her head. *The cure is worse than the poison.*

God, how right he’d been, and he had no idea.

She wasn’t sure how long it took. How many minutes had passed until Nicole’s veins vanished back beneath her skin, pale blue and unnoteworthy. Until Nicole finally collapsed back into her pillow, unmoving, but breathing haggard and too fast. Her color was better, a little bit, and she licked her lips, wincing as her tongue flicked across dry, cracked skin. Her eyelids fluttered, once, then again, and she opened her eyes, wolf-gold, blind and confused.

“Hey honey,” Waverly whispered.

The bite marks on her arm looked awful, leaking some kind of reddish liquid that smelled like the antivenom. Waverly grabbed for a cloth and carefully wiped it away as the wolf re-oriented. When it was clean, she re-bandaged it, hoping no one would notice it had not been done by a nurse’s steady hand.

“What’s.” Nicole winced, closed her eyes, opened them again on warm human brown. “Waves?”

Waverly meant to answer. Really, she did. But all that came out of her mouth first was a sob, and she bent over Nicole, ducking her head to Nicole’s chest.

“Hey,” Nicole said, resting one hand on Waverly’s shoulders and one on the back of her head, fingers curling weak and absentminded into her hair. “Hey, shh, it’s okay.”

“I thought I’d lost you,” Waverly whispered.

“Can’t,” Nicole mumbled. “Can’t lose home base, baby. Cuz it doesn’t move.”

Waverly laughed, and pulled back, and wiped her nose.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Nicole smiled. It was a tired smile, a shadow of her usual one, but it was hers, all dimples and flashing white teeth.

“That’s my girl.”

Waverly rubbed a hand across her eyes, grinning behind her fingers. “And you’re mine.”


Waverly blinked, felt fear run down her spine. “What?” She sat up, ran a hand through her hair to
“Yeah. It’s weird,” she said. She sat up, moving a bit more gingerly than usual, and leaned in to cautiously sniff at Waverly’s neck. “It’s like Shae’s perfume.”

“Can we talk about that later?” Waverly said, trying not to panic. The last thing she needed was for Nicole to realize Shae had been here, and recently too. “I need to get a doctor in here to make sure you’re really okay.”

Nicole frowned, thoughtful, but nodded. “Okay. Yeah, okay.”

Her doctor was as confused as she was. Being honest, Waverly still felt like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting to learn that the Widow had snuck in one last trick to make a fool of her. But then he left, to analyze the results of one more test, and Waverly finally started to relax.

“You’re really tense, baby, are you okay?”


Nicole could almost certainly tell, but she smiled and leaned in to nuzzle her nose against Waverly’s.

“Okay. If you’re sure.”

Waverly winced. It always hurt to lie to Nicole, even briefly, and not just because she always knew. “I just. It’s hard to explain.”

“Waverly? I have the best news!”

She looked up as Wynonna swung into the hospital room, a vial of dark red liquid in hand. Time seemed to stop, for just a second, as Wynonna registered that Nicole was upright, sitting on the bed of her own power.

“Haught damn, you made it!”

Nicole grinned as Wynonna swooped in and grabbed her up in a hug.

“Okay!” Nicole squeaked out. “Just. Still not 100%. So maybe less squeezing?”

“Yeah,” Wynonna breathed, pulling back and looking her over. “How?”

“Nobody knows,” Nicole offered. “I. I woke up, and I felt completely fine.”

Wynonna looked at her, and Waverly ducked her head, shame crawling up to sit on her shoulders like a cat.

“It’s a miracle,” Nicole said.

“It’s something,” Wynonna said, faltering on the words. She turned her focus on Waverly, and Waverly looked up at her, feeling like some strange echo of Shae from earlier. She dropped her gaze, the sight of understanding dawning across Wynonna’s face feeling like a bullet straight to her gut. “I told you to wait,” Wynonna said, sounding small and terrifyingly fragile. “I gave you my word I’d get a cure. And I did,” she said, gesturing with the vial. Nicole looked from Wynonna, to the vial, to Waverly.

Waverly looked toward the floor again, feeling Wynonna’s terror and Nicole’s confusion on her
like physical weights.

“Waverly,” Wynonna said. She sounded on the verge of tears. “What did you do?”

She’d known, that this would come. That this conversation had to happen. But god, she’d hoped to have more time. To be more ready.

In the absence of that time, she panicked.

She pushed down tears and grabbed her bag, shoving herself off Nicole’s bed as she flung herself out the door, racing for the parking lot. She didn’t think Wynonna would follow her, exactly, but even so she fled, driving too fast for the snow and the tears she could barely see through, tearing down the road until she could park in the alley behind Shorty’s and hide inside. It was the first place Wynonna would look for her, probably, other than the Homestead, but if she could just breathe, and clear her head, maybe she could think her way out of this.

And then Gretta came sauntering in through the front doors, all but skipping down the steps to the main floor.

“Well,” she mused, smiling that sly, vulpine smile of hers. “You look unhappy. Maybe you didn’t love Nicole Haught after all.”

“How dare you.” Gretta raised her eyebrows, unimpressed by the fire in Waverly’s voice. “You said you’d point me to the antivenom!”

“No, I said I could get you the antivenom.”

“Oh,” Waverly breathed. “That was a dirty trick.”

“Is she not cured?”

“Wynonna will never forgive me.”

“No my problem.”

Waverly breathed out a sigh and reminded herself that it was unwise to attempt to deck an Iron Witch.

“Fine,” she said, when she’d more or less conquered her temper. “What do you want.”

“That,” she said, pointing to the Marzaniok’s trophy where it sat behind the bar, its usual hiding spot whenever Rosita wasn’t actively using it to manufacture Dolls’ serum.

“Oh, no,” Waverly said, skirting around the bar as Gretta came around the other side. “No way.”

“You told me to name my price,” Gretta said.

Waverly bit down her first answer—you’re twisting my words—and waited, watching as Gretta stepped up to the trophy and set a hand on it.

“This is it, Earp.”

“You know, you make a wish on that thing, you’re gonna regret it in ten years,” she said, grasping at straws.

“I’m aware of the cost.”
Gretta turned to the trophy. “Kommen Sie,” she murmured, “Ich brauche Sie, und ich beschwöre Sie,” she said, and then repeated it, starting from the beginning in a chant.

The door of the bar opened and slammed shut, and Waverly glanced away from Gretta only long enough to see that it was Doc.

“I got a frantic text message from Wynonna, said you’d run off,” he said, racing up to her side. He took one look at the witch and paused. “The Blacksmith?”

“Her sister,” she explained.

“Lassen Sie uns übereinkommen,” Gretta intoned.

“Gretta,” she said, glancing at Doc, then away again. “She. Helped me with something.”

“Mein Wunsch, lass meinen Feind verschwinden.”

“Disappear?” Doc muttered, translating. “Waverly, why is she jabberin’ in German?”

“Das ist mein Wunsch.”

“I don’t know,” she said, fear crawling up her throat.

“Dass es so wird als wenn Wynonna Earp—”


“—nie existiert hätte.”

“Stop,” Doc snapped. “Now!”

“I changed my mind, okay?” Waverly shouted, panic rising up in her chest like water at high tide. “No deal. No deal!”

Doc glanced at her, then stormed forward, reaching for Gretta. “Hands off that trophy, witch!”

“Das es so sei,” Gretta intoned, and just as Doc grabbed the trophy, to wrench it away from her, he vanished in a flash of light.

Waverly gasped, taking a half-step back. “What did you do.”

“Sorry about Holliday,” Gretta said, with a decidedly unapologetic shrug of her shoulder as she pulled the trophy down off the table. “Chalk it up to collateral damage. You two Earp girls. You got my sister killed. Now this is your punishment. One will disappear. The other will have to live with it.”

“No,” Waverly breathed, turning to follow as Gretta made for the door, hopping up the steps. “No. No! Undo it!”

Gretta grinned at her over her shoulder and swept outside.

“No! Wynonna!” Something, something old and powerful, tugged at her thoughts, pulling at her body like riptide, and she looked around her, scanning for a familiar face.

She called for Doc, but he was gone.
She called for her sister, one last time, before Waverly forgot even her name.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, only two episodes left...

Thanks again to Mischiefless for going over these chapters with me! And thanks also to @Wayhaughton for tweeting a transcription of Gretta’s spell way back when, cuz that was a godsend.
Sheriff Haught

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Haught hitched a ride back to the center of town, trying to remember why she’d left her cruiser at her house instead of at the hospital. For that matter, she wasn’t sure why she was wearing civilian clothes when she needed to be at work within the hour. But then again, waking up somewhere with little memory of how she got there wouldn’t have been the weirdest thing to happen to her since she got to Purgatory. Given the way her life had been going, the weirder thing was that her clothes weren’t bloodstained and there wasn’t any sinew stuck between her molars.

Not that she was complaining, of course.

Her house was silent when she entered, and combined with the sparse décor, it looked more like a museum exhibit than a home. Her living room, such as it was, had almost nothing in it, other than a cheap, uncomfortable sofa and a coffee table with a single coaster on it. Not because she cared about keeping the furniture in good shape, but because that was what people expected of a cop.

The kitchen looked more like an IKEA display than a functional room. There were no knickknacks on the shelves, just a small dish set of serviceable plastic and ceramic. Enough to make a few simple meals with, but cheap enough to discard if she had to leave in a hurry.

She bypassed each of these, heading for her bathroom. She stripped out of her civvies, dumped them in the basket, and frowned at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was getting a bit long. Her shoulder blades itched and she turned, twisting to look over her shoulder, peering at her back in the surface of the glass. A pentacle bound within three concentric circles covered most of her upper back. She squinted at the complex lines, checking the integrity of the ink. It was a communication spell, or at least so she had been told. A way for her father’s “family” to keep track of her. A string of runes was tattooed clockwise in the outer band, another written counter-clockwise in the inner band.

Her wolf pushed against the tangible sensation of the ink. She was furious, howling blood and vengeance. Haught frowned, trying to check in and pierce through the wolf’s rage. Their relationship had started out tumultuous, but over time they had each made some concessions. The wolf respected her personhood, and in return she respected the wolf’s needs. In the process, she had learned to trust her wolf’s instincts. The wolf was usually the first to know when something was wrong, and if she was this riled up, something was very wrong. Frankly “riled up” was an understatement. The wolf was absolutely incoherent. She never made much sense, of course, but this was new. Usually Haught could get at least a vague sense of what was upsetting the wolf, but this time it was nonsensical. She just got the same idea over and over.

Wrong! All of this is wrong!

She bared her fangs in the mirror, gave a vicious snarl that echoed off the bathroom walls, and watched her eyes turn such a bright gold they almost glowed. Yes, she thought as loudly as she could. This is definitely wrong.

She’d been getting more phone calls lately. Shae was getting restless. Her father wanted results.

The wolf raged and howled, not satisfied with that. Haught frowned, pushing her down. They didn’t have time to bicker over semantics. Her bedroom was as quiet and empty as the rest of the
house, but when she walked inside, a big fluffy ginger cat was sitting on her bed. She stopped dead in
the doorway. She never left windows open, and strays never came near her, smelling
lycanthropy on her from meters away. But there was most certainly a cat, just, there. Sitting on her
bed and staring at her with those wide, unblinking feline eyes. She stood there for what felt like an
age, but the cat was unfazed, and Haught moved, keeping to the wall to maintain distance from it.
She kept her eyes on the cat as she pulled one of her uniforms from her closet, dressing quickly and
holstering her sidearm on her belt.

The cat never stopped staring at her.

Stranger even than the cat’s presence was the fact that her wolf seemed completely at ease with it.
She had expected her wolf to growl and push for violence (not ideal, she didn’t want to clean blood
out of her comforter again) or at least for a show of dominance and territory. She’d run into that
before, with a particularly pushy neighborhood cat. But with this cat, her wolf almost seemed...
docile. Respectful, as if she had some kind of arrangement with the little ginger beast.

She skirted around the room again with the cat’s knowing, slitted eyes following her, and left
without a word.

Maybe it was some witch’s familiar. It wouldn’t be the first time her father’s “family” had extorted
some loophole in the boundaries of the Triangle to send a pet across to surveil her.

She left a window open, hoping the cat would leave or just poof itself out of existence or
something, and took her car back to the station. Lonnie, her one remaining employee, would be on-
shift when she arrived. Which. Well. Being her last officer, he usually was. They’d both been
pulling pretty much round-the-clock shifts for weeks. Her initial requests for additional manpower
from the city had all ended in casualty reports, so most of her newer requests were being
stonewalled.

Not that she could blame them. Who would want to work in Purgatory, when your options were
either work in the big city, or work in a town that had been taken over by gangbangers, that had an
apocalyptically high crime rate, and had a 90-some-percent officer fatality rate?

Hell, if it was her, she’d pick the city too.

Lonnie was out on the roads on her way in, and she tuned her radio to listen to his voice reporting
robotically about what he was dealing with. More violence out on the west side of town. Shots
fired, but no casualties. Unless you counted Old Man Hitchens’s remaining eardrum being
ruptured.

She clicked off her radio and walked into the station, and heard an all too familiar voice echoing
into the empty halls.

“She was everything!”

*Doc Holliday*. This might be actually be a good day.

“And she has been taken, or worse: erased!”

She stalked the halls and let out a subvocal growl, though she expended a great deal of effort to
keep herself human. While Dolls needed her in place as Purgatory Sheriff, for now, she didn’t want
to find out the hard way that he considered her expendable. Shae and her father had already
intercepted at least one message Dolls had sent out about her, but for now BBD didn’t know her
secret. If they did find out, best-case scenario she’d end up a leashed supernatural BBD flunky just
like Dolls. Worst-case? She didn’t really know what the worst-case was. Being some four-star general’s fur rug, maybe.

“Are you gonna make a demand?” Dolls said, his voice a level, tense sneer. “Because if you’re gonna make it, make it now, before I shoot that compensating mustache off your smirking face.”

She glimpsed Holliday standing in the BBD doorway and pulled her baton, sneaking up behind him in near-silence.

“I want you to remember,” Holliday said. He sounded soft. Sad. Desperate, almost.

That was weird. She’d never heard him talk like that before.

Haught stepped up behind him and whipped the end of her baton across the back of Holliday’s head. He crumpled, collapsing to the floor, and his hat tumbled off onto the tile floor.

As soon as she did it, it felt wrong, somehow. Her wolf cried out in horror, almost as if she hadn’t expected Haught to do it. That was strange too. They were usually on the same page.

But Holliday had been getting in her way for months. She pressed all her memories of that toward her wolf. He’d killed dozens, including Nedley. His demons had killed easily a hundred more. He was a drug kingpin. An extortionist and a racketeer. Holliday’s mayhem and criminal enterprises kept her so busy with maintaining a façade of “protecting and serving” that she’d had less and less time for her work searching for the seals. Which in turn was making Shae testy.

Her wolf subsided, but she was decidedly not happy about it.

Dolls slowly lowered his pistol, and Haught grinned at him. “We have the Doc Holliday in custody.”

“Oh my gosh,” Jeremy said, even as he stepped over Doc’s limp feet and crouched down at his side. She followed suit, squinting at Doc’s face. Jeremy took the man’s guns out of his holsters and started stacking up bricks of RDX from his jacket. “I have so many questions for him.”

Dolls tilted his head, surveying his prize. “Put him in there. With whatever she is.”

“Wh– what if she eats him?” Jeremy asked.

“Well it’s like black widows in a jar, Jeremy. May the best bitch win.”

Haught helped Jeremy move him, huffing and puffing more than she really needed to in an illusion of exertion. Dolls kept his pistol on the creature in the chamber while they opened the door, and Haught gave Doc a vicious kick in the side to shove him the rest of the way in. He groaned, starting to wake up, and Jeremy slammed the door shut.

Haught tucked her thumbs into her belt loops and headed for the door.

“I’ll just get the paperwork started, shall I?” she offered.

Dolls grunted, but Jeremy grinned and waved as she walked out. “Thanks Sheriff!”

She waved over her shoulder and headed back to her desk. As usual, it was covered with a mountain of paperwork that would probably take hours. As if she didn’t have enough to do.

She had about an hour of peace without Lonnie in the building, but eventually he returned, and took up his post at what used to be the reception desk. After Sarah was shot crossing Fifth and after the
three resignations that followed, Haught had converted it into a workspace. It just made more sense.

“Lonnie,” she called, about twenty minutes after he’d returned. “Why am I holding a Missing Person report with the word Person scratched out and Pug written above?”

“Mrs. Grandeur’s dog disappeared,” Lonnie said, turning to look at her. She sighed and tossed the paper onto her keyboard, reaching for another stack. “I dunno why anybody’d keep a dog in Purgatory though,” he continued. “What with all those coyotes.”

“Coyotes, right,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. Between the demons and her own monthly jaunts, it sure as hell wasn’t coyotes killing the local dog population. “Lonnie, we have forms for missing animals. You really gotta pay attention.” She sat back in her chair and her eyes scanned to the plaque and photo of Randy Nedley on the wall. “God, I’m tryin’ my best, old man, but.” Regret and guilt chased around in her stomach like a dog after a cat. “Damn, I miss you.”

Shae thought that sentiment was stupid, and didn’t waste time telling her so whenever it came up. And maybe she was right. After all, Haught had her chance to do something about the explosion and fire that demolished the Nedley residence, killing both father and daughter, and she hadn’t done a damn thing. She had stood on a rooftop two houses down, lurking in the shadow of a chimney stack, all lumbering beast and golden eyes.

She had listened to the screams, had breathed in smoke and the stench of burning flesh. She had watched as Holliday’s demons killed half the volunteer fire department from across the street, leaning out of second-story windows with rifles. But she had known even then, that if Nedley died, she would be sheriff. And if she were sheriff, she’d have reign of the city, freeing up both time and access to figure out where the hell the seals were hiding. She could unearth the demon and appease her father and her wife. Maybe win enough favor to get them to let her go free, at least for a while.

And so she had lurked on the rooftop as Nedley died.

She had done nothing.

Haught glanced to the clock, looking for anything to distract her from her own thoughts. 11:59. She gasped, a surge of satisfaction and excitement spiking through her chest. Despite all the death and fear and the diaspora of people leaving Purgatory, Shorty’s was still in business. One particular employee was still there, and in high demand, too. Haught grabbed a tube of chapstick from its spot next to her pen cup, applied some, and ran a hand through her hair. And just as the clock ticked over to 12, she smelled Waverly coming in through the front door.

Waverly was nothing like what her father’s researchers had described. While Haught was prepping for a move to Purgatory, they had briefed her, painting a picture of a broken woman. Waverly was the dregs of her family, they’d said, laid low by tragedy and the ravages of a system that was never designed with people like her in mind. Her father and older sister had been killed when Waverly was six years old, taken during an attack against their home by some of Wyatt Earp’s seventy-seven undead outlaws.

Waverly Earp, last of her name, should have been all raging fire and hard iron. Instead she was a forgotten bit of driftwood, left in a corner to gather soot and dust. She had been adopted into Gus’ family so deeply that she’d even taken the woman’s name, and the curse slumbered while she forgot her birthright.

That was not quite what Haught had found. Some of that had been true, but she also found Waverly to be a popular young woman with a fire that was more than what the Earps were said to be.
Something new. Tempered steel that was some mix of Earp and Gibson. Something strong and flexible and beautiful and kind. Something that smelled delicious, like warm air and strawberry shampoo, and...

And her fiancé’s cologne. Ugh.

She glanced over as Waverly slid around the counter, waved, and sauntered up to Haught’s desk in tight-fitting jeans and her trademark Shorty’s shirt tied off above her waist. A few dozen nights’ idle fantasies of laying kisses across that expanse of bared skin wandered through her mind, so real that she almost would have called them memories.

Except that was impossible. She had definitely never slept with Waverly Gibson. Waverly soon-to-be Crofte. No matter how much she wanted to, that had definitely never happened.

Right?

Deep inside her chest the wolf was making a noise she’d never heard her make before. It ground in her chest like a growl but it hitched, occasionally, like a child screaming and weeping in the middle of a thunderstorm. Haught looked inward, prodding the great beast to try to feel out the edge of the emotional storm brewing in the wolf’s corner of their shared consciousness. Just touching it, mentally, struck at her like a blow. It was something so much more than heartbreak. It was a fury and grief so old and so deep that Haught couldn’t understand it. It felt like looking into the Grand Canyon, or leaning over the side of a boat on open ocean, or peering up at the sky on a cloudless night.

She felt so very small, in the face of that pain. It made her chest ache and made her eyes burn as if she would cry too.

“Your regular: chicken salad,” Waverly said with a beaming smile, setting down the container of food.

“Oh!” Haught said, startled out of her own thoughts. She blinked, struggling to re-orient. What the hell was that?

“But I added pickles,” Waverly said, frowning. Haught struggled to maintain her smile. She’d smelled them from across the room. She definitely knew there were pickles. “Do you like pickles?”

“I love ‘em,” she said, and while she’d learned to be an excellent liar here in Purgatory, this was a bit of a tall order. Even she could hear the strain in her voice.

“Oh great,” Waverly said, relieved, and turned to sit on the corner of her desk. “Food’s not moving like it used to, so we’re pits-deep in ‘em.”

“Ah,” Haught said, forcing a smile. The phone was ringing and she had a hard time not baring her teeth in frustration as Lonnie just let it ring. “Things’ll turn around. You put your face on Shorty’s sign, we’re gonna have a tidal wave of new Purgatorians!”

Waverly chuckled, but it sounded a little bitter, maybe. “I might have to put my face on the ‘Now Leaving Purgatory’ sign.”

“You’re really doin’ it, huh?” Haught asked. There was some comfort in that idea. Waverly was the best thing about Purgatory, but between Holliday’s demons and the one Haught’s father meant to release, Purgatory was already not a good place to be, and it would only get worse once her father got through with it.
Being the best thing about a town like Purgatory was a really good way to get dead.

“Yeah.” Waverly looked at the ring on her finger. “It’s time, you know. For real.”

Haught thought of Perry Crofte, left at the altar because Waverly had gotten cold feet, more than once. The wolf seized on that thought, that picture, like a sailor grasping at driftwood, and began to claw her way back from grief to rage. Haught wasn’t exactly keen to stop her, either. Rage she could work with. Rage was useful. Constructive, at least in its ability to be destructive.

“It’s real,” Waverly said again, a little wistful. Haught almost smiled, not from happiness at Waverly leaving, but at the soft smile on her face as she examined the ring. Waverly looking happy felt. Right, somehow.

The wolf’s sudden fantasy for ripping Perry apart into tiny pieces and burying him at the bottom of the abandoned well out north also might have helped. Just a little bit.

“Oh, hey!” Waverly said, and hopped off the desk, turning to look at Lonnie. “You guys are sort of like DMV now, right? Cuz I need to fill out a change-of-name form.”

“I haven’t—”

“I got it,” Haught said.

“Wait, I thought you said—”

“Phone, Lonnie,” Haught snapped. “Get the phone.”

Waverly smiled and watched her as she dug a form out of a drawer.

“Oh, hey!” Waverly said, and hopped off the desk, turning to look at Lonnie. “You guys are sort of like DMV now, right? Cuz I need to fill out a change-of-name form.”

“I ain’t—”

“I got it,” Haught said.

“Wait, I thought you said—”

“Phone, Lonnie,” Haught snapped. “Get the phone.”

Waverly smiled and watched her as she dug a form out of a drawer.

“Well, little known fact,” Waverly offered, shy and grinning. “My real last name is Earp.” Haught let her face go blankly interested, pretending she didn’t already know. “Yeah. I was raised by an incredible woman named Gus Gibson. So I sort of. Borrowed the name.”

“Oh,” she said. “I had no idea.”

“The name Earp,” Waverly said, looking off into the distance. “Ugh. It’s such a curse.”

If only you knew.

“Oh I like this!” Waverly said, looking down at her hand. She took Haught’s fingers in hers, stroking her thumb across the knuckles. She was looking at Haught’s wedding ring, a simple, golden band. But all Haught could think about was the sensation of her fingers, warm and soft and
so familiar, somehow. “It’s simple.”

“The one thing marriage is not,” Haught muttered, and then frowned at the ring. Tight jewelry was top of the do not wear list for werewolves, and besides, for all that she was technically still married to Shae, they were hardly what she’d call on good terms. “Why am I wearing this?”

“Well,” Waverly said, ignorant to Haught’s confusion, and pulled her hand back. She examined her engagement ring, framing it with her fingers. “Fresh start. I’d be a fool not to marry him. Right?”

“As long as you believe it in your heart.”

“I sort of feel like I’m. You know.” She gestured, cringing. “Running towards a cliff. Terrified of jumping, but.”

“Well, if it’s right, you don’t think about the cliff.” Haught smiled, just a little, and Waverly mirrored it. God, she’d give up all that remained of her humanity if only Waverly would have her and look at her that way all the time. “Because you’re sure when you reach the edge, you’ll fly.”

Waverly’s gaze flicked down to her mouth, then up again, reading her face, maybe. Against all sense, Haught would have sworn she looked interested. Waverly’s heartbeat had picked up, too, as if she wanted to lean forward but was trying to talk herself out of it.

“If you go off a cliff,” Lonnie interjected, “Don’t you die?”

Waverly turned, reluctant, to look at him, and Haught struggled not to growl. Waverly’s phone buzzed, saving her from embarrassing herself, and when Waverly saw the screen, her smile faded.

“Oh! He’s outside.”

“Ah,” Haught said, pulling her hand back, into her lap.

“Thanks for this,” Waverly said.

“Thanks for lunch,” Haught noted, smiling, but her heart wasn’t in it.

Waverly headed for the door. Haught watched her go, and her wolf did too. The wolf had gone quiet now, rage and anguish filling up within her until it sloshed at the thin boundary between their minds. Haught pressed against the wolf, trying to ask questions, trying to understand the breadth of what was happening between them.

You’ve never acted like that around her before, she thought at the wolf, but the wolf sat, terrible and silent in her grief, unable, or perhaps just unwilling, to answer. What’s different? You’ve been strange all day.

“You gonna eat those pickles?” Lonnie asked, interrupting her one-sided conversation.

She shot him a glare.

“What? You don’t like ‘em.”

“Well I do now,” she grumbled, snatching the carton off her desk and hugging it protectively to her chest. The stench of vinegar was choking, but it was from Waverly, and she did not want Lonnie’s grimy human hands on her food. “So buzz off.”
HELLO AGAIN PUPS. Long time! The house has been swarmed with in-home therapy folks lately so I've been bogged down in things, and then 66 actually became the first time that a chapter required a 100% scratch-and-rewrite. ＠＿＠ Fingers crossed I've figured out the bulk of my scheduling nonsense and I'll see you soon with 67.

Also, you may have noticed this finally has a chapter endcount. Barring anything surprising happening, we are coming quite close to the end of our journey...
Sheriff Haught

Haught was running out of places to look around town. She knew the demon’s wives had broken the seal that was moved to Shorty’s basement, plus the one in the church-turned-school-turned-residential development. But the third eluded her. She’d checked every temple, church, and Mason lodge in the Triangle, and still nothing. On Shae’s suggestion, this time she was trying an old bar that had been abandoned for a couple of months. It had at one time been a popular hangout for mercenaries, but Holliday’s demons had run most of them out of town.

Now, the bar was empty of people except for a couple of drifters who’d taken shelter from the biting winter wind. They were easy enough to dispose of—the younger man bolted when she growled into the air vents, but the other was so old and frail that one good golden-eyed snarl made her heart stop—and then Haught had her run of the place. She turned over tables and knocked on every cabinet wall and floor for hollow spots. After twenty minutes she’d gotten so frustrated that she tore the place apart, literally, ripping beams from their moorings and tearing away wall panels to get to the spaces behind. Nothing. No big stone discs, no metal runestones, no nothing. Shae’s lead was bogus. She snarled and kicked a few stools and tables over, just for good measure, but eventually she dragged herself back into her car and tried to calm down.

And then her phone rang. She cursed under her breath before she realized it was her personal phone, the ringtone wrong for it to be the burner Shae used. When she dug her smartphone out of her pants pocket, she found the display lit up with Waverly <3, and scrambled to answer it.

“Ms. Gibson?”

For a moment Waverly said nothing, but then there was a muffled sound, like a sob, and Haught sat up a bit straighter in her seat.

“Where are you, Waverly?”

“Shorty’s,” she said, between big gulps of air.

“Are you hurt?”

Waverly made a faint, wailing noise. Muffled—she’d covered it behind a hand. “No.”

“Are you in immediate danger?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’m coming to get you.”

There was a sound. Fabric rustling. Probably a nod. “Okay,” she said, like she’d just realized Haught couldn’t see her.

“Stay on the line,” she said, and set her phone down in a cupholder as she jerked the car into gear and kicked up ice as she tore off toward Shorty’s.

When she pulled up in front of the bar, she found an absolutely obscene amount of blood smeared across the front patio and the snowy sidewalk. She blinked, trying to reconcile the grisly scene against Waverly’s report that she was not in danger. Had something changed since the phone call? It couldn’t have, she’d been listening the whole time.
She grabbed her station-issue shotgun from beside the front seat and got out, loading a shell into the chamber with a deafening slide and *thunk* of metal. She snarled deep in her chest and listened first, but there was nothing. No crunch of ice and snow, no rapid breathing, no guns ratcheting or clicking or anything at all. She could smell Dolls, though. Sulfur and gasoline, and a lot of it, too. And Doc Holliday. Leather and whiskey and gunpowder. She took a deep breath, smelled the blood on the snow. And inside, too, she caught the piss-and-blood stink of a corpse.

Well. Shit.

She avoided walking through the wet streaks of blood in front of the door, but noted that the handprints smeared all over seemed to be moving away from the bar, rather than toward it. Someone crawling out of the place? And recently, too, it still hadn’t dried.

Haught pressed her shoulder to the front door, swinging it slowly open and leading with the muzzle of her shotgun. The place looked clear and she scanned a second time, letting her vision tint gold to borrow the wolf’s senses. She heard muffled sobbing. That would be Waverly. Now with the door open she could smell Waverly too. Sticky, cold, rancid fear. Underneath the fear and blood was the smells of the bar: coffee, beer, pickles and steak sandwiches. Not nearly enough to cover up the sickly sweet stench of death.

“Ms. Gibson?” she called, keeping her voice quiet as she moved past the entryway. Just ahead, under the bar, Waverly was sitting about five feet away from... Jesus. Doc Holliday’s cooling corpse. It had only been what, a few hours, since Haught had kicked him into BBD’s containment chamber. How had he gotten free? More importantly, how the hell had he gotten *dead*?

Waverly was conspicuously unmarked with blood, but she’d changed clothes since Haught had seen her last, abandoning the jeans and shirt for an elegant white dress and a crown of pink flowers. She’d wrapped her arms around her knees and ducked her face, and was just sitting there on the bloodstained ground in her clean white dress, weeping.

Haught smelled gunpowder and smoke and scanned the room one more time. There was a huge pool of blood in the entryway, and it smelled like the gun had been fired here, right where she was. That might explain why Waverly was clean, even assuming she was the one who fired the gun, but what the hell had happened here?

“Jesus, Waverly,” she muttered, but as she moved forward to go to Waverly she saw Holliday’s face, twisted and pale and blind-eyed in death. She froze, her chest going tight and cold. Her wolf howled, a long, low mourning call full of so much sorrow and loss that her eyes burned with tears.

What the hell was wrong with her? If Doc Holliday was dead, that was a *good* thing.

Wasn’t it?

Haught forced her body to obey and slid the strap of her shotgun over her shoulder. She gathered up Waverly in her arms, scooping her up off the floor like a child until Waverly was standing on her feet. Haught walked her a few steps away and turned, putting Waverly’s back to the body.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Waverly said, and her eyes found Haught’s face, but in a sort of haphazard, unfocused way. Still in shock, maybe. “God, he just—I was in the basement, and I just. I wasn’t even supposed to be here. The man in the asylum said, said I was supposed to find Wynonna. He called me his angel. Like Mama used to. I came here to look at her stuff and—”
Wynonna. Why did that name sound familiar? Her wolf was suddenly at attention, ears forward, tail stiff with tension and anticipation, and Haught didn’t know why.

“Asylum? Waverly, what asylum?”

She shook her head, dragging in a deep breath. “It doesn’t. It doesn’t matter. I heard someone up here, so I came up with my gun and—and it was Holliday, only he was. He was glad to see me?” she said, so confused and lost that Haught reached out and stroked a thumb down her cheek. Waverly leaned into it, just for a moment, her eyes slipping shut in relief. “I know it doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about that.”

“He said the same thing as the man in the asylum,” she whispered, meeting Haught’s eyes with her own still shining and wet with tears. “He said I have to find Wynonna.”


She sobbed, clinging onto Haught’s sleeves and bending forward, as if the weight of it all was sitting on her as a physical burden. “I don’t know, god, I don’t know...”

Haught inhaled, trying to think even as the wolf pushed and pushed at her to hold Waverly tight and never let go. Haught tried not to listen to that—as much as she wanted to do exactly what the wolf was asking for—and looked toward the body. “Single bullet wound,” she muttered aloud, and glanced toward the bar, where Waverly’s shotgun was sitting on the polished wood.

“I didn’t—”

“I know,” she murmured. “I know. Did you see who shot him?”

“Dolls,” Waverly whispered. “Dolls came. Holliday tried to talk him down, but Dolls wouldn’t listen. Holliday said they were friends. And he. He knew things about Dolls. I think. I think he was telling the truth. He shot Dolls, but. Just in the shoulder, I guess. But Dolls shot Holliday when he bent down.”

Haught took a deep, slow breath in as her wolf wailed and hid in the caverns of her mind, filling her chest with an agony so expansive that it didn’t seem like it could possibly be her own. She looked from Holliday’s corpse to the entryway again, crunching the numbers. The pool of blood, then, was from Dolls. He had hit the ground. Holliday bent over him, and Dolls shot him in the gut, then crawled outside with his injured shoulder.

She tried not to let herself think about where Dolls might have gone after that. She needed to focus on the problem at hand. Namely, what the hell was she going to do with Waverly?

“Okay. I tell you what. Let’s get to my car.”

Waverly nodded and followed her out the door. Haught led her around to the passenger side and got her in, only heading to her own side once Waverly was inside and secure with the door shut. Haught grabbed a box of tissues out of the backseat and then slid into the driver’s seat, starting the engine just to let it idle and run the heat. She offered the box to Waverly, who had, in the moment of calm, started crying again.

“Thanks for coming to get me,” she said, plucking tissues from the box.

Haught offered her something like a weak laugh. “Standard operating procedure.”
“We both know that’s not true.” She tugged at the tissue she’d taken, straightening it in her lap. “I don’t know what’s— I don’t know what’s wrong with me!”

“Hey,” Haught said, immediately. “Absolutely nothing.”

“He’s violent, and insane,” Waverly said, gesturing with weak sweeps of her hands, trying to encompass the breadth of the confusing, nonsensical feelings with just her fingers. “A huge part of the reason why Purgatory went to shit, but when he died... Have you ever met someone and instantly known in your heart that they meant something to you?”

She thought of the surge of possessive joy and jealous frustration that swept through her every time she looked at Waverly. The warmth that filled her chest at all of Jeremy’s stupid jokes. The respect and admiration that settled her rampaging thoughts whenever Dolls asked for favors. The rage and defiance suffusing her when she got phone calls from Shae.

“I might kinda get that,” Haught said, keeping her voice soft. “Yeah.”

“God!” Waverly said, and tilted her head back, thumping it against the headrest. “He told me to find the Iron Witch. The way he said it, I... I think he meant an actual witch. That’s.” She frowned. “Crazy, right?”

“Look,” Haught offered. “This town is a haven for crazy. It’s.” Waverly looked at her, and Haught realized she stood at the edge of a choice. If she told the truth here, now, there was absolutely no coming back. Her wolf, for once, was quiet, as if waiting to see what Haught would do. “It’s supernatural central.”

Waverly looked away with a raw gasp. “G– I’ve never heard anyone say that out loud before. God! God you’re brave.”

Haught let out a breath and looked down at the dashboard. No, she was a coward. She’d crumbled under Shae’s fangs and claws. She’d caved to her father’s demands. She’d let them put magic into her very skin and agreed to do their bidding like some docile old dog. She’d come here under false pretenses, searching for the resting site of a demon, all so her father’s followers could set him free.

Brave was about as far as you could get from where she was. Here she was, Sheriff Haught, wearing a star that she didn’t deserve.

“So. Look,” Waverly said, cautious, blissfully unaware of what was running through Haught’s mind. “This Iron Witch. Do you know who that might be?”

“Maybe.” Haught nodded, slow. Gretta Perley had to be who Holliday had been talking about. She was the only witch left in the county, maybe the whole province. “Yeah.”

“And. Would it be so illegal for you to get me her address?”

Something felt horribly familiar about Waverly asking her for a favor like this, but she couldn’t place why. The wolf was laughing, thinking about something from a long time ago. Something about her keys, maybe. But that didn’t make much sense.

“Uh-huh,” Haught said, grinning and pushing the wolf’s thoughts aside. “Super illegal. But you know, if I just. Happened to blow off work, and we sort of. Pass by...”

“You’d do that for me?” Waverly said, soft, shy.

She chuckled. “I’d do a lot of things to you.”
“B— for. For me,” Waverly corrected.

“Yup!” she said, a little too fast. Oh god, she’d said that aloud. She reached for the ignition and started up her car, and she thought the wolf might have actually been laughing at her. “That too. Mmm!”

Waverly said nothing, but if she noticed how weak that save was, she didn’t draw attention to it.

“Yeah, Sheriff Haught,” Waverly said, as Haught reached for her seatbelt. “You always smell like vanilla dip donuts. They’re my favorite.”

Once, when Haught had first arrived in Purgatory, she’d scoped out the other Perley sister’s home. The Blacksmith, Mattie, had lived out in the lowlands near the Pine Barrens and Haught had visited her on the pretense of needing something to cleanse her new house. It had been mostly to see the inside of the witch’s home and determine if the Blacksmith would be a threat. She was pretty sure the Blacksmith had not been fooled, but she’d let Haught go with minimal fuss. And then it hadn’t mattered anyway, because Mattie had been murdered.

The Blacksmith’s place had been as much function as form, with half devoted to her workshop and the other half enclosed into a space that was only barely legal as a domicile. That part of the shop held her bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom, and Haught remembered frowning at the layout and asking where her water heater was. The Blacksmith had smiled her smug, knowing little smile, and mused about the heat of a forge before moving on without really answering.

Though the women were twins, the Iron Witch’s home was very different. The Iron Witch was more herbalist than metal-worker, and it showed strongly in the exterior of her home. Where the Blacksmith’s home had been a converted barn at the heart of a meadow only nominally reached by roads, the Iron Witch lived in a wood cabin in the mountains. Where the Blacksmith’s windows had been sparing and stained black with soot, the Iron Witch’s windows were thick, textured glass. There was an adjoining workshop, but it looked like it hadn’t been used in a long time.

Just walking onto the witch’s land put Haught’s teeth on edge, her skin thrumming with the power of Gretta Perley’s domain. Suddenly, she was grateful that it wasn’t too close to a full moon. The last thing she needed was the power of the land pulling her wolf out without permission in front of a civilian.

The door to the residence was unlocked and unlatched, which Haught learned when she knocked. The door swung open a few inches, easy and silent. Waverly sheltered behind her like she was used to it, which was simultaneously comforting and a little weird.

“Hello?” Haught called, listening intently. There was a soft sound of shuffling across the room, then the unmistakable click of a rifle’s safety. She sighed, heavy and audible, and raised her voice as she called through the door, “I’d rather you didn’t shoot, ma’am. It’s Sheriff Haught. I’m here to ask you a couple questions.”

Waverly, evidently ill-composed for protocol, added, a bit shrill, “A-and me, too! Waverly Gibson!”

The safety clicked back on almost immediately and Haught let out a breath.

“May we come in?” Haught called, holding a hand out to stall Waverly from barging in.

“Okay,” the Witch whispered, so soft that Haught narrowed her eyes. Just how much did Gretta
know about her?

“Should we—”

“Shh.” Haught set a hand against the door and pushed, stepping into the room with Waverly practically walking on her heels.

The inside of the house was simple, like the exterior. It was only a few rooms, and the entryway led immediately into something that Haught thought might be half living room, half apothecary. The room was dark, lit only by scattered scintillations of sunlight from the thick glass windows. The ceiling was host to what looked like a hanging herb garden, filling the room with an almost overpowering floral scent. Somewhere in a far corner was a relatively large supply of vervain. Enough to make her skin crawl.

Gretta, the Iron Witch, sat on a bench against one of the outer walls of her cabin, watching them with her good eye. The other, her right, was hidden behind a patch.

“So,” she said, tucked away in a reading nook with her legs propped on a bookshelf. “You finally found me. Figured you’d come by eventually.”

“What’s going on here?” Waverly demanded, though she had not yet emerged from Haught’s shadow.

“What Ms. Gibson is trying to say is that we have reason to think you’re involved in. Well, all of this.”

“Okay, yes,” Gretta said, screwing up her face in a frown. “But I never thought the wish would turn out like this. This spell is. The sheer scale of this is like nothing I’ve ever even read about, let alone tried.”

Haught frowned, confused, and Waverly finally crept out from behind her, crossing her arms over her chest.

“So you think this world is under a spell?”

“What, like Narnia, or Mar-a-Lago?” Haught muttered, smirking. Waverly glanced at her and she shrugged. “Sorry, it’s. It’s just...”

“Right?” Waverly breathed, agreeing. “Why would you wish for something like this?”

“Hey, I don’t get it either!” Gretta snapped, glaring at each of them in turn. “Look at me! My life is shit! And Mattie’s still dead.”

“Mattie Perley,” Haught said, remembering. “Your– your sister. She was...” Waverly looked at her and she hesitated, re framing her words to avoid some of the details. “Was killed by a freak. Calls himself the Jack of Knives.”

“What, the serial killer?” Waverly said, in hushed tones, as if she thought the Jack might be listening. She looked to Gretta. “I’m so sorry.”

“I just wanted to change the past. The entire timeline. But wishes are literal. I wished your sister gone, and.” Gretta shrugged, helpless in the face of this elder magic. “The universe erased her entirely.”

Haught looked at the rough black leather covering the witch’s ruined right eye. A sister for a sister.
An eye for an eye. That must have been one hell of a wish, then, if it took out an entire person. What the hell kind of genie did Gretta Perley have access to?

“Wynonna,” Waverly guessed, and Haught glanced at her, startled.

Gretta did too. “Do you remember?”

“No,” she said. “People have been saying her name to me all day.”

“Oh, yeah,” Gretta said. “People touched by the demonic?”

Haught’s breath caught in her chest, and she kept her mouth shut tight. Was that why her wolf had been freaking out all day? Had she known all along about this world-altering spell, without being able to articulate any of it? The wolf rolled her eyes so hard she might’ve strained something.

Haught pretended she hadn’t noticed.


Right. Her wolf had known, and so had Doc Holliday. What a pair.

“Your friend,” Gretta said, and Haught almost laughed. Doc Holliday, Waverly’s friend? Except... that might explain why Waverly had reacted so strongly to his death. Hell. It might explain why she had, too. “He grabbed the trophy at the exact moment I made the wish. Kept him immune from it. Helped him retain his memories.” Waverly’s heart was pounding with fear and confusion, and the witch leaned toward her, sliding along the bench. She grabbed Waverly’s arm, and Haught fought the urge to step between them, biting down a growl. “This spell is only cheap glamour,” Gretta said. “This demon? Is in way over his grain-sack head.”

“The Marzaniok?” Waverly whispered, wincing when Gretta’s grip tightened.

“Okay,” Haught growled, looping an arm around Waverly to pull her free.

“Wait, how did I know that!” Waverly said, her voice suddenly higher, more faint and frantic.

Haught tugged, trying to pull Waverly toward her. “Just take your hands off her.”

“No,” Gretta said, shifting her grip on Waverly to keep hold of her. “I can’t let her go now! I’ve waited too long.”

“I need to leave!” Waverly said, but didn’t move to free herself, frozen in place.

“Come on,” Haught said, taking Waverly by the arm and walking away.

“No!” Gretta cried, scooting herself out of her little nook so she could jump down from her bench. “No!” Haught ignored her and was halfway across the room before Gretta called out again. “Okay wait! Look, I have been working on a reversal spell. It’s not much, but I can lift the glamour for several seconds.”

Haught looked to Waverly, who tilted her head in a little well, worth a shot sort of gesture. Haught’s wolf growled in frustration. A warning, almost. Stay. Haught sighed, looked to Gretta, and waited.

“Peel zurück,” Gretta murmured, looking from her to Waverly and back. “Ist die falsche Welt, in und die anderen.”
“Oh my god,” Waverly breathed. A tangible, very real chill went through Haught’s body. A chilled breeze hit her legs, where her uniform pants had vanished, and then her back. A hospital gown? Her thoughts faded to the background, and the weight of Shae’s wedding ring—so heavy, even though it was so small a thing—vanished off her hand.

And then, in its place, she could remember a completely different world. A world where she had left her family. A world where she had escaped Shae. Met new friends, both supernatural and mundane. A world where people cared for her, trusted her. This demon’s spell masked it, but it was all still there. That’s why she felt connected to Dolls, to Jeremy, to Doc. To Waverly. It was all still there, it just looked different. Like looking through tinted glass. Reality, but covered up with gauze and a few party tricks.

None of this was real. Not in the ways that mattered. It was all just an illusion, a misdirect to keep them focused on what things would look like. But it was like what the witch had said. It was why Mattie was still dead. The spell couldn’t actually bring her back to life. It couldn’t rewrite history. All it could do was dress up the world to make it look like it had.

All the world’s a stage indeed.

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“This is my fault,” Waverly whispered. “I gave you the trophy with the Marzaniok.”

“Because I tricked you,” Gretta reminded her.

“And then Wynonna was erased. Wynonna.” Waverly let out a breath, half a laugh, as she remembered, and just that name brought a rush of memories to Haught, too. “Warm and funny.”

“Insanely protective,” Haught added, with a smile, remembering a fight in the police department kitchen and Peacemaker and sharp words flung like knives in defense of sister and of home.

“Hair like a mare with a Hollywood stylist,” Waverly added, more rueful. “And then.” She inhaled, sharp, and Haught wondered what more she’d remembered. “I betrayed her. Because I love you.”

The chill of the winter snow outside fell away, her whole body suddenly warm with something that was not at all physical. Her heart was so full and light it almost hurt. The wolf yipped and barked, tail wagging, overcome with joy and relief that Haught finally understood. That Waverly understood.

That Waverly was hers. No. Theirs. In every sense, and against all odds.

It was something that in this world, under the spell, Haught hadn’t imagined could ever be true. She was free. She had a home. She had friends who knew her secret. She loved, and was loved in return.

She let out a breath.

And then Gretta’s spell crumbled and collapsed.

“Wait—wait!” Waverly said, frustrated, as the glamour rushed back in to fill the vacuum. Haught hissed in distaste and pain even as Waverly rubbed at her forehead, as if physical pressure would bring back the memories. “Agh! It’s gone!”

“But not the memory of the memory,” Gretta said.

Haught bit her lip to keep from crying out in despair, struggling to hold onto the memories of what had been, what could be, but it was like trying to remember a dream. There was a whole world out
there that could be hers. No. *Should* be hers. A world of love and respect and strength, but she could hold onto only pieces of it. The rest slipped away.

She inhaled, slow, and clung to the new memories like a lifeline. Memories of wholeness and peace and affection so rich and real that it ached.

“So-- so that was why Doc Holliday was looking for that trophy,” Waverly said. “He wanted to break the spell. Can.” She moved closer, urgent, and Haught followed, drifting after her like a tethered balloon. Waverly stood at the center of her salvation. She couldn’t bear to be far from her, not now that she knew all of what could be. Would be again, if they could undo this spell. “Can we do that?”

“Enough fire can break anything,” Gretta said. “But the trophy was stolen years ago. It’s at Revenant Ground Zero.”

Haught heaved a sigh. “We’ll never make it past the front gate.” Well. *She* probably could, but not with Waverly at her side and in one piece. “That-- the Homestead’s impenetrable.”

“That’s what Daddy always said,” Waverly said, half under her breath. “Then someone proved him wrong.”

“Someone?” Haught said, frowning. “You mean...”

“Bobo del Rey.” Waverly glanced up at her. “The man in the asylum.”

Haught considered it, then nodded and headed for the door as the witch watched them go. “Just. Wear a wire so I know to come charging in if I have to?”

Waverly visibly shivered with something Haught didn’t think was fear. “Big strong sheriff a mere shout away?” she mused, and the edge of almost-flirtatious amusement in her voice made Haught’s heart soar with possibility. “I accept your terms.”

Getting to St. Jude’s wasn’t overly difficult. Nor was fitting Waverly out with a wire and microphone, which she did sitting on the curb outside the facility. Given what Waverly told her about the psych hospital’s newest patient, Bobo wasn’t exactly liable to see them out a window. She circled around to the passenger’s side, and crouched down, one knee resting on the curb as she fussied with the front of Waverly’s dress to hide the cords. The ground was cold, a bitter wind gusting now and then and creeping around the open passenger door to crawl under her jacket. She let her hand stall at Waverly’s waist when she found the outline of a revolver tucked into Waverly’s dress.

“Where’d you get—?”

“Stole it off Doc,” she mumbled. “The shotgun’s so big and bulky.”

“Good thinking,” Haught said. “Though I guess I can’t technically approve of theft.” Waverly breathed out a laugh and Haught grinned, checking the radio frequency as Waverly patted the mic under her collar and hid the earpiece under her hair. “Looks like we’re about done. Almost seems like you’ve done this before.”

“I guess I did, in that other world, but.” Waverly’s mouth twisted up in a scowl. “I don’t really remember it anymore. God, this is so frustrating!”
“It’s confusing for you too, huh.”

“Yeah.” Waverly fell quiet a moment, then added, “Gretta said that the people who can see through the spell are the ones touched by the demonic.” Haught checked the clip for the microphone. “Do you think that’s why she could see through it?”

Haught exhaled through her nose, bobbing her head to the side as she considered her answer. “Dunno. Maybe. That or she can see it because she’s the one who made the wish?”

“Hm.” Waverly chewed on her lip. “What about you?”

Haught looked up at her. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t.” Waverly pressed her lips together. “I don’t remember all of it. But you’re. Special, aren’t you.”

A bolt of full-fledged panic crawled up her spine and grabbed hold of her by the base of her neck. The wolf pushed at her, warm and comforting. She took a steadying breath and picked her words carefully.

“Something like that, yeah.”

“But you’re a good one.”

“Everybody has bad days,” Haught said. That was giving her way too much credit. She had a lot of blood on her hands in this ensorcelled world. “But I like to think I am, yeah.”

“That’s good. There’s too many bad ones out there.”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice a little rougher now as emotion choked her. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Wish me luck?”

“You don’t need it,” Haught said, and winked. “But good luck.”

Waverly smiled, and Haught got out of her way, watching as she headed for the main doors. Haught sat down in the passenger seat and left the door open, just in case she needed to run inside, and picked up the receiver.

“Hi, uh, Gina, hi, yeah. It’s me, I’m back.”

“To see Mr. del Rey?”

“Yeah, please?”

“Leave all metal with me, please.”

“Oh sure, right.”

There was a jangling of coins, maybe, though Haught wasn’t sure where the hell Waverly had been keeping them all, and then her hesitant little laugh. Had she taken out the revolver? Haught didn’t think she had.

The nurse was unimpressed. “Follow me.”

“Thanks,” Waverly breathed, walking with the nurse through a couple more hallways.
“Ten minutes.”

“Sure.”

The sound inside Bobo’s room was. Odd. Muffled, as if by soundproofing. A padded cell? Wow, they’d really busted out the full setpiece on this, hadn’t they.


He didn’t sound as head-in-the-clouds mad as Waverly had described him, but he did sound a bit. Hm. Off.

Waverly was unfazed, maybe adjusted to it after their talk earlier. “You said I was an angel.”

“My angel, to be exact.”

“Mm,” Waverly murmured. “Let’s TBD that part for now.”

“Whatever my angel wants.”

Her voice went soft and serious. “To get on the Earp homestead.”

He gave a low growl and there was a distant, muted noise of impact and fabric, as if he had flopped around on the ground. The volume of his voice changed slightly, and she thought maybe he’d gotten up, so his face was closer to her microphone. Haught almost scoffed. When he growled, he just sounded like a human making animal sounds. He was no wolf. Just a pretender, using smoke and mirrors and shadows to frighten people. “You’re too young to be the Heir yet. Where is the gun? And your lineage isn’t exactly pure.”

Haught’s growl, however, was all too real.

“Look, please—” Bobo grunted alongside a muffled whump, and Haught thought maybe Waverly had grabbed him and shoved him against the padded wall. She almost cheered. “Concentrate.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay? I need your help. Because it’s crawling with revenants.” There was a moment’s pause, and she could almost imagine the fire in Waverly’s eyes. “Like you.”

Bobo considered this information, then made a faint humming sound. “The talisman was never dug up.” There was another beat of silence, and then he leaned a little closer to her, his voice terrifyingly audible. “Be a dear and... untie me?”

“What?”

“You want help getting onto Earp land, you need me,” he murmured. “I’m the only one who knows where the talisman is buried.”

Waverly let out a long, slow breath.

Haught clicked the button on her radio.

“Go ahead,” she said.

“Are you sure,” Waverly said. Haught knew that was for her, and grinned a wolfish, toothy smile. Damn but her girl was clever. Er. That girl.
No, her wolf thought, and it was so coherent it might as well have been language. *Our girl.*

Waverly added, this time not for her, “Maybe you could just tell me.”

“Now where’s the fun in that,” Bobo murmured.

“We’re low on other options,” Haught said into her radio. “Better the devil we know.”

Waverly let out a breath, but she must have nodded, because Bobo snapped his teeth together with a triumphant little growl.

Haught listened, her body aching with tension and coiled energy, as Waverly untied his straitjacket and left the cell. He subdued a nurse, putting her on the ground within the space of a heartbeat, and then he went after the other orderlies nearby. There was distant chatter, radios squeaking. Haught heard Waverly breathing a little too hard, jogging along behind Bobo as he stalked through the halls, calling out little insults and mocking jeers at the other patients.

When they got to a main lobby, Haught heard a sound like a whip cracking, then another.

“I like your boots,” Bobo snarled. It wasn’t directed at Waverly, she thought. Too quiet, like he was facing a different direction. “*I want your boots.*”

Whoever he’d spoken to hustled to obey, making little nervous sounds as they stripped off their boots and let them *thunk* down on the floor.

The microphone picked up Waverly’s uncomfortable, “Um, sorry about this,” but she wasn’t exactly *stopping* Bobo either.

The radio transmissions lined up with real-world sound a minute later. With a concussive pulse of raw force, Bobo blasted the front doors off their hinges, and each one spun out to land in the grass. He marched out with stolen boots on his feet and a furry coat in hand, and Waverly hovered just behind him, taking a few skipping steps to catch up every few strides.

Haught dropped the receiver into the center console and slid out of her cruiser, pulling open the rear door. Bobo slipped into the coat as he approached and bared his teeth at her, though he abruptly closed his mouth when she bared fangs and gold-rimmed eyes in response. He snapped the loose tie of his straitjacket again—not a threat directed *at* her, she thought, but as a general comment on the state of things—and slid into the back seat of her cruiser. She shut it behind him and checked Waverly as she got back into the car. The pounding of her heart said she was nervous, but the set of her mouth said she was self-assured, and there was no tinge of regret or real fear. Good.

Bobo was silent for the entire drive to the Homestead. She wasn’t sure if that was a blessing, or an ill omen. His presence kept Waverly from talking, and it gave Haught entirely too much time to think. Entirely too much time to recognize that she was *angry.*

It wasn’t anger that made sense, but it was there anyway. Some of it, she thought, was her wolf’s anger, bleeding over, but she found that some part of her was still on the wolf’s page, and that part, that part that was a blend of wolf and Nicole Haught, was *livid.*

She was angry that in this world all her friends were at each other’s throats. She was angry that she was living in secret, hunting for the wrong team, all at the behest of her would-be mated wife. She was angry that Waverly was going to marry someone else, even though there was an obvious connection between her and Waverly.
She was angry that some demon had ruined her life, just to fulfill the ill-advised wish of a grieving witch.

Haught didn’t drive them anywhere close to what had once been the Earp Homestead, but stayed out of sight of the main house. As they all climbed out of her car Haught drew her sidearm out of habit, and they stole across the fields in a cluster, charting an almost direct line to the Homestead’s abandoned pet cemetery. Bobo was watching the horizon as they walked, and just as they got close his pace slowed from something strident and confident to something more leisurely and thoughtful.

“Can we hurry this along?” Haught asked, eyeing him.

“Wait. Wait,” Bobo said, half-turning, gesturing with one hand. “No. If I bring the sister, the Heir, back into existence, well that would be. Tap-tap-tap. A nail in my coffin.”

“What is this, slam poetry night?” Haught muttered.

Waverly glanced at her, but said nothing.

“Hah,” Bobo said, pointing to her, but talking to Waverly. “She’s funny. You should keep her.”

“Bobo please. Help me.”

“Oh. I know I said I would never hurt you. But that was before—” Bobo broke off with a groan and a snarl of pain as he shook off some thought, or some piece of the spell, maybe. He slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead, growling, and then was quiet, staring into Waverly’s eyes as he reconsidered. “Dig under the hamster.”

Waverly gasped. “Pikachu?”

Bobo didn’t answer, but looked up to the sky, scanning the clouds, which was answer enough. Haught watched him, only sparing a glance for Waverly as she entered the fenced-in cemetery and crossed herself to stave off whatever divine punishment was in store for those who committed the oh-so-egregious crime of hamster grave-robbing.

Haught followed Waverly into the enclosure and grabbed a second stick as Waverly knelt in the snow and started digging into the hard earth.

“The talisman is neutralizing the ground,” Bobo explained, moving to lean in the corner of the little fence. “Remove it, and the ammolite will be reactivated, and the revenants will be blown off the land like dried leaves.”

They were only digging for a few seconds before a name came like a cold breeze across the land. A shudder crawled up Haught’s spine, the prickle of fur following it on instinct before she bit it down.

Robert, the wind whispered, with a woman’s voice. Oh Robert...

Bobo stood, and walked outside the fence, squinting at the horizon as a pair of black, ghostly figures came sliding across the snow, descending a hill on the other side of a frozen pond.

He snarled again, that weak, all too human imitation, and started backing away from the open field. “Faster,” he growled, and then headed toward the Homestead. “Faster!” He picked up to a jog, and as Waverly kept working with her stick Haught looked up to follow his progress.

Bobo approached the front gate and one of the revenants came out to greet him, calling “Bobo del
frickin’ Rey? Holy shit! Bobo’s back! Boys! Bobo’s back!”

This kicked off an immediate conflict as another revenant, armed with a shotgun, bellowed at the two of them, “This is Holliday House! We follow Doc, and Doc only!”

That last revenant didn’t stay to continue the argument though, and headed toward the little pet cemetery. Haught cursed and got to her feet, working the slide on her pistol. The revenant had spotted them, and he continued down the road rather than turning back toward the Homestead. She could see him frowning, squinting at the two of them where they were crouched inside the fence.

“How’s it goin’ down there?” Haught asked, training her gun on their approaching foe.

“Ugh!” Waverly cried, stabbing uselessly at the dirt. “The ground is frozen!”

“What the hell are you bitches doin’?” the revenant shouted, and Haught fired, getting him in one leg even as the bark of gunfire made Waverly shriek. He went down in a heap in the snow, thrashing and cursing.

“Okay!” Haught looked down at Waverly. “We gotta go!”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, but looked up at her, deadly serious. “To the barn. I’m not leaving without that trophy. Come on!”

If someone had told Haught that morning that by three o’clock in the afternoon she’d be weaving through a crowd of violent, gun-wielding, bellowing demon-adjacent assholes who were all so busy fighting each other that they almost didn’t notice her, she’d have laughed. If they’d said that she’d be doing all that alongside Waverly Earp, who was wearing a goddamn flower crown, she’d have taken them to St. Jude’s herself.

And yet, here she was. Sliding under swinging crowbars and flying fists. Brandishing her gun at anyone who came within arm’s reach of them. Guiding Waverly with shouts and one hand on Waverly’s lower back. Pushing her forward, ducking under exposed beams and creating openings with her pistol, the crack of it swallowed up by the demonic voices and the haphazard chatter of semi-automatic panic-fire from somewhere in the crowd. Someone came up behind her and she turned, roaring at him and getting him in the shoulder with a point-blank shot that sent him spinning into the snow.

“Oh god, you’re so cool, Haught!” Waverly shouted, and even with her wolf’s hearing, Waverly’s voice was only barely audible over the screaming and the yelling and the gunfire.

Haught brought them around a rifleman’s watchtower and picked off two more revenants that were getting a bit too close for comfort. She waited for a tire to roll by, fire flickering out of the open hole, and then shot once more, clearing a path toward the barn.

“Go,” she yelled, pushing Waverly forward. “Go!”

Waverly screamed and ran, stick in one hand and Doc’s revolver in the other. Haught yanked the barn door open and turned around as a shot came her way, striking the barn wall. She shot once more, taking out the knee of the approaching revenant before she dragged the door closed and spun back around. Waverly had her own gun on an armed woman in the far corner, and Jeremy was crouched on top of a table on the nearer side, his hands dangerously close to the wire for some bricks of RDX.
“Do not shoot that thing in here,” the woman was snarling, “Or else this whole place blows!”

“Cuz there’s drugs and explosives?” Haught shouted, her voice gone a bit high and thready with rising fear. Her ears were still ringing after all the screaming and gunfire outside—her hearing was sensitive enough without having a few dozen firearms going off all around her—and she could barely hear herself without yelling. She recognized the woman. Rosita, Dolls’ plant among the demons. Jeremy froze where he was sitting on the table, both his hands raised, palms forward. “What are you, Jeremy? Some kind of double agent?”

“I am barely a single agent!” he wailed, and she moved her pistol to focus on Rosita on the other side of the barn. Waverly kept her stick pointed at Jeremy, which was probably appropriate for his general threat level. “Sheriff Haught,” Jeremy continued, watching the standoff between her and Rosita. “We believe Black Badge has gone rogue.”

“You think that’s bad,” Waverly snapped, gesturing with the stick. “We need to find a big hockey trophy!”

Jeremy stared at her. “What?”

“Well, it’s much worse than it sounds.”

“BBD is probably listening in right now,” Rosita said, looking at Jeremy. “Probably on their way here to annihilate us!” She finally dropped her gun, holstering it, and Haught lowered hers in turn.

“Naw,” Jeremy said, though his voice rose another octave as said it. He finally hopped down off the table. “They’ll just send in Tomahawk missiles!”

It wasn’t an official truce, but it was as good as they were going to get. Rosita went to the barn door to watch for danger as Jeremy worked on the RDX, and Waverly and Haught both started searching around the tables and crates, looking for where a big trophy might be hiding.

And then Waverly’s phone rang. And she answered it.

“Oh!” she said. Haught’s hearing was coming back, but she couldn’t hear much of the voice on the other end of the line. “Hi Per’!”

Haught growled and returned her attention to the search. Of course, he’d call now. When they were probably all about to die, gutted by demons or blown up by military grade explosives. Of course.

“Uh, yeah, sure, raspberry cream sounds... great.” Waverly idly waved the revolver around as she tried to get off the call. “Listen, I can’t really talk. I’m in a barn wired to explode.”

Haught looked to her and shook her hand, trying to convey come on, we’re running out of time and I can’t find this damn thing by myself! with just a gesture.

“Also I think I’m gay, call you later?” Waverly squeaked, and yanked her phone away from her ear to disconnect the call.

Haught blinked, her wolf roaring in triumph, and she found herself grinning, just a little. Okay, so maybe this version of reality wasn’t all bad.

“What has got hot sauce in their panties?” Rosita drawled, squinting out through one of the knotholes in the wooden door.

Haught leaned closer to her, peering out through one of the cracks in the boards. The two ghostly
black figures were sliding through the crowd of demons, freezing some in their tracks and clawing at others. Haught shrugged one shoulder, a bit of manic energy crawling up her spine, and offered, “Victoria’s Secret models: black lace edition?”

“What the—” Jeremy caught up between them and peered outside, breathless with panic. “The Widows? What do they want? And why do I suddenly know they’re called the Widows?”

“I’m not waiting to find out,” Rosita said, snering. She pulled her pistol back out of its holster and set a hand against the door, preparing to shove it open. “There’s a trophy behind the wheelbarrow, if that helps,” she called out, pitching her voice so Waverly could hear her.

“What!” Waverly said, and spun around, kicking up straw. “Oh!”

Rosita snarled, her voice thick and dark and deep like the demons outside. She shoved the door open and stepped out, even as Haught and Jeremy both shouted and reached to pull her back inside.

Rosita kicked the door shut behind her, forcing them back, and almost immediately thereafter a group of demons converged on her, their rifles booming.

Bits of her splattered everywhere against the snow and the barn door and Jeremy yelped, recoiling and wiping blood from his face, horrified.

“Oh god,” he moaned, looking at the smears on his hand. “Is she–?”

Haught stared at the twitching, gory mass of demon lying on the snow outside. Out of habit, she reached for a façade of a soul, to pretend to care. But the wolf was waiting for her, and pressed warmth and regret into her grasp like pushing a toy into the reach of a baby. It hurt, but it was also a good hurt. She hadn’t known Rosita well, but there was something real there. Something human.

“I’m sorry Jeremy,” she said, and her voice shook as she did.

Outside the demons were converging on the barn.

“Guys!” Waverly screamed, her boots thumping on the straw floor. “Guys I found it!”

“We’re not gonna make it!” Haught said, turning away from the barn door. The demons were too close, and even if she wolfed out, this wasn’t going to end well. None of the guys outside were wielding silver, but even she couldn’t take a hundred bullets and hold off several dozen people at the same time. Something would have to give and it wasn’t gonna be pretty when it did.

“No, no!” Jeremy snapped, slashing his hands out in protest. “I cannot die! I’ve only had sex one and a half times! Oh god that was so out loud.”

“Guys! We’re not gonna die,” Waverly said, still clutching her stick.

“Okay, Waves,” Haught said, and stepped closer to her. “I love you...r optimism,” she said, changing tracks about as smooth as a runaway train. “But– b– there’s no way out!”

“Right,” Waverly said, and turned to her, deadly serious. “Unless we die.”

Demons pounded on the barn door and Jeremy lurched away from it in a panic. He nearly dropped the detonator, his shoes sliding on the straw.

“Jesus!” Haught shouted, and reached out a hand. Not to take it, but to shield Waverly from it, as if that would have done a damn thing. “Watch that thing, Jeremy!”
“Sorry!” he said, babbling with nerves, “Sorry, sorry, sorry...”

“I know how to get her back,” Waverly said, looking to Haught again, her eyes hard with fear and confidence.


“Wynonna!” she said, her voice shaking. “I just hope it’s not too late. Listen. What happens if we detonate the RDX?”

“Your basic fire and brimstone,” Jeremy said.

Waverly turned back to Haught, her breath picking up, but Haught didn’t smell fear. Jeremy stank of it, of course, but Waverly just smelled like... Like a candle lit in the darkness.

“The Iron Witch said that if we destroy the trophy with... with fire—”

“Then the spell is broken,” Haught said, finishing her thought for her.

“And Wynonna returns.”

“I– okay,” Jeremy snapped, frustrated. “I am a super brain and I have no idea what you two are talking about!”

Waverly snatched the detonator from him. He let her take it, maybe because he was afraid to wrestle it away from her and set it off by accident. Or maybe he was just relieved to have the responsibility taken away.

“Dying may be our only chance of living,” she said, looking between the two of them. “Who’s in?”

“No, no, no,” Jeremy said.

Haught watched Waverly’s face, trying to glean meaning from it. She thought of a world where she went to sleep and woke up with Waverly beside her. Where there was no wedding ring, there was no spell on her back. Where the rage of the full moon was far-off and tempered with love. Where she could live with the person she was.

Where she was a person, and a werewolf. Where she could be both those things, and more besides.

She grabbed Waverly’s hand, cradling it and the detonator in her own, and Waverly’s warm eyes met hers. The tips of her ears poked out from behind her hair and with the crown on she almost looked like a faerie, innocent and young and soft with a range of emotions unmatched by normal humans.

“Where you go,” Haught whispered, a tiny part of her mind recalling a verse from a book she’d read in temple so many, many years ago. “I go.”

Waverly’s expression softened, as if she hadn’t expected the words, or hadn’t expected them to be said with such gravitas, maybe. Waverly closed her eyes and steeled her will.

“For Wynonna,” she said.

“For Wynonna,” Haught echoed.

She felt Waverly’s attention, and glanced toward her, puzzled. Jeremy was saying something, but it didn’t even register, because then Waverly reached up, stood up on her toes, and tangled her
fingers into Haught’s hair to pull her face down. Their lips met, and it was everything Haught had imagined it would be and more. Waverly was soft and warm and felt like coming home. The kiss felt so easy, so familiar, despite it being their first.

Waverly’s thumb stroked along her cheek and the wolf didn’t even have to push for Haught to loop an arm around her, holding Waverly close against her body. Waverly’s fingers slid through her hair and only after Haught heard a chainsaw revving and Jeremy shouting did she break away. Waverly’s expression was stricken with pain and fear and longing and her hand brushed down Haught’s cheek even as Jeremy slapped his hand down on top of the detonator, waiting until Waverly’s and Haught’s hands followed.

Together they slammed the button down, and the whole world was overtaken with fire.
Chapter 68

One moment, she was a version of herself straight out of her worst nightmares. Then she felt fire and shrapnel as it tore at her body. Agony wracked through her, her lungs filling with smoke as her skin crackled and peeled like paper.

And then, just like that, she was herself. Standing in the middle of the Earps’ barn and wearing nothing but a wristband and that damn hospital gown.

Her wolf wept, overjoyed at the return of normalcy, with a low, crooning howl that made Nicole’s hair stand on end.

“Ohhh,” Jeremy said, and grinned, looking from Nicole to Waverly. His dark face was smudged with soot, but he looked mostly intact. “Not dying single!” The corner of Waverly’s mouth twitched upward into a shadow of a smile and Jeremy added, more ruefully, “Yeah. Fingers crossed.”

“We’re back,” Waverly said. She looked significantly worse off than Jeremy did, her hair a tangled, blown-out mess of flyaway curls, her clothes stained with soot and dirt. She turned to Nicole and set her hands on Nicole’s shoulders, her face so full of relief that Nicole felt all her guilt and shame and regret come roaring back. God, the DNA test results. The fight in Shorty’s. The mess that came of her trying to wrestle a damn Widow. And that was only everything that happened before she became that terrible “Sheriff” version of herself, a killer and a liar. Waverly’s smile looked like it was made of porcelain, ready to crack at the slightest provocation as she whispered, “You’re okay.”

“I am so, so sorry,” Nicole said, the words pouring out of her without thought. Hell, she wasn’t even sure which part she was apologizing for. All of it, maybe. “Times infinity—”

“Shh,” Waverly said, grabbed Nicole with both hands around the back of Nicole’s head, and pulled her down, pressing their lips together in a kiss just as searing as the explosion. Waverly’s kiss felt like coming home, like waking up after a terrible nightmare. Maybe that’s all that other world had been. A terrible dream of what could be but wasn’t.

But then, that’s the thing about nightmares, isn’t it?

No matter how awful they are, they always have to end.

Waverly was so warm and soft, and Nicole curled her arms around Waverly’s back and pulled her in tight, pressing their bodies together.

“Dolls,” Jeremy said, and Nicole was dimly aware of him near the barn door. “Doc. We have to find out if they made it.”

Nicole pulled back, though only with the utmost reluctance. In the absence of Waverly’s heavy jacket and body heat Nicole realized how cold she was. The wolf always made her run hot, but an uninsulated barn in the middle of winter with nothing but a thin cotton gown? Even her wolf wasn’t a miracle-worker. Nicole rubbed at her forearms to stave off the chill, and Jeremy shrugged out of his jacket to give it to her.

“We know Bobo did,” Nicole said, and then looked to Waverly. “Or did he? How can he even be back?” When Jeremy handed her his jacket she threw it over her shoulders in a haphazard heap, shivering. “Thanks.”
“And,” Jeremy added, “And—and which timeline are the Widows in?”

Waverly frowned and turned, yanking up a rifle from the crate of weapons Dolls had given them ages ago. “The thing is, we won’t know if the spell was truly reversed until—”

“Until what?” Nicole asked.

“Until we find Wynonna.”

Nicole fussed Jeremy’s jacket over her shoulders and took a step after her as Waverly headed for the barn door.

“Waves?” she asked, and Waverly paused at the barn door, pulling it open a few feet. “Do you want help?”

Waverly considered it, then shook her head. “No, I think... I think I need to do this alone.”

“Sure,” Nicole said. “Of course.”

Then she was gone, and a moment later, Jeremy stepped up beside Nicole.

“So we’ll give it another 30 seconds before we head out, right? I don’t wanna ruin her dramatic exit.”

Against all sense, Nicole started to laugh. Maybe the stress was finally getting to her. “Yeah. Yeah, about that long should do it.”

“Cool,” Jeremy said, and nodded. “You’re one of the good ones, y’know?”

She thought of who she had been. Could have been. But she wasn’t that person. She wasn’t the kind of werewolf who casually kills homeless people or covers up murders. The nightmare was starting to slip away, but she remembered that much, at least: that she was not that woman. She felt her wolf coiling, warm and protective, around her thoughts. The wolf was simply content to be home, where things made sense and her person was Nicole.

“I try,” she said, and grinned at Jeremy. “And maybe that’s the most important part.”

Together, they stepped outside, and Nicole regretted it immediately. Outside, out of the protection of the barn’s walls, it was even colder, the wind biting at her skin and crawling into her joints to sit and stew in her bones.

“Jesus,” Nicole said, her teeth chattering. “It’s f-freezing.”

“Do you wanna change?” Jeremy asked. “Fur’d be warmer.”

“I-it’s okay,” she said, nodding up at the building. “The house is right—”

A sound shook the earth, so loud and startling that it rippled through the air like a shockwave, and they both stopped short, stumbling and planting their feet against it. It sounded like the distant roar of a locomotive, but furious and dark. There was something sapient in it, but what, Nicole couldn’t say for sure.

The wolf, though, might have had some theories. Following the wolf’s instincts Nicole bared her teeth as they lengthened into fangs, and snarled her own defiant cry in the face of that bellowing roar. She felt fur pricking across the curves of her cheekbones, down her neck, along her forearms. After a moment, the echo of it faded, and Nicole hesitated, biting down her more bestial response
“...was that,” Nicole finished, scanning what she could see of the horizon past the house and across the sloping hills of Earp land.

“Never heard of anything that could be that big before,” Jeremy muttered, but his gaze was distant, his eyes unfocused.

“Think inside,” Nicole muttered, and headed for the stairs.

The door was unlocked, as usual, and Nicole let herself inside the house, lingering for a moment under one of the air vents in the hallway. She let hot air wash over the back of her neck, sighing as heat seeped into her whole body. Jeremy followed her indoors and made a beeline for the kitchen, but he hit his shoulder against a door frame as if he wasn't even looking.

Exhaustion was starting to crawl up Nicole’s spine and scratch at the barriers of her will. Today felt so long already and it was only early afternoon. God, what a day it had been. Waking up in the hospital, then searching all over town for the seal and schlepping out to the Iron Witch’s home. She thought of how much effort it would take to go upstairs and track down one of her spare outfits and instead decided to wait. She settled herself down on the stairs, muttering to himself about possible theories.

Nicole’s arm still ached and she winced, peeling off the bandage. It wasn’t still bleeding, at least, but she turned her arm over, squinting at it. A pair of pale, greyish-blue scars bracketed her forearm where the Widow had bitten her. She ran her thumb over them.

Damn. Yet more scars for her collection.

Nicole left the bandage on the stair and put Jeremy’s coat on the right way, bundling up in it and relishing the warmth. She leaned her head against the wall beside her and let her eyes close.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been out, but she woke up to the sound of tires crunching in the Homestead’s driveway and leapt to her feet, growling, until she realized where she was. Jeremy poked his head into the hallway, looking at her.

“What?” he asked, looking haggard.

“Wynonna!” Dolls shouted outside. “Waverly!”

Nicole darted out the door with Jeremy right on her heels. “Dolls!” she shouted, waving.

He let out a sigh of relief and closed the distance to the front patio, a shiny silver briefcase in hand.

“What?” he asked, looking haggard.

Nicole barely had time to register that she smelled leather and gunpowder and wildflowers before Waverly and Wynonna came jogging around the corner of the house. Waverly looked a bit out of sorts, albeit relieved; Wynonna was wheezing and laughing all at the same time with her arms up in the air and Peacemaker in hand.

“Oh I am so glad to see you morons!”
“Uhhh,” Nicole quipped, “Thank you?”

Nicole caught Waverly smiling at her, but Wynonna stopped beside her and grabbed Nicole’s shoulder, gripping tight, as if she wasn’t convinced Nicole was really alive and okay. Nicole grasped her arm in return, squeezing right back.

“Any idea where you disappeared to?” Dolls asked.

“The last thing I remember,” Wynonna said, still out of breath, “I was with you, holding that plate.” Wynonna gestured to the briefcase in his hand with Peacemaker. “And then next thing I know, I’m in a ditch. Story of my life. What about you?”

Dolls shrugged. “I woke up in a body bag.”

“And they say you don’t know how to party,” Wynonna muttered, then sobered. “What about Doc?”

“Probably in a similar situation,” he said. “Because I killed him.”

“Jesus,” Waverly breathed.

“Yeah,” he said.

Wynonna took in that information, then glanced to Nicole and Jeremy. “How the hell did you guys make it?”

“It’s kind of a fog?” Nicole said. She was sure she’d remembered more when the spell first broke, but now it felt more like a story she’d been told, rather than something that had happened to her. “Between what happened and what... didn’t happen?” She frowned. “Un-happened? I don’t know.”

“Well,” Waverly said, “I wish I could make everything I did un-happen.”

“Hey,” Dolls said, immediately. “Then Nicole wouldn’t be here.”

Nicole’s wolf preened at the shy, slightly guilty smile Waverly shot her, and she found herself smiling too. It wasn’t every day you got proof your girlfriend cared so much about you she’d risk an apocalypse for you.

“Okay it’s settled,” Wynonna said, almost growling the words. She gave Nicole a particularly pointed look. “Everyone stops dying.”

Nicole considered the implicit accusation, then bobbed her head in a sort of okay fair gesture and nodded.

“Or. Tries really hard not to,” Wynonna said, moving to sit down on the Homestead’s steps. “Now that this third seal is broken.”

“What?” Nicole yelped, almost perfectly in time with Jeremy.

“Bobo’s back,” Wynonna explained. “And he’s hangin’ with Widow Beth and Mercedes.” She turned her hand over, showing them a small group of crumbled pieces of metal and a red gem. “He crushed the seal, a.k.a. Doc’s ring, and made the earth cry.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jeremy said, “We heard it. Like Godzilla if he stepped on a Lego.”

“Yeah. That was the sound of the demon Clootie waking,” Waverly said, and looked at Nicole, her
expression intent. “Guys, I really buggered this up.”

Wynonna snapped her gaze up to look at her and scowled. “Flush it out,” she snapped. “No more guilt. No more secrets. We don’t have time for feelings. We need a plan. And we need it fast, cuz this sucker’s comin’ out my vagina.” She frowned, glancing past Nicole. “Yeah, my vagina, Jeremy. Any minute. So.” Nicole glanced over her shoulder at Jeremy, who looked a bit queasy, and pressed her lips together to stifle a laugh. Poor kid. Definitely out of his depth on this one. “Speaking of flushing,” Wynonna said, in that way that only Wynonna Earp could, “Anyone need to pee?”

She glanced around and Nicole blinked at her. “No.”

“No? No one? Okay. Just me.” Wynonna hauled herself up to her feet and headed back inside. “Be right back.” She paused in the doorway and leaned back out of it. “Oh and Jeremy?”

He perked up like a puppy. “Yeah?”

“Do you know how to get the paint off that plate Dolls has?”

“Prob...ably?” he said, blinking and glancing toward Dolls.

“Great. Do that. I think it’s how we kill Clootie.”

Wynonna disappeared, and Nicole shook her head, bewildered, but pleased. Damn, she’d missed that woman. Dolls headed inside with Jeremy behind him, already muttering about possible ways to clean off the paint. Waverly glanced at Nicole and took her hand, leading their way inside to get out of the cold.

“Are you okay?”

“Mm. Weak,” Nicole said, and frowned. “Sore. But getting better all the time. That cure and that nightmare world, I guess, did a number on me. On both of us. But we’ll bounce back. Just need like. A minute to sit and catch our breath.”

“What are we gonna do about your dad?” Waverly asked, keeping her voice low to avoid disturbing—or being disturbed by—the men in the kitchen.

“God. I don’t know.” Nicole sighed. “At least we’ll have some time before his people show up.”

“Um,” Waverly said, chewing on her lip. “About that.”

“What?”

Waverly glanced around, then tugged her into the living room while Dolls and Jeremy worked in the kitchen. With Wynonna upstairs they had a moment, if a short one, to themselves.

“Shae’s already in the Triangle.”

Several thoughts raced through Nicole’s mind, but the one she blurted out first was a hoarse, “What?”

“Yeah.”

“How—”

Waverly shook her head. “She came to the hospital. She.” Waverly let out a breath. “They hacked
into the admin files at the station, Nicole. She’d listed herself as your next of kin.”

“Oh,” Nicole said.

“As your wife.”

By this point in her life, Nicole had sustained more than her fair share of near-death experiences. But none of them were quite as heart-stoppingly painful as this. She almost choked on her own breath, her heart dropping down into her stomach, cold and rattling like an ice cube in a glass.

“Oh,” she said again, more quietly.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Nicole dropped her head forward, staring at the floor. “I swear I meant to, Waverly. It just. It wasn’t ever the right time.”

“Neither was me finding out from her directly while you were in a coma,” she said. To Nicole’s surprise, Waverly didn’t sound angry, exactly. Just tired. Very, very tired.

“What?” she whispered, and looked Waverly over again, scanning for damage or blood, sniffing at her hair and face. “Waverly, did she hurt you?”

“No,” Waverly said. “She didn’t touch me.”

“I know Shae,” Nicole growled. “And that is not the same thing.”

“Later, okay? There’s too much going on right now.”

Nicole hesitated, then nodded and closed her eyes. “Okay. God. Waverly, I’m so sorry.”

“Okay,” Waverly said, and Nicole felt Waverly’s forehead press to hers. Her breath was warm against Nicole’s skin. “We’ll talk when this is over. About Shae, and about me.”


“I um.” Waverly sighed and leaned a little into Nicole. Nicole looped her arms around her, holding her close. “I did something really stupid. Night before you got bitten.”

“Oh.”

“Promise I’ll tell you after. Like Wynonna said. No more secrets.”

“Right,” Nicole said, and felt her stomach twist with guilt. She had one more secret left, and it wasn’t really going to wait until after, but there wasn’t much she could do about that.

She couldn’t tell Waverly about Wynonna’s favor. At least not yet.

Nicole didn’t remember a whole lot about the day after the failed baby shower. Partially in light of the Pussy Willows debacle she had decided that drinking was a Bad Idea and had avoided it, but she spent most of the day in a daze, even after she’d convinced her wolf to stop her constant howling and moaning and crying.

But she did remember Wynonna’s nervous double-knock in the middle of the afternoon. She
remembered letting Wynonna inside. She remembered making cocoa while Calamity Jane sat against Wynonna’s knee and purred like her life depended on it.

Wynonna had seemed so steady, sitting on Nicole’s couch with her hands around her mug and talking about what her gynecologist had said about adoption.

“It’s just not an option for us,” she’d said, her voice almost unnaturally calm. Hell, Nicole wouldn’t have noticed how much it all was bothering her if it weren’t for the constant tik-tik-tik of her nails on the ceramic, tapping an anxious drumbeat on the handle. “The curse. I just. I can’t lose track of the baby. It’s the next Heir, whether I like it or not.”

“Oh okay,” Nicole had said, sitting across from her in the armchair that covered her trapdoor. She’d leaned forward at some point, her elbows on her knees. “Earp. What do you want to do.”

“I don’t know.” For a moment Wynonna had just stared at her, her face a badly masked display of so much pain and uncertainty that it made Nicole’s soul hurt. “Should be with family, I guess. Someone who knows the truth. Who can teach it our.” She hesitated, mouth twisting with distaste. “Legacy, I guess.” Nicole had opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again when Wynonna had added, sounding more confident and firm than she’d been all afternoon, “Outside the Triangle. It can’t stay here. I don’t want this baby living like we did. Lonely and afraid.”

That was a hell of a list of requirements. Sensible ones, though. Outside the Triangle was absolutely vital. Too many threats inside Ghost River County, even knowing there’d be a small army at hand to defend the baby. There was just too much shit still inside the boundaries ever since the Solstice, setting aside the risk of other things sneaking in. Giving it to family was smart too, if only to get around some of the paperwork. The fewer people knew that Wynonna Earp had a child, the better.

There was really only one candidate. She’d inhaled when she realized who it was, and Wynonna’s eyes had slid back to her.

“Gus,” Nicole had said.

For a moment Wynonna had said nothing. “Yeah. Okay.”

Nicole had watched her for a moment, reading the slight tremble in her chin where Wynonna was trying not to cry, the shine in her eyes, the tapping of her fingers on her mug.

“Do you want me to handle this?” she had asked.

Wynonna’s expression hadn’t changed. “Please,” she’d said, but it stuck in her throat. She cleared it, tried again. “I don’t know the first thing about doing this and I can’t tell Waverly yet.”

“Wynonna, I can’t—you’ve already seen how bad I am at lying to her.”

“I know,” Wynonna said. “I’m not asking you to lie. I just don’t know what else to do.”

“Okay,” Nicole had said, though it curled around her throat and gripped tight. “Okay.”

Wynonna came back downstairs and Waverly went with her to her bedroom to talk. Nicole headed to the kitchen, deliberately not listening in on the sisters’ conversation. Dolls finished wiping down the plate, now stripped down to the metal. Nicole lowered her battered, sore body to one of the chairs, and Waverly reemerged a few minutes later and set Peacemaker on the kitchen table.
Waverly took up a position in one of the doorways, while Dolls settled in the other. Jeremy looked at Peacemaker, his face lighting up with curiosity.

Nicole ran her fingers across the edge of the kitchen table, and for some reason all she could think about was that first dream she’d had where she talked to the wolf, sitting at a facsimile of this very table.

“You sure this’ll work?” Dolls called out, tapping his knuckles on the plate as the dull thuds of Wynonna’s boots announced her imminent arrival.

“Hell no.”

“Which is exactly why it might,” Waverly added, as Wynonna rounded the corner, now in fresh clothes. “It’s Wynonna logic. Don’t question.”

“It’s not just that,” Wynonna said. She swatted Jeremy’s hand away from Peacemaker and plucked the gun up off the table. “Watch.” Dolls held the plate up for her and she lowered the Colt over it so the barrel hovered about an inch from the center of the plate.

The gun’s metallic, discordant hum picked up and the barrel glowed a vibrant, fiery orange—and so did the surface of the plate, sigils and runes scrawling into existence across the surface.

“See?” Wynonna said, as Dolls let out a low laugh. “It’s like they know each other.”

“Whoa,” Dolls said, and reached out as if to touch one of the pieces. Nicole felt a faint aura of heat coming off the glowing metal. There was something alluring about the fiery runes, something that pulled at her wolf, but she had a feeling she wouldn’t like the results if she tried to grab either of the two items. Dolls must have felt it too, because he hesitated, his fingers stalling a few inches from the metal.

Wynonna flashed a crooked little grin. “Gun and plate, sitting in a tree.”

“Oh boy,” Nicole muttered, chuckling, and while Wynonna ignored her, Waverly glanced at her with a quiet, warm smile.

Wynonna pulled Peacemaker away and the glow faded just as quickly as it had appeared. “It’s our only shot.” She set Peacemaker on the table again. “Jeremy, figure out where Bobo and the Widows were going. My bet’s on Clootie’s tomb?”

“Yay,” Jeremy said. “Off to the maps. Again.” He looked less than enthused, but determined, and he got up from his chair.

Wynonna turned around, her voice suddenly shakier.

“Dolls.”

“Yeah.”

“Find Doc. He needs to be here. And.” She jabbed his shoulder with one finger. “*Try not to kill him again.*”

“You know I can’t promise that,” he said, but he was smiling.

“Well, I promised I wouldn’t break it without him,” Wynonna said. She pulled the shattered ring from her pocket again, or maybe she’d never let go of it, and she ran her fingers over the pieces.
“This ring kept him ageless and now he.” Dolls said nothing, but she took a moment, gathering herself. “What if he’s…”

“Hey,” Jeremy said, in his gentlest voice. “He’s not. I’d feel it in my groin.”

A moment of silence so awkward it belonged in a high school theatrical production settled over the room and Nicole glanced to him, wondering at precisely what point he’d regretted the words coming out of his mouth.

“I feel like just for that, I get to say ‘vagina’ again,” Wynonna said.

Jeremy sighed, but nodded. “Mhm.”

“I’ll find him,” Dolls said.

Dolls offered the plate back to Wynonna, and she took it, frowning at the glossy metal face. “And I’ll go deal with this.”

“Then I’m coming with,” Waverly said, as Jeremy followed Dolls back out to his SUV. “Especially with the due date being, like. Well. As far as anyone can guess, now-ish? I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

Wynonna blew out a breath. “Well, when this goes down, you’re gonna see a lot more than you bargained for. I.” She bit down some other comment, then locked her eyes on Nicole. “Haught?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Nicole said. She was still wearing Jeremy’s jacket, still sore as hell, but she stood up and leaned a little closer, putting as much warmth and care as she could into the words. “I got you, Earp.”

Wynonna nodded, grabbed Peacemaker, and headed into the hall.

“Wait,” Waverly said, frowning. “What happened to flushing our secrets?”

Nicole made a face, looking for words. “Um…”

“Waverly!” Wynonna hollered, from the next room. “We can worry about the rest of that stuff later!”

Waverly frowned, then sighed. “All right,” she said, and stepped forward to kiss Nicole’s cheek. “After,” she said, giving Nicole a meaningful look. Nicole nodded, and Waverly headed into the hall to leave.

“Saved by the Earp,” Nicole muttered, once they were outside, then frowned. “Wait. My car. Uh—Earp?” She jogged toward the door. “Earp! I need a ride!”

Wynonna loaned her the use of Gus’s truck, which seemed somewhat appropriate given how the rest of the day was liable to go, and she went home for what felt like the first time in days. She tried not to think about the fact that she had technically only been gone for a few hours, rather than days. She thought it might break her brain if she did.

The interior of her home still looked a little like a tornado had hit it. Her living room was strewn with the debris of her coffee table, and the rug had several splatters of blood staining it. She didn’t look forward to scrubbing that out. Maybe she’d just ditch it and buy a new one instead.
The entryway bore the lingering stench of fear and violence, and there were drops of blood on the wood floor that smelled a little like coffee and bourbon. Nedley’s hat was sitting on the bench by the stairs with her climbing gear, which was. Hm. Worrying. She’d have to figure out what that was about later.

She dragged herself up the stairs, and Calamity Jane met her at the top of the steps with an affectionate and heavy thump of cat skull against her shins.

“Hey, Jane,” she murmured, scooping up her ginger beast. CJ’s purrs were almost deafening as she rubbed against Nicole’s collarbones and the hollow of her throat and under her jaw, doing her level best to replace the lingering scents of hospital beds and blood and smoke with herself. “Missed you too.”

When her cat was finally satisfied, Nicole stripped out of Jeremy’s jacket and her gown. A quick shower and change of clothes later, and she was finally starting to feel more like herself again. The hot water did wonders for her sore and aching body, and being in real clothes again, her clothes, pushed the last bits of the nightmare world further from her thoughts.

And, once she’d strapped her silver knife back into place on her calf, she felt even better. If Shae was already in the Triangle, there was no telling what the day would hold.

Jeremy had evidently also made a detour on his way into town, because when she found him holed up in BBD’s offices, poring over a map of the Triangle with a ruler and pencil, he was also in clean clothes and a new jacket.

“Left your coat at my place,” Nicole offered by way of greeting. “I’ll wash it and bring it back.”

He grinned, but, other than a quick glance at her, kept his attention on the map. “Thanks. Dolls left some gear out for you to load up with, if you want.” He flicked his head toward another table, and Nicole nodded, scooping up one of the boxes of ammunition to start loading the clip for her pistol.

“Ugh,” Jeremy said, as she began her work.

“Having trouble?”

“My previous conjectures about holy sites aren’t even a thing anymore,” he grumbled, finally looking at her. “Bobo Del Rey’s involvement is harshing up my whole system.”

“Yeah, and you haven’t even met him yet.”

“I’m so okay with that,” he said, leaning over the map again. “I can’t wait to meet the Pod though.”

“What?” she asked, laughing.

“That’s my codename for Baby Earp!” he explained. “I’m gonna teach it how to rap,” he added, beaming.

Sometimes it was easy to forget about Jeremy. Which was odd, since he was always there, quiet and in the background when he wasn’t running his mouth with oddball comments that most of the group didn’t understand. He was strange, but he was also solid. So reliable that he was easy to overlook, like a lamp—bright and cheerful and always there, invisible until something went wrong. He wasn’t a defender like Dolls or Doc or Nicole herself, but he was a brilliant mind, a bulwark against threats in a different way.

And it broke Nicole’s heart, a little, that he had invested so much of himself into the group, and
they so often forgot about him. He had no idea what was going to happen and was living proof that Wynonna’s choices impacted far beyond her own direct family. Did she know that? Did she know how much everyone loved her?


He looked up at her, and she thought he was about to answer, but then he frowned, a thought flicking across his face. “Wait, wait, uh...” He bent over the map, waving his pencil. “There are two sites where Bobo had constant security. One: the shack where he was holding Constance’s sons’ bones.” He circled it on the map.

“And the other?” she asked. She loaded the clip into her gun and holstered it, leaning over his shoulder to examine the map.

“A condemned gold mine in the foothills,” he said, pointing to it.


“Oh, I know,” he said, with faux humility. “And, um. I stay because I don’t fit in here. But none of you ask me to. I’m... I’m allowed to be me.”

“You’re part of the family,” she said, grinning. “And being part of the family means—”

Something slammed into the door, blasting it open, and she jerked upright, startled. The frosted pane in the door shattered into a few dozen pieces and hit the floor in a cascade of sound and broken glass. She hadn’t heard or smelled a damn thing, but Mercedes, garbed in white and somehow transformed into something so much more than she had once been, stood in the doorway.

“—dealing with terrifying forces of evil!”

“Where is the Earp wench?” Mercedes drawled, bored. “I want my weapon.”

Nicole drew her gun and worked the slide, aiming it at Mercedes, and barely caught the sound of Jeremy pulling his own gun from its holster, a sci-fi-looking contraption that seemed like it would be more at home on the set of a Star Wars movie than BBD.

Nicole narrowed her eyes, the wolf’s snarl of protective rage catching in her throat, turning her words low and gravelly.

“Why don’t you eat mine.”

“Looks like you’re shit outta luck,” Jeremy said, bracing the grip of his gun with his other hand. Weaver stance, Nicole thought. He’s been practicing. Excellent.

“Hardly,” Mercedes said, and smiled. She walked into the room even as Nicole started to growl. “I just found me some bait.”

She opened her mouth and let out a horrible blast of icy wind, so fast and in such a wide arc that Nicole couldn’t duck around it. It hit her and Jeremy full in the chest, the blast so strong that it bowled both of them backward over Jeremy’s desk. Paper and pens went everywhere and his bin full of paperclips hit the ground, scattering across the floor in a silver spray. Nicole struggled up to her hands and knees, but the cold was so visceral that it was taking over, spider-webbing across her face and down her chest and back, crawling down her spine like frost spreading over grass.
Her wolf was howling in rage, but Nicole could feel the cold spreading over both of them, and Nicole slowly dropped to the tile floor. Jeremy lay beside her, twitching and shivering in the cold. There were blue lines tracking over his skin like veins, crystals of ice clinging to his nose and lips.

As it turned out, Waverly had not been exaggerating. The paralysis toxin hurt like a bitch.
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nicole wasn’t sure how long she and Jeremy lay prone and frozen in the street in the middle of Purgatory. She could smell others around them, civilians, and that cold, spiderweb smell of the Widow Mercedes. Except... Mercedes smelled like something else now too. A hint of sulfur, maybe. Hellfire? She hadn’t thought the Widows were innately hellish, but maybe it had something to do with the Widow’s spontaneous wardrobe change?

She was full of questions and couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

Moments like this one, she remembered that she was, in so many ways, a small part in someone else’s story. It was humbling and also kind of frustrating.

Or maybe the frustration was just about the paralysis. Her nose had itched for about ten minutes and it was going to drive her insane.

But then she heard a car engine rumbling, and god help her, she knew that engine. Waverly’s Jeep. The sound was followed by the squeal of tires on pavement and that burnt rubber smell as Waverly slammed the brakes. If she’d had control of her mouth and larynx, she’d have cursed the fact that Mercedes had dropped her so that her head was pointed back toward the car behind her. Her wolf struggled and raged and beat against the walls of the demon spider’s toxin, but she couldn’t break through.

All Nicole could do was listen.

She heard the doors open and shut, then the sounds of shoes striking asphalt as the two Earps got out of the Jeep.

“Wynonna Earp.” Mercedes almost, almost sounded warm when she said it. “Time to meet destiny.”

“Better not be a nickname for your beav’,” Wynonna drawled, “Cuz I’m not in the mood.”

“I’ve come for my weapon,” Mercedes said, ignoring the jab. “You will not deny me.”

“I might.”

“The Demon Lord is awake, but he has not risen,” Mercedes said. “I’ve come for the final piece of the puzzle, and I am not talking about that useless gun.”

“Yeah, about that,” Wynonna said. “Your stupid plate was tacky as shit, so I melted it down into one sexy, ammolite-laced bullet.” Nicole smelled the other Widow, spidersilk and smoke, coming closer. She tried to let out a whine or some sound of warning, but she couldn’t get her throat to work. “Let them go, or I punch a hole into your no-longer-rotten-but-still-stolen face.”

“You might wanna cool that itchy trigger finger,” Mercedes murmured.

“I’m a bit hurt that I wasn’t invited to the party,” Beth said. There was a sound of impact, of hands grabbing flesh, and Waverly let out a startled gasp. The Widow must have grabbed her. That bitch. “Also that you tried to blow me up.”
“Hear this, Wynonna Earp.” Mercedes’ sly, sneering smile was an audible thing. “The weapon I seek isn’t that awful plate. It is you. And I intend to use it.”

Nicole felt like she couldn’t breathe. Was this what the Oracle, the Night Mare, had been talking about? There is only the effort to be made, and the choice.

“Just so everyone’s clear?” Wynonna called out, raising her voice to be heard by both Widows and anyone else in earshot. “I’m my own damn weapon and I’m about to unleash all this shit.”

“One bullet,” Mercedes noted. “Two of us. And then there’s my husband. But I can help you find the right path.”

“You got some nerve trying to negotiate with me. You’re still wearing my friend’s face!”

“And Bulshar’s ring,” Mercedes said.

A pulsing, gut-deep fear shot through Nicole’s body, so visceral and so sudden that, already being unable to move, unable to fight or flee, tears were her only outlet, burning across her temple, fire-hot compared to her frozen skin. The demon’s name. She’d never dared say it, not around Mikael, not here in the Triangle, not even around her family, all born of a paranoia that he would hear and use it to grow his strength. But here was his bride, throwing it around like it was nothing. Like it was just... well, a name.

Then again maybe it didn’t matter now that the demon was awake.

“Meaning,” Mercedes continued, “I can destroy the rest of your friends before your next breath. Which seems to be quite... labored.”

“Bulshar,” Wynonna said, sucking in a ragged breath like she recognized the name. Had Waverly gone through the book with her sometime after the mess at Pussy Willows, the way they’d talked about?

Or did she know it from somewhere else?

A scent on the wind interrupted her thoughts. Whiskey and dust, wool and cigarette smoke.

Doc Holliday. Thank god.

“My husband’s true name,” Mercedes explained, unaware of their newest arrival. “Fires-given.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Doc murmured. He strolled out from an alley beside Shorty’s and, from the sound of his footsteps, he stopped between Mercedes and the spot where Nicole and Jeremy were lying on the pavement, partially blocking the Widow’s path to them. “I kinda died.”

“Who didn’t?” Wynonna said, and Nicole could perfectly visualize the grin on her face.

“Enough!” Mercedes snapped. “Use the bullet on Beth, and we’ll take Bulshar down together.”

“Shoot Mercedes,” Beth insisted. “Or I kill your sister.”

She heard Beth’s jewelry jangling as if her grip on Waverly tightened as she said it. Waverly’s breath picked up, harder and faster, and Nicole screamed within the confines of her frozen body, frantically trying to push strength into her dead limbs. But she couldn’t move, couldn’t shout, couldn’t even let the wolf burn through her and replace skin with fur and weak, human hands with razor claws to rip these Victorian monsters apart.
“Do you know what she wants?” Mercedes asked. “To feed your newborn to our husband. Join me and we’ll destroy him together. Or I’ll let her.”

Doc’s voice had gone low, raspy with bridled rage, and Nicole heard his footsteps as he stepped away, closer to Beth. “Do not make the mistake of threatenin’ my child.”

“That doesn’t work on us,” Beth said, taunting.

With a low click of the hammer on his revolver he raised his gun. “Maybe I should just take the prize you are fightin’ for,” he mused.

“Wynonna, what is he doing?” Waverly asked, low and urgent, and Nicole would’ve shouted in horror if she could. Was he aiming at Wynonna?

“I am the greatest gunslinger that ever lived,” Doc continued. He was still moving, and Nicole heard Wynonna’s footsteps now too. Circling like sharks. What were they doing. “When I pull this trigger, things die.”

“Bad things,” she reminded him.

The wolf pressed thoughts at her and Nicole imagined, just for a moment, Doc firing, taking Wynonna in the head, removing the pawn from the board. No, not a pawn. Wynonna was a goddamn queen, make no mistake.

“Mercy comes in many forms,” Doc said.

“You’re confused,” Wynonna called out, but it sounded sort of hollow, almost like lines for a play, and Nicole wasn’t sure why.

“It’s not so bad, Wynonna. Up there. I saw Wyatt. And he is so damn proud o’you. But I will kill us both before I let you walk in service to the devil.”

“It’s a ruse,” Beth sneered.

“If I die,” Wynonna said, and she sounded... smug. “They can’t use me.”

“Wynonna!” Waverly said, breathless with horror.


Were they speaking in code?

“The baby’s coming,” Wynonna told him. “You can save it. Aim high.”

“I will do my best.”

“I’ll take one out on my way down.”

“Or me,” he replied. “I am so very tired, Wynonna.”

“Doc don’t!” Waverly cried.

“See you on the other side,” Wynonna said.

Mercedes let out a short laugh. “So much bluffing I’m embarrassed for all of you!”
Nicole heard Peacemaker’s hum, heard Waverly’s soft, frantic no, no, no! and then the crack of the guns firing. She heard a faint shearing sound, almost like a boomerang winging through the air, and then two squelching impacts of bullets striking. Then a third, tiny impact of metal on brick.

The toxin vanished, devoid of its maker, and Nicole gasped, scrambling up to her feet. The ground was littered with bits of spiders and egg sacs and all around her, Jeremy and the other hostages were getting up too. In the middle of the pile that had been Mercedes was the demon’s ring. Nicole grabbed it while Jeremy was turned the other way and pocketed it.

“Oh gross,” Wynonna grumbled, looking at the bits of spiders left where the Widows had been.

Nicole headed toward the others as Doc embraced Wynonna. Wynonna laughed and mumbled into his jacket, her voice muffled, “I had no idea you could split a bullet.”

“Neither did I,” Doc admitted.

Waverly hugged them, then turned away, grabbing Nicole’s hand once she came in range. Waverly pulled her close and Nicole’s wolf didn’t even have to ask before Nicole clutched Waverly tighter and nosed under her jaw, checking Waverly for any damage beyond the stench of spider on her throat and clothes where the Widow had been holding her. There was a scratch on Waverly’s neck where the Widow’s nail had broken skin, and Nicole let the wolf out, just a little, licking across the cut to clean it. Waverly stifled a laugh and pushed her face away.

“Been so long since I actually killed something,” Doc said, grinning. “I forgot how happy it makes me.”

Waverly glanced away from Nicole and then moved back toward the others. She kept her grip on Nicole’s hand, freeing up one so she could slap Doc solidly across the face.

“Don’t you two ever do that to me again!”

Waverly did not, Nicole noted, try to slap Wynonna. Though she might’ve, if it weren’t for the twisted expression of horror and pain on Wynonna’s face.

“If it’s been twelve minutes or less since your last contraction,” Doc said, gesturing with both hands to emphasize his point, “You’re dilatin’.”

“You read the books,” Wynonna said, half-laughing through the pain.


“Look, guys,” Waverly said, “We need to get her anywhere that’s not the middle of the frickin’ street!”

Doc and Jeremy nodded, and Nicole came up behind them as Doc turned Wynonna around to head for Shorty’s.

“Come on, big mama,” he said, guiding her toward the steps.

“Did you just call me a big mama,” she demanded, but it lacked most of her usual Earp fire and steel.

Nicole dimly heard Wynonna talking to the boys inside, but she lingered in the entryway with Waverly.
“I... I have to go with her,” Waverly said.

Nicole nodded. “And I’ve gotta get ready.”

Waverly’s eyes were wet still, shining with fear and mounting anxiety. “What did Wynonna ask you to do?”

“The only thing she could.”

Waverly had always been quick. Nicole watched understanding dawn, then grief.

“Don’t be too hard on her, okay? She’s really gonna need you, after.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and she looked up, meeting Nicole’s gaze. “Okay.” Waverly leaned up to kiss her, quick and sweet and even in this terrible moment, it was everything she’d missed since their fight only days prior.

Waverly went inside, following Wynonna, and Nicole steeled herself, pressing a hand over the ring where it sat in her pocket.

She needed to make a phone call.

Mikael had taught Nicole a lot of things. How to address vampire lords and ladies. How to ask favors of Brownies and how to make friends with Bluecaps. How to survive a drinking game against a Maenad and how to win at cards with Dwarves—without pissing them off. How to pay respect to Fairy Circles and how to avoid offending nymphs and dryads if she went into the woods on the full moon. He’d taught her how to find supernatural hangouts, how to identify herself to bouncers so they’d let her through instead of directing her to the nearest mundane bar, and perhaps most importantly, which clubs not to go to. Like the one in Vancouver run by a Dullahan mobster that Mikael had pissed off two hundred years ago.

Mikael had taught her how to get by in most supernatural circles, or at least how to get out of them unscathed. And chief among these skills was never forget a resource.

Now, in hindsight, it seemed clear that it was a wartime strategy for his fight with the Cult of Bulshar, but it suited peace and near-peace, too. So when Wynonna asked for her help getting the baby to Gus, at a loss for how to go about it, Nicole was ready.

When it came to resources in Purgatory, Nicole had her eye and ear on Perry Crofte from the moment he got tangled up in BBD’s messes. Nicole was pretty sure there was no better person to have in your debt than a rich man, and in this case it paid off in spades.

“Sure thing, Officer Haught. I’ll get my guys moving. Should be there in just a couple hours.”

“Sounds good,” she said, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Her wolf was grumbling about Perry’s involvement, and had been for the whole conversation, but she’d be damned if she could remember why. “Meet at the coordinates we discussed last time.”

“What’s your ETA?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, and sighed. “Sounded like she’s getting close, but we’ve got one more thing to check.”
“Right,” he said. “No problem.”

“Exactly. I’ll text you when I know for sure if the package can leave the county.”

“Great. If we get a negative from you…”

“If that happens you don’t have to—”

“We’ll come anyway,” Perry insisted, cutting her off.

“You sure?”

He chuckled. “Trust me, these guys are good. No sense wasting the paycheck.”

She let out a breath. “Thank you, Perry.”

“No,” he said, his voice softer, now. Warmer. “Thank you. I owe her my life. I’m glad I can do something to start repaying the favor.”

Once she was off the phone, she shot Waverly a text and hid the demon’s ring in one of her desk drawers—she didn’t want it on her person in case she had to shift or fight in a hurry. Her cruiser was outside in the parking lot where she’d left it, and as she left the station she pulled her hair around her ears and shifted them, listening and sniffing judiciously for any sign of someone sneaking up on her. Paranoid, she also checked the cruiser—examined the undercarriage, checked under the hood, checked the gas cap—for any sign of tampering or explosives. Satisfied that there were none, she got in and drove down the block, pulling into the alley beside Shorty’s to wait for Waverly and, as Jeremy had called it, the Pod.

She left the window cracked so she could smell and hear, and kept her hand on her knee, in easy grabbing range of her knife if she needed it. Somewhere in the distance she could hear stomping boots and hollering, and even without that, the news that Shae was in town was still rattling around somewhere in her ribcage, making her nervous.

Her wolf was quiet but full of tension, listening just as carefully for any sign of incoming threats.

She wasn’t waiting long, but she was so focused that when Waverly tapped on the passenger window, a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms, Nicole nearly jumped out of her skin. She blew out a breath and leaned over to shove the door open, giving Waverly room to climb into the car.

“Hey,” Waverly said, leaning over the center console to kiss Nicole’s cheek. “Thanks.”

Nicole didn’t answer at first, stunned. There was fresh, drying blood smeared down Waverly’s upper lip from her nose, and more at the corner of her mouth. Her bottom lip was torn, scabbing over with blood.

Fury followed shock, and she growled, her vision flaring with gold as the wolf’s rage swept up through her chest.

“Who hurt you.”

“Nicole. Honey.” Waverly’s voice was so sharp that each of them shut up, startled. “There are revenants on their way. I need you to drive.”

Nicole flushed, embarrassed, and started up the car, one eye on the rearview mirror and one on the alley around them. She glanced at the bundle cradled in Waverly’s arm. She heard a soft, muted
little wail and saw a tiny fist stretch out of the blanket before drawing back in and just like that, the wolf was spellbound. With effort Nicole tore her gaze away from the baby and pulled the car away from Shorty’s.

Only once they were on the road, heading toward the edge of town, did Waverly speak, her voice muted, thick with remembered pain.

“Rosita,” she said. “She tried to use the baby as leverage.”

“That bitch,” Nicole said, growling.

“She was my something stupid, too,” Waverly said, ducking her head, ashamed. Nicole frowned, confused, but kept her eyes on the road. At least the snow had mostly melted, and the roads were empty.

“What? You mean from the other day?”

“I was such an idiot,” Waverly said, and the way she talked reminded Nicole of a hose cranked slowly stronger. The words came out as drops first, then a trickle, then a torrent. “I was just so angry with you and I’d been drinking all night and Rosita did something nice for me and I kissed her, like an idiot, and I knew how wrong it was, I knew it instantly but then I couldn’t take it back.” She clutched the baby closer to her chest, earning a soft, displeased noise for her trouble. There were tears running down her face, but with what must have been a Herculean effort of will she kept her voice relatively steady. “And when I found out she was a revenant and she knocked Tucker out I thought ‘oh good, great, that’s what I needed, I needed the curse to get complicated, I needed to have doubt, to question if they’re all evil,’ and I thought maybe she was the exception, y’know? Like I’d done something so, so stupid with her but at least she wasn’t as bad as Bobo or– or the Jack.”

Nicole kept her eyes on the road, but when Waverly paused, breath hitching, Nicole said, very softly, “Okay.”

“At least it isn’t that complicated,” Waverly spat, her voice flashing to hot anger, just for a second. “At least that’s one good thing that comes out of her turning traitor. I won’t lose more sleep over the fact that I tried to shoot her.”

There was so much to unpack that Nicole wasn’t sure where to start. So she went with the easiest part. “You shot her?”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, and leaned her head against the passenger window. “She punched Wynonna and I had Peacemaker and... and Wynonna told it to work for me. And it did.” She let out a sharp, frustrated breath. “And I missed.”

“Oh,” she said. Who the hell punches a pregnant woman?

“Nicole.”

“Hm.”

“Why aren’t you screaming at me.”

Nicole bit her lip. The wolf had an answer, ready to go at the tip of her tongue. Because fighting with you and maybe losing you is so much worse than knowing you kissed someone else. That damn mate bond. Complicating everything. Because she was upset. It ached, knowing that Waverly had been so angry with her that she’d kissed Rosita. It ached to know that Waverly was capable of
that. Could, maybe, be capable of that again, the next time they had a fight. And they would have more, that Nicole knew all too well.

But even with that surprise, she felt... like she knew Waverly. And she knew that they could talk through it. And she knew that Waverly felt so much, felt so deeply, that if she was talking like this now, it’s because she was already beating herself up about it.

Which, really, was the answer to Waverly’s question.

“Because...” Nicole blew out a breath. “Because it’s obvious you already feel awful. Me yelling at you won’t change how you feel about it, right?”

“I guess not.”

“The only reason to yell at you would be to make you understand the consequences of what you did. But seems to me you already know.”

Waverly’s breath caught on something that was trying to be a sob.

“So,” Nicole said, looking for the words, “Yelling at you doesn’t help us.”

“Wouldn’t you feel better if you did?”

“No,” Nicole said, surprised by the simple truth of her answer as soon as it came out of her mouth. “No, I think I’d feel worse.”

Waverly wiped at her face and her nose, wincing when she pulled at the broken skin there.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not happy about it.” Nicole blew out a breath and rubbed the heel of her palm against her eye before the tears could quite decide if they were going to fall or not. “It sucks. It hurts. A lot. But we both messed up.”

“Yeah,” Waverly said, “But what you did and what I did are not equivalent.”

“No, they’re not,” Nicole sighed. “And it’s never gonna be. And that’s gonna have to be okay, I think. I don’t want to get into that cycle of us just. Screwing up.”

Waverly frowned, but didn’t say anything.

“You won’t do it again.”

“Never,” Waverly said, snapping her head up to look at Nicole. “It was—it was awful. As soon as I kissed her I knew— she wasn’t you and.” She paused, swallowing hard, desperate and breathless and sounding a little queasy just at the memory. “I’ve never wanted so badly to just sink into the earth and disappear. Nicole, I don’t want anyone else. It was stupid and— and dangerous and I won’t. I won’t.”

Nicole slowed the car, just enough to look over at Waverly and meet her eyes for a moment.

“Okay,” she said, and smiled, just a little. “Well, that’s the part I care about.”

Waverly took her hand with the arm not cradling the baby and squeezed.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Bond be damned, warmth flooded through Nicole’s chest and she found herself beaming to hear
Waverly say it. For once it wasn’t said under duress, it wasn’t said under a spell. She just said it, on purpose, for no other reason than because it was true.

Nicole squeezed her hand in return, glanced forward at the road, then back.

“I love you too.”

Waverly beamed, returning her attention to the baby, though she didn’t let go of Nicole’s hand.

“I think I’ve got some wipes in my glove compartment,” Nicole added, glancing at Waverly’s mouth. “If you want to clean up.”

“Oh,” Waverly said. “I’ve got some in my purse, too.” She leaned down to get them and set to cleaning her face as best she could. Nicole found herself listening as Waverly wiped blood from her mouth, and Nicole’s jaw clenched every time Waverly hissed or flinched. Nicole frowned, but focused on driving, and wrinkled her nose.

“What’s that smell?”

“Hm?” Waverly said, glancing over at her. “Oh, shit, can you smell it?”

“Kind of?”

“I had it vacuum-sealed so it wouldn’t bother you.”

“Well I can’t quite pick it out, so I guess it worked. What is it?”

“Vervain. Told you I’d start carrying a deterrent.”

“Oh!” Nicole laughed, though it was a bit grim. “You might need it today, so, good.”

“Let’s just hope she doesn’t catch up to us while we’ve still got the baby,” Waverly muttered. “Who I should probably move to a new blanket. Wynonna said you’d have one?”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the bag on her backseat. “In there.” Waverly twisted to stick her hand into the bag, pulling out the pale blue blanket Nicole had packed. “Here, I’ll pull over.”

She did, and Nicole unfolded the blanket, giving space for Waverly to move the tiny infant. Nicole reached into Waverly’s lap to take the old blanket she’d been using, and for a moment she was frozen, just staring at the baby.

“Oh,” she said, a little hoarse. The wolf pushed at her and on instinct Nicole raised her arm, letting fur prickle out over her fingers and the back of her hand. She very gently touched the edge of the blue blanket as Waverly wrapped it around the baby, and one small hand caught Nicole’s knuckles, tiny fingers tangling into the fur.

“Did Wynonna give you a name?” Nicole asked, but her voice came out a little strangled.

“Alice,” Waverly said, and there was a look on her face that Nicole wasn’t sure how to read. Pride, maybe, or affection.

Even as long as the drive was, the Triangle’s border came too soon. Nicole stopped close to the boundary, and blew out a long breath, eyeing the small fenceposts on the shoulder and the asphalt
and the *Welcome to Purgatory* sign. The sign swung with the wind in clumsy, haphazard little arcs.

“Are you sure about this?” Nicole asked, looking over at Waverly’s face.

“We have to know,” Waverly said. “Both of us.”

Nicole got out as Waverly did, pulling her jacket closed around her.

“Okay, so,” Waverly said, coming around the front of the car to stand beside her. Nicole tugged her closer, sheltering her from the wind. “If the baby starts screaming or if I start...” She swallowed, eyeing the line. “To burn. Get us over the line. Fast, okay?”

“Okay,” Nicole said, and curled her hand around the nape of Waverly’s neck, holding her steady as she leaned her forehead against Waverly’s. “I got you, Waves.”

For a moment, Waverly lingered there, leaning into Nicole, perhaps taking comfort in it, or perhaps just stalling. Then she took a deep breath, turned toward the road, and squared her shoulders.

She strode forward, taking steady, measured steps.

Nicole waited by the car, stomach churning. If Waverly burned over the line, it would destroy her, physically *and* emotionally. Part of her wanted to run forward, and her wolf positively *itched* to dart forward and block her path. But Waverly was right. They *did* need to know.

So Nicole waited, and watched, and held her breath.

Waverly’s gait never faltered, even as she drew level with the sign and strode past it. She paused, four steps beyond the line, and Nicole saw her head dip forward as she looked down at the baby, heard Waverly’s low sigh.

“Hey,” Waverly murmured, stroking a hand along Alice’s little face.

Nicole jogged forward, unable to help a soft laugh as she caught up and set her hands on Waverly’s arms, holding her with the baby between them.

“The baby’s Doc’s,” Waverly murmured. There was a shadow of a smile on her face, but there was also caution behind it, a storm building behind her eyes. “And... I don’t have revenant blood.” Her gaze slid aside. “Bobo lied to me.”

“What about the DNA test?”

Waverly shook her head, brow furrowing, but still hadn’t looked at Nicole. “Okay, so... I’m not an Earp either.” Nicole squeezed her arm gently. “Nicole,” she said, barely more than a whisper. “What am I?”

“That’s easy,” Nicole said, keeping her voice just as soft, and lifting one hand to cup Waverly’s jaw. “You are extraordinary.”

Waverly’s smile was fragile, but it shone through anyway, and Nicole leaned down to press a kiss to her mouth.

“Come on,” she murmured, drawing Waverly back toward the car. For a moment, it almost felt like all their problems had been resolved. Like they could put all the various pieces behind them.

Apparently, Waverly felt it too, because the next thing out of her mouth was an only partially sarcastic, “Hey, so how’s that divorce comin’ along?”
“Ha ha, yeah, I’m on it,” Nicole said, but a genuine chuckle escaped her as she headed around to her door. “Does it help if I say I sent her the papers months before I moved to Purgatory?”

“It does,” Waverly conceded, climbing back into the car. “A little. But you’re not off the hook yet for never telling me.”

Nicole grinned, albeit a bit sheepishly. “All right, I guess that’s fair.”

Chapter End Notes

A'ight since Ao3 was down last night, today you're getting a double-update! And after this it'll be one a day until we're done. Almost there, my friends. Just a few chapters left. Gonna try to post around 5 pm EST the next three days, so I will see you then. <3
Chapter 70

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn’t take long to reach the rendezvous point once they got back on the road. But when they approached the field she’d set for their meeting point, Nicole saw that it was just empty space, no cars or people in sight. Nicole’s anxiety level went from a moderate what if my alarm doesn’t go off when it’s supposed to all the way up to a vibrant there’s something in my basement with me and the sun’s about to set. Had Perry been found out? Had he been taken by BBD or her father’s cult or some other force they didn’t even know about yet? Nicole stopped the car, unaware she’d started a low, rolling snarl in her chest until Waverly tapped her wrist.

“She’s sleeping, shh.”

“Sorry,” Nicole muttered, and eyed the field. “Where is he...”

“Maybe he’s past that rise?” Waverly asked, gesturing to one of the rolling hills around them, but then she hesitated. “Wait, is that—?”

Nicole bent to peer out Waverly’s window. “A helicopter?” She growled and shoved her door open. “Out,” she said, moving to circle the car. She couldn’t see any mounted guns, but if someone got really crafty and tried to blow up her car, she didn’t want Waverly in immediate shrapnel range. Nicole pulled Waverly close and walked away from the vehicle, sheltering both Waverly and Alice against her chest. Worst-case scenario, she could shift. Big enough rounds could tear through walls if the circumstances were right, but if necessary Nicole could get tall and dense enough to at least slow them down.

God, what a life she led, that her best game-plan was to turn into a twelve-foot-tall ancient beast of murder and the hunt to stop someone from shooting up her girlfriend and her girlfriend’s newborn niece.

The wind picked up, the distant whup whup whup of the rotors almost deafening.

“Black Badge?” Waverly guessed, and Nicole winced. If it was, this was about to get very dicey, for all three of them.

Nicole said nothing and looked down at Alice again. She was still asleep. Waverly held Alice closer and gently kissed her forehead.

The helicopter came to rest on the open meadow with the grace and lanky elegance of a great bird, and as the door slid open, Nicole got a confusing blast of scents scattered with the high wind—cologne and wool and leather polish and diesel.

A man climbed out, all broad shoulders and heavy build, dressed in black and grey with a utility belt and ski mask.

Nicole pulled her pistol, aiming it at the goon. She moved forward a step, pushing Waverly behind her, and prayed she wouldn’t need to shift.

Then Crofte climbed out of the helicopter and lifted a hand in greeting.

“It’s Perry,” Nicole breathed, and stowed her pistol again. She focused on Waverly, smiling for her
benefit and rubbing her shoulder.

A woman followed Perry, then two of the bundled-up goons, and the whole retinue headed toward them across the field.

“Best private security money can buy,” Perry said, as explanation, and Nicole gave him a tight nod in greeting. He turned to indicate the woman behind him. “I even brought a wet nurse. Did you guys know a wet nurse is still a thing?”

“You’re a good man, Perry Crofte,” Waverly said.

“And still alive, thanks to Wynonna.” He smiled. “This is really the least I could do.”

Nicole chuckled. “Her good deeds are finally paying off.”

“Hey, we should get going. Just to be safe,” Perry said, but when he moved forward Waverly recoiled a half-step, clutching Alice a little tighter. Nicole turned her head, startled, at the soft sound of crunching brush—Doc was walking up beside them, the sound and smell of him dulled by the helicopter’s downdraft.

“Wait, wait—” Waverly said, turning aside.

“I got it,” Perry said, easy and calm. “You need to say goodbye.”

“Not me,” she said. Doc stepped up beside her, looking a bit like he’d run the whole way here. “Here,” Waverly said, and passed Alice to him.

He let Waverly position his hands so he could cradle Alice in his arms, and for a long moment he was totally silent. He took in his daughter, and Nicole felt her throat get tight just from watching.

She almost didn’t dare check in with her wolf, but when she did, Nicole found her quiet and still, wrapped up in a soft, muted sorrow. Not fighting, like Nicole half-expected, but accepting, and grieving in her own way.

“Dainty and delicate in blue,” he murmured, his voice shaking. He touched Alice’s face, with a gentleness and care Nicole almost wouldn’t have expected from the old gunslinger. “Where are you taking her?”

“As far away from the Ghost River Triangle as she can get,” Waverly said, matching his tone. “Aunt Gus is waiting.”

Doc nodded, but Nicole could see his heart wasn’t in it. He glanced up, as if only now noticing Perry, and the nurse, and the guards.

He looked down at his daughter and stroked a hand over her head.

“Goodbye little girl.”

The nurse came forward, gently taking Alice from Doc, and Waverly stepped back into Nicole’s side, hugging her arms around herself.

They watched as Perry, the nurse, and his private security men walked back to the helicopter. The rotors picked up as the crew climbed back inside, and Doc turned aside, heading back toward the woods.

Waverly almost moved to follow him, but Nicole caught her sleeve, and Waverly turned back,
ducking her face against Nicole’s chest.

Over the helicopter Nicole couldn’t hear her sobbing, but she felt the shaking of her shoulders and felt hot wet tears hitting her skin. She held Waverly close, and watched until Perry’s helicopter swept out of sight over Purgatory, and out of their lives.

Nicole lost track of the minutes. They stood beside the car at first, until Waverly’s trembling got more violent, brought on by cold more so than by sorrow. Then they moved to sit in the backseat of Nicole’s car together, with Nicole’s baby go-bag tucked into the footwell. Waverly lay against her, curled up in her lap, and said little. Nicole didn’t ask questions, and Waverly provided few answers.

Nicole thought that at some point, words would come to replace the tears. And maybe it would, eventually. But not now, and not here.

Pain always operates on its own schedule.

When Waverly’s breathing was finally calmer, Nicole kissed Waverly’s forehead and rubbed gentle circles on the back of her neck. She asked, as soft as she knew how, “How about we go home?” When Waverly said nothing, she added, “Get some sleep?”

Waverly made a faint sound, a breath that came out almost as a laugh.

“Please.”

It was sort of amazing, really, how different the world looked, now that Alice was gone. The sky seemed just a little drearier now. All the colors just a little paler. Even Waverly seemed greyer, more subdued. Nicole wanted to pull her close and wrap herself around Waverly. To lick her face and tell her it’d be okay and hold her until it was true.

That was half wolf and half her, and somehow she couldn’t seem to care about the distinction.

Nicole started up the car and drove back across the field with one hand on Waverly’s knee, squeezing gently now and then whenever it seemed like Waverly might need it. They rumbled along on a back road for a while until they reached the highway. The sun was starting to go down as she pulled onto it, but just as she got up to speed, she heard a faint thumping noise, almost like a cattle stampede, but smaller.

“What is that,” she said, peering out her windows for the source of the sound.

“What’s what?”

Nicole let her vision tint gold and looked again, and then she saw it. An enormous black beast, sprinting across the field ahead of them, on a direct collision track with her car.

Shae.

“Oh shit!” she yelled, yanking the wheel to one side to avoid her. Shae heard the tires squeal and changed her own course to match, and within seconds she slammed into the car shoulder-first. She hit the rear driver’s side door instead of hitting Nicole’s door, and though Nicole was scrabbling desperately at the wheel, it didn’t matter. The car spun out beneath her and they struck something along the roadside, flipping off the pavement and rolling across the field alongside the highway. She hit her head, maybe, though on what she wasn’t sure, and for long seconds all the windows
were a terrifying blur of grass and dirt and sky. Finally the car came to rest, flat, but a bit off-balance.

For a moment, everything was still.

“Whoa,” Waverly breathed. Nicole glanced over and saw that Waverly’s head was resting against one of the airbags.

“You okay?” Nicole asked, blinking away spots and fumbling for her seatbelt. Shae was still out there, Shae was still out there, and she had to move.

“I– I think so. You?”

“Yeah,” she said, and shoved at her door, a little dizzily, to get out. “For now. Stay in the car.”

She pulled herself free of the cruiser and scanned the fields around them. Shae crested the hill above her, human again, a dark lithe shape against the waning sunlight. Nicole watched as Shae, naked as the day she was born but for a long cord with its leather pouch hanging between her breasts, strolled down the slope toward the crashed cruiser.

“Oh Nicole,” Shae purred. “You’re awake. Thank god.”

Chapter End Notes

heh heh heh

I MEAN UM see you tomorrow!! :D
“Shae,” Nicole growled, suddenly very grateful for the weight of her knife on her calf. “What, did you get stuck in traffic?”

She heard Waverly moving inside the car, but didn’t dare look back. A moment later she heard the driver’s door thump shut. Then, after a pause, she heard the lock click.

Shae gave a warm, delighted little laugh. “You know me, sweetheart. I am nothing if not a patient woman.”

Nicole snarled.

“Manners,” Shae murmured, clicking her tongue in disapproval. “You should show more respect to your elders.”

Nicole twisted her feet to dig her heels into the soft earth churned up by the car, bracing her weight. Her vision flared gold with both bridled rage and the hunter’s instincts, and she found herself measuring the distance, the slope of the hill, calculating speed.

“Don’t embarrass yourself,” Shae said, laughing. “Have you already forgotten what happened last time?”

“I might surprise you,” Nicole said, shrugging out of her jacket and her utility belt and yanking off her necklace, dropping all three behind her into the dirt. Her wolf kept a running growl grating in her chest, but she let her mouth split open in a smile full of fangs. “What’s that they say about old dogs and new tricks? Do you still favor that opening right backhand?”

Shae snarled, vicious and bloodthirsty. Her eyes changed, yellow and hard, like nuggets of gold against her dark face. Black fur grew across her ears, her jaw, her bare chest. Her skin rippled and swelled as the bones beneath shifted and contorted.

Nicole darted left. Dead sprints weren’t exactly her forte, but she raced away from the car, desperate to put some distance between Shae and Waverly. As she ran, she let her wolf come roaring out.

It was almost seamless, the shift. Fur bursting from her skin, her shoulders and hips broadening, doubling in size. The canvas of her work pants stretched to the limit and tore at the seams, her shirt falling off her chest in strips and tatters as she outgrew it. The knife’s straps around her shin stretched to fit her new form, gripping tight around her leg and matting down her fur. Pain flared briefly through her belly and chest as her taxed organs changed to support her larger body. She let the wolf’s instincts guide her and, twice as tall as usual and nearly as heavy as a car, she dug her claws into the earth and spun, wheeling back around with the languid, deadly grace of a fighter jet in flight.

Shae was only a handful of steps behind her, but Nicole saw those bright gold eyes widen, startled, as Nicole pivoted. Shae tried to reverse course to meet her, huge black paws sliding on the loose dirt and tall grass. Nicole slammed a shoulder into Shae’s ribcage, earning a furious roar and throwing Shae off-balance. Shae rolled in the dirt and flipped up to her hind paws, gouging huge lines in the earth.

Shae gave a deep-chested bellow and charged at her, raising her right paw back—not in a backhand, perhaps still sore about Nicole’s taunt, but poised for a downward swipe—with all her
claws flashing in the red glow of sunset. Nicole threw herself low and to the left, rolling across the dirt so that Shae’s swipe caught nothing but empty air. Shae’s furious roar followed her as she scrambled back upright and braced herself on three paws. Nicole reached down to her calf, grasping the handle of her knife in one big fist, and pulled it from the scabbard.

The discordant song of the silver clattered against her senses, jangling and terrible, and she saw Shae’s ears flick back even as she charged again. Nicole twisted, slashing out with the knife, but Shae ducked beneath her swing, grasping Nicole by the front of the neck and with a violent snap of her body, she arched backward. Shae was strong, stronger even than Nicole was, and in that one gesture she brought all of that greater strength to bear. She ripped Nicole up and off the ground, flinging her overhead like Nicole was just a toy.

Nicole lost her grip on the knife and soared over Shae’s head, flying several dozen feet before she struck the ground and rolled twice. She might have kept rolling, too, except she slammed back-first into the dent Shae had left in her rear left door, warping the frame even further and earning a panicked yelp from Waverly, still inside the car.

Shae closed on her, a flash of silver in her hand, and grabbed Nicole’s right arm at the wrist. She held it against the top of her cruiser and slammed the knife down, spearing Nicole’s hand right through the middle, the silver blade punching all the way through and into the roof of the car, pinning her.

Nicole screamed, the silver burning, burning, flaring through the whole inside of her hand even as it tethered her there, and the only coherent thought in her head was a frantic prayer that Shae had not destroyed too many of the nerves in her palm with that blow. Her wolf moved frantically to dull the pain, and with the loss of focus her body buckled, some of the wolf leeching out of her physical shape to focus on the internal damage. She shrank down to only a bit larger than her usual height, bending back over the metal frame of the car, fur clinging to scattered parts of her body as her wolf tried to focus on too many things at once.

Shae bent down, changing enough to get back her human larynx. She snarled, baring fangs, and laughed.

“I warned you,” she cackled, her voice husky and dark with the wolf’s ferocity and deep, barrel chest. “I warned you not to fight me, not to throw yourself at me like this.” She ran a claw gently down Nicole’s jaw. “But you can make it stop, sweetheart. Just tell me where Bulshar’s ring is.”

Nicole forced her eyes open, her vision still half the wolf’s but swimming, blurring into gold-tinged smears of color.

“Just tell me,” Shae said. “I’ll take it off your hands, and then I’ll go, and I’ll leave you and your little mate be.”

Nicole snarled, baring her teeth. “Leave Waverly alone.”

“I will,” Shae said, laughing. “Just tell me where the ring is.”

“Why,” Nicole said, the word coming out as a thick, heavy rasp. “Why do you want it. Gonna put it on?”

“And enrage Him?” Shae said, and laughed. “No, sweetheart. No, I intend to return it to him. Much can be done with the gratitude of the Shadow Lord.”

“What could you possibly want from him,” Nicole said, panting. “You already have my father’s
trust. You’re his right hand, aren’t you? His hidden blade?” Shae set a hand on her shoulder, the one stretched up onto the top of the car, and pressed down. The joint warped and twisted further, and Nicole screamed.

“Your father is only a man,” Shae said. “A fool, and a coward, buying my service with party tricks and empty promises, and still, only a man.” She shrugged one big shoulder, and eased the pressure on Nicole’s arm. “He is a means to an end.”

“You bitch,” Nicole gasped.

“If you don’t give me Bulshar’s ring,” Shae said, sounding bored, “I’m sure Waverly will. It wouldn’t be the first time.” Shae grinned, running her tongue over her fangs. “And she, unlike you, is soft. She won’t take long to break.”

“She doesn’t know where it is,” Nicole said, sounding hollow at first, then more frantic as Shae drew back from her, turning and peering in through the windows of the car. “She doesn’t know where it is, Shae!”

“Well now you’re just taking all the fun out of it,” Shae said, sighing. She raised one paw and Nicole flinched, trying to twist her body away. Shae slammed her fist into the driver-side window with a violent crash and the whole pane shattered inward in a cascade of safety glass. Shae knocked shards out of the frame until she could grasp the door, thick nails punching into the leather interior and the metal. She hauled back her arm, ripping the door off its hinges, and tossed it aside. Waverly screamed, and Nicole snarled, slashing at Shae with her free arm. “Waverly!”

Shae batted Nicole’s hand aside and laughed. “Oh this will be fun,” she said, and bent down, reaching in with one paw to scoop Waverly out like a cat playing with a mouse. She grabbed hold of Waverly’s jacket and pulled, dragging Waverly across the center console, across the driver’s seat, and down onto the ground. Waverly looked a little dazed, as if she’d hit her head. Shae leaned in as if to bite her. Nicole writhed and lashed out with her foot, trying to catch Shae’s shoulder or her head. “Waverly!”

For a moment she could almost see it. Shae’s fangs, leaving a pale white scar on Waverly’s shoulder, just like the one on Nicole’s. She knew Waverly could handle her own wolf, had handled Legion, in fact, but to take away the last bits of humanity and certainty that Waverly felt like she had now, after finally learning she wasn’t half-revenant? God, the thought made Nicole sick.

But just as Shae got close, almost within range, Waverly shoved her fist up, jabbing Shae in the nose. The impact was almost laughable, hardly the bite of a fly compared to Shae’s size and strength. But, as was so often true with Waverly, it wasn’t about force. Bits of green leaves rained down out of her hand as she smeared her fistful of vervain in Shae’s face, and Shae reared back, roaring and howling and pawing at her snout.

Waverly wasted no time. She rolled onto her belly, scrambled to her feet, and ran.

Shae snarled, and Nicole could imagine the next moments all too easily. Waverly would never outpace a werewolf. The head-start she’d gotten from the vervain would never be enough. Shae would run her down like a rabbit, catch her by a leg or an arm or the back of her neck. She’d slam Waverly to the ground.

Shae would rip her apart.

The wolf surged against her thoughts. Coursed through her body as fire and rage.
A strength, a synergy, that Nicole had never felt before flooded through her. It calmed her thoughts, eased her fears, and bolstered her strength. She twisted, grasped the silver knife by the handle with her free hand, and yanked it out. It burned, but the pain was a distant thing, an annoyance, rather than a debilitating force. Shae was rolling around on the ground, but she’d gotten all the vervain off. As Nicole watched, Shae got back to her feet, snarling and growling.

Shae lumbered forward, huge paws digging into the dirt to build up speed.

Nicole took hold of her knife, stepped away from the car, and threw it, hard. She was no Doc Holliday, but the wolf’s instincts—no, her instincts—were good. The blade bit into the back of Shae’s thigh, burying deep, and Shae’s leg buckled beneath her. Dirt and grass flew in every direction as she crashed, sliding and digging a furrow into the earth.

Nicole changed. But it was different this time. It wasn’t the wolf overtaking her thoughts or sweeping through her body—it was simply her. Both of them, working in tandem. In perfect unity.

Her bones twisted, shoulders warping, knees locking. Her face contorted, changing, stretching not into a heavy, toothy maw, but a long, pointed muzzle. Her fingers drew together into proper paws, heavy and precise for running and leaping, rather than grasping and scratching. She hit the ground on three of her four paws and ran. Even favoring her injured front side, she moved faster than she ever had before, more swift and sure-footed.

Nicole closed the distance in seconds. She leapt over Shae’s crumpled body, and when Nicole hit the earth on her front paws she spun, looming over Shae, snarling and gnashing her teeth.

Shae looked up at her, gold eyes wide with fear and confusion even as her werewolf form collapsed, torn apart by the burn of silver in her leg. She shrank before Nicole’s eyes, until all her fur was gone, her limp, bleeding body sprawled in the dirt.

“No,” Shae said, the word choked and rasping. Her gold eyes raked across the long, sleek lines of Nicole’s body: the narrowness of her shoulders, the arc of her spine, the deftness of her paws.

“That’s not possible. You never accepted her! You can’t!”

Nicole threw her head back and howled, an instinctual, primal thing that was as much a call to her allies as it was a warning to her foes. Even to her own ears, she knew it was different. Not the guttural, bellowing imitation of a werewolf, but a true howl, as if from a true wolf.

Nicole lowered her head again, glittering caramel eyes on Shae. She braced her weight, and when she lunged, for the first time in her life, Nicole actually heard Shae scream. She closed her jaws around Shae’s head, muffling the sound. Two weak human hands scrabbled at her muzzle.

Nicole picked Shae up by the head and shook, violently, like a dog with a chew toy. There was a muted snap, almost like a green stick breaking, and Shae went limp in her jaws.

For a long, terrible moment, the field was very still, and very quiet. She dropped her prize into the dirt with a thump. It wasn’t a worthwhile kill. It wasn’t for food, or for practice. It was to defend a mate, but it was an emotional kill. A very human kill.

It tasted sour in her mouth.

Everything felt a little different, this way. She remembered what it felt like to let her wolf out and run in the woods, but that hadn’t been like this. There wasn’t a clean line between her and her wolf. It was just her. Them. She raised her head and listened, ears flicking. Somewhere far away, she
heard a raven croaking. Ravens were friends, she thought, and she knew in her bones that
knowledge was ancient. That friendship came from a time before shoes and cars and asphalt; from
a place where roads and fences and wires couldn’t stretch. She lifted her nose and sniffed at the air.
Fear, and blood. Violence, but also life. She could smell prey—caribou—in the far distance and
rival predators—bears, and other, smaller wolves—as well.

Waverly’s boots crunched in the grass, and Nicole turned her head. Waverly stood above her, the
loose ends of her jacket flapping in the wind, her braid billowing out beside her like a pennant.

Nicole limped up the hill toward Waverly, picking her way carefully up the grassy slope on three
paws.

“Wow,” Waverly whispered, and Nicole flicked her ear to catch the sound. “That’s a hell of a party
trick.”

Nicole didn’t answer. Couldn’t answer, maybe. She dropped her head and pressed her forehead
against Waverly’s chest. Waverly let out a sigh, and Nicole nuzzled, sniffing up and down the
length of Waverly’s body. She shook her head, sneezing violently when she caught the vervain still
on Waverly’s hands.

“Oh, sorry,” Waverly said, wiping her hands on her pants.

Nicole looked her over. No damage, no blood. Shae hadn’t bitten her, or even scratched her. Good.

Her eyeline was about even with Waverly, which made her realize just how big a wolf she must be.
Part of her was thrilled.

Part of her was terrified.

Waverly’s hands reached up to scratch behind her ears, and Nicole slowly lay down on the grass,
holding her wounded paw close to her chest.

What was she?

God, what had she just done?
Okay I'm a bit early posting today, since I said 5pm eastern before, but I think my nerves are gonna make my heart explode if I don't, so uh. Here goes.

Waverly phoned Dolls, asking for backup and a ride home. Nicole flexed her paws in the dirt and lay down on her side. Every time Waverly glanced toward her, Nicole’s tail thumped down on the grass, but she didn’t really let it bother her this time. Even though she was so damn big the sound of it hitting the ground was comically loud. She tried to pay attention, otherwise, but her mind drifted, fuzzing out and only giving her bits and pieces.

Nicole found herself standing in a room. She felt like she’d been there before, and after a moment, she realized it was the Platonic Ideal interrogation room, except... not. It was instead more of a living room, now, with two plush armchairs facing each other. There was no other seating, but the space didn’t feel empty, exactly—the corners were full of rugs and pillows and tapestries hanging on the walls. It all felt very warm and very friendly.

Nicole was standing just in front of one of the two armchairs, and across from her, in the other, was her wolf.

The wolf had abandoned the lawyer façade now, and with it went the suit. Instead she was dressed in something that reminded Nicole of a Grecian robe, tied at one shoulder and draping in long flowing lines to her waist, where it was belted with a golden leather band. A brooch in the shape of a sunburst rested on her shoulder where the robe was pinned. The other shoulder was bare, leaving part of her chest exposed, but she didn’t seem to be cold. She had one leg crossed over the other, her bare foot bobbing to music Nicole couldn’t hear. Other than the general air she gave off of leashed, primal power, the only sign that she was something more than human was that the sole of her foot bore pads like a dog’s, thick and several shades darker than her skin.

Around the wolf’s neck, Nicole spotted the golden collar that was Waverly’s bond. Nicole raised her hand to her own neck and found the collar mirrored. She wasn’t naked, this time, but dressed in blue jeans and a simple shirt with the top few buttons undone.

“I thought when I was here I wore what I was wearing in real life,” Nicole mused, but she sat down in the armchair. “Like my pajamas. Or the time I was naked because I fell asleep downstairs.”

“Logical,” her wolf murmured in that rich, husky voice Nicole remembered so well. “But those times, you had come here in dreams. Here, now?” She gestured around her with both hands. “You wear what makes you most comfortable.”

Nicole raised her eyebrows, looking over the Grecian outfit again. “So this...”

“Is what makes me comfortable,” the wolf said. Her fangs glinted as she laughed. “Yes.”

“If this isn’t a dream,” Nicole said, “What is it?”
“This is...” The wolf frowned, looking for words. “This place is us.”

“Us,” Nicole echoed.

“You merged with me,” the wolf said. “You let me in.”

Nicole blinked. Was that what she’d done?

“I let you in before, though,” Nicole said. “Like on the full moon. But we’ve never. I mean we’ve never become that, before.”

“You let me out,” the wolf said, and smiled. “It’s different.”

Nicole frowned and leaned back in her chair. Was it? Maybe that made sense. She’d always thought of it as letting the wolf out, letting her out to play or to fight. When the wolf had asked for permission to come out on the full moon, the conversation had felt like a child asking to go play outside.

But this? This wasn’t like that. She had known that even as it was happening—that she wasn’t letting the wolf take over so much as they were becoming something together. She had let the wolf into her head, into her soul.

It hadn’t seemed possible, but she’d let the wolf into her heart. Was that what Shae had meant, in that last instant?

“Oh,” she said, though that one word did little to capture the breadth of it. “Well that changes some things.”

“It does,” the wolf agreed. “And it doesn’t. We are still who we are. We—”

“But,” Nicole said, interrupting, and her wolf’s eyebrows rose, as if surprised by her audacity. “We can do this again, can’t we?”

The wolf’s eyes glittered, but her smile was almost unreadable. “Do you want to?”

Nicole thought carefully about her answer. Did she?

She thought of those two terrible moons with Shae, hunting and killing god knows what and god knows who in the woods. She thought of her terror at the thing inside her body, the parasite that ate away at her will and forced her to do things, terrible things. The thing that made her growl and snarl and made her teeth and nails grow when she got too angry. She thought of the long nights fighting the wolf’s control, desperate to remain just a little bit herself.

She thought of her months with Mikael, all but trapped in his home, a prison of her own making. Even under the moon she had run on his property, hunted his animals. Mikael himself had caged her, turning her back from the boundary if she ever tried to leave his lands. She had learned how to subdue her wolf, how to enforce arrangements. He had taught her how to leash the wolf most of the month, in exchange for favors.

And she thought of her months in Purgatory. Learning to see the value of her wolf. Learning that there was a world of difference between people like Bobo or Willa—jackals hiding behind human faces—and people like her. Wolves who prowled the edge of the campfire’s light and pushed back the darkness.

She thought of Waverly. The woman who gave too much, to everyone, but still made time for the
strange out-of-towner with the crinkled business card and the charming dimples and a goddamn chocolate allergy. She thought of how Waverly had taken her in like a stray and given Nicole something that she and the wolf could understand in each other. How Waverly had become something they both wanted to protect—with tooth and claw and pistol alike. Someone they would defend to the death if it was ever necessary.

She remembered talking to Mikael the day he told her werewolves had once been guardians, taking on the wolf’s pelt for good reasons.

*Like superheroes*, she had said.

Was that what she was? More to the point, was that what she could be? What she *wanted* to be?

No, more than that: was it what *they* could be?

The wolf watched her with the patience of a creature older than time and waited.

“I do,” Nicole said.

“You sound surprised.”

“I am. But.” Nicole took in a breath. “I do want that. I want to do things differently after this. No more cages.”

That, Nicole thought, actually took the wolf off-guard. “What?”

“I told myself that I locked us away because I didn’t trust you,” Nicole said. “But really that’s not it, is it? I didn’t trust *me*. I didn’t trust myself not to enjoy what you were offering. I didn't trust that I'd be able to resist if you pushed. That’d I’d give in. But I get it now. That’s not how it is at all. So no more cages. No more fear.” Nicole grinned. “And I mean. We make a pretty good team.”

“We do,” the wolf murmured. “Partners, then.”

“Yeah.” Nicole rubbed the back of her neck and gave the wolf a shy, sort of sheepish grin. “But uh. Partners need names.”

“They do.” The wolf smiled. “Call me Honey.”

“Nicole?”

Nicole blinked and picked up her head from where she’d been resting in the grass.

“Hey,” Waverly said, and stroked a hand up the length of Nicole’s nose. “Dolls and Wynonna are on their way. Do you... I mean, can you change back? You’re not stuck like that, are you?”

Nicole stood up on her three good paws and shook herself down to get stray bits of grass and dirt out of her fur. The fourth burned with lingering silver, but she tried to ignore that, at least for the moment. She felt Honey’s smile, in the back of her mind. Warm and patient. If she could compare her life before now to the two of them fighting over the steering wheel of a car, then now, like this, they had their hands threaded together, handling the wheel together.

And together, they let go.

It didn’t hurt, which was what she found most startling. It was just change, as easy as rolling her
shoulders or stretching out her legs on the couch. She simply changed, releasing Honey’s natural form to return to her own. She stood up, somewhere amidst the rippling change, so that she ended on her feet, holding her injured hand close to her chest.

“Wow,” Waverly said, letting out a breath. “Um. That was incredible.”


“I have about a million questions.”

“Me too.”

She laughed. “You don’t know either, huh.”

“Not exactly. But it’s...” She frowned, looking for words. How did one explain this new frontier to someone who’d never experienced it? “Let’s just say we’ve brokered a new understanding.”

“We?”

“Me and Honey,” Nicole said. Waverly gaped, and Nicole winked. “Guess you made an impression.”


Nicole barked out a laugh. “Awful.”

“Here,” Waverly said, and dug a vial out of her purse. It looked like glass, at first, but glittered like crystal, and the liquid inside shone silvery-white in the sun.

“What’s that?” Nicole asked.

“Jeremy and I’ve been working on containment,” Waverly said. “Guess this is our first test run.”

Her tongue poked out between her teeth as she pulled off the stopper and poured the liquid onto the back of Nicole’s hand. The water inside was as cold as glacial ice and it seeped into the open gash, making Nicole snarl and grind her teeth together even as it cleared out the worst of the silver.

“Moonwater?” she asked, her teeth still clenched against the pain, and almost laughed. She’d never heard of it being bottled before, not without it losing all its potency, but then again, Jeremy and Waverly each were forces of nature. With the two of them working together, they could probably change the whole damn world.

“Mm,” Waverly said, and dug a roll of bandage from her purse, winding it around Nicole’s palm. Seriously, how much did the woman keep in there? And how much of it was emergency werewolf patch-up kit? “I thought if we could figure out how to contain it, we could stockpile some. For occasions like this. When, y’know, you get assaulted. By your wife.”

“You’re really not gonna let that go, are you.”

Waverly stuck out her tongue, but she was grinning. “Not yet I’m not.”

“Fair. And speaking of my wife,” Nicole muttered. She moved over to Shae, leaning down to grab her knife out of Shae’s leg. It made a sickening squelch as she pulled it free and the blood on the blade hissed and bubbled as it burned. Revulsion rose like bile in her throat.

Waverly paused where she was trying to open the trunk. “Is she um. You know.”
“Dead?” Nicole finished, sounding a bit hollow even to herself, and frowned. “Let’s see.”

“It was uh. Pretty violent, what you did. I can’t imagine she survived.”

Nicole grimaced. “Yeah. Um. Sorry about that.”

“No,” Waverly said, but her voice was a bit squeaky. “It was... I mean it wasn’t cool but it was very flattering?”

“You’re welcome, I guess,” Nicole said with a laugh that was two parts discomfort for each part genuine amusement. She took hold of Shae’s shoulder to roll her onto her back and then crouched down beside the body. Shae’s eyes were open, staring, her mouth slightly open, and it made Nicole’s skin crawl. Nicole leaned a little closer, sniffing at Shae’s face and listening for her breath. She pressed two fingers under her jaw.

“No pulse,” she reported, “No breath. I think it’s safe to say Shae’s dead.”

“Oh, good,” Waverly said. “Which uh. I guess is kind of fucked up to say.”

“Hm.”

“Hey.”

Nicole looked up, and found Waverly watching her. Waverly’s expression was hard to read, but she looked... worried, maybe.

“Are you okay?”

Nicole inhaled, slow, and let it out as she thought about her answer. “Uh, not super great, I guess. It’s a lot. But, uh, first,” she added, and set the flat of her silver blade against Shae’s shoulder. The skin smoked and hissed as it burned, and she pulled the knife away again. “Yeah. I was afraid of that.”

“What?”

“Her wolf’s still in there.”

“Oh.” Waverly looked queasy. She popped the door open and busied herself with fetching things out of Nicole’s duffel bag, rather than watch.

Nicole drew in a deep breath and flipped the knife around in her left hand. She paused for a moment, with the point hovering a couple inches above Shae’s heart.

She hadn’t really done this before. Killed someone. Well, she had, but that had been different. And it had been bad enough when she was slaughtering goons trying to kill Dolls in the woods. That was defense of a friend. And they’d shot at her right back, too, like Dolls had pointed out at the time. But this. This was... personal. Hell, at least the mercenaries had been strangers.

And sure, it wasn’t really Shae anymore. But it was part of her. Shae’s wolf had been a part of Shae for as long as Nicole had known her, even if she didn’t know Shae’s secret at the start. In some ways, Shae’s wolf had made Shae who she was, and vice versa.

Shae’s wolf was as much a part of all their shared memories as Shae was. They’d been rock-climbing together. They’d gone to the concert together, gambled together. They’d had meals together. And she’d fucked Shae. In earnest, and with wild abandon. Hell, they’d lived more in
those few months than some people did in years.

Honey leaned against her, as solid and supportive and heavy as a wall.

Shae had hurt her. Hurt them both. Hurt Waverly. And Shae’s wolf had been a part of all that too. An unwilling participant or partner-in-crime, Nicole would never know, but a part of it all the same.

“Okay,” she whispered, though whether it was for her own benefit or for Honey’s, she wasn’t sure.

She slammed the knife down, sliding between ribs until the silver pierced Shae’s heart. Shae didn’t scream or thrash or burn. Shae was already dead. But when Nicole pulled the knife back out, a wisp of golden fog leaked out of the wound, drifting free until the wind picked up, and carried it away.

Waverly moved closer, standing on the other side of Shae’s body. Nicole rested the knife against Shae’s skin.

Nothing happened.

She got up to her feet again, breathing out a sigh, and slid her knife back into its sheath on her calf.

Waverly didn’t say anything as she handed Nicole a pair of jeans, a bra, and an old PSD hoodie. She didn’t have to. Her face spoke volumes—the twist of her frown marking her regret, the lines around her eyes marking her grief, the furrow of her brow marking her satisfaction that the threat had been removed.

Nicole put on her clothes and the tattered remains of her boots and stood waiting over Shae’s body until Dolls and Wynonna arrived.

Dolls said nothing, though he looked at Waverly, sharply, as if maybe he recognized Shae’s corpse.

Wynonna, however, seemed to be unaware of the exchange happening next to her. She looked brittle, tired, and sore, and all out of shits to give about one issue or another. She was actually leaning on Dolls, her shoulder resting on his. Nicole could hardly blame her, after the day she’d had, but it was a surprise Wynonna was willing to let anyone see that she was relying on other people like this. Wynonna pointed at Shae’s body, then looked at Waverly, and then at Nicole.

“So who’s this?” she asked, her voice dry.

“She’s—” Waverly began.

“My wife,” Nicole said.

Dolls snapped his head around to stare at her, but Wynonna narrowed her eyes. Ah, Waverly must’ve said something.

“Haught,” Wynonna said, her voice absolutely arctic. “I believe I had a standing warning on the ‘if you ever hurt my sister’ front.”

Nicole frowned. She couldn’t seriously mean...

Wynonna pulled Peacemaker, pointing it at Nicole’s chest. Nicole’s eyes went a bit wide, but she didn’t move.

“Wynonna!” Waverly snapped, and yanked her sister’s arm down with both her hands.
“What?” Wynonna said. “I didn’t even cock it, relax. Come on, I wouldn’t actually shoot her. I just wanted to see what she’d do.”

“Why?” Waverly demanded. “Cuz you didn’t already give me enough heart attacks today?”

“Because if she let it happen it’d mean she knows she fucked up,” Wynonna said, holstering Peacemaker again. Nicole glanced down at the ground. That, at least, was certainly true. It also had a lot to do with how much she trusted Wynonna not to kill her, but she wasn’t going to bring that up just now when Wynonna was being nice. “And since that is evidently the case, I am satisfied.” She shot Nicole a somewhat dirty look. “For now. But we’ll talk about this later.”

Nicole smiled, just a little. “Yeah. I figured.”

“Now. What are we doing with our shiny new werewolf corpse. And the ruined cop car. Nice job, by the way. That’s a hell of a crash.”

“Thanks! A werewolf hit it,” Nicole said glibly.

“And here I thought you were the boring one.”

“Not sure I can do much about the car, but I think we can make the murder case disappear easy enough,” Dolls noted, and offered Nicole a faint smile. “Well, we do still have some pull with PSD’s leadership. And even if we’re not officially on BBD’s payroll anymore, it’s in their best interest to keep werewolf fights off police radar, so I think I can swing this as an official-capacity thing. Trust me, if you think breaking up pitbull fights is bad, try doing lycanthropes.” He winked at Nicole but kept his expression dryly horrified. “It’s a nightmare.”

“Fair enough. To our offices, then,” Wynonna drawled. “But I’m not touchin’ it.”

Nicole laughed and went with Dolls to fetch a tarp from his car. Between the two of them, they got Shae’s body into the back of his SUV.

When she sat in the backseat, Waverly offered her the necklace she’d dropped on the ground. She moved to take it, but Waverly just moved a little closer, and reached around behind Nicole’s head to fasten it shut.

“Thanks.”

“Mmhm,” Waverly said, and nuzzled her nose against Nicole’s. “Here. You look beat.” She patted her leg, and Nicole lay down across the backseat, pillowng her head in Waverly’s lap. If Honey were a cat, Nicole thought she’d have been purring. As it was, she could feel the energy of Honey’s mental tail swishing at the cozy warmth of Waverly’s body as Nicole rested against her. Waverly curled her arm around Nicole, stroking hair away from Nicole’s face with an idle finger.

“I’m just gonna close my eyes for a second,” Nicole said.

“Sure,” Waverly said.

“Just for a second.”

When she woke up again, Waverly was shaking her shoulder. “Nicole.”

“Hm.”
“We’re supposed to be in BBD for a de-brief. Dolls and Jeremy already carted off the body.”

Nicole yawned and pushed herself upright on her good hand, rubbing her face in the crook of her elbow. “Damn.”

She followed Waverly into the station, squinting past the bleary tiredness still clinging to her. Sarah stopped them at the BBD door, and Nicole struggled not to yawn in her face.

“Came for you this morning,” she explained, handing Nicole a manila envelope. “By courier. Oh my god, what happened to your hand?”

Nicole frowned, rubbing at her eye with her good hand and flipping the envelope over. Honey was growling but Nicole judiciously kept that out of her own voice. “Um, long story. Thank you, Sarah.” She started to turn away, then paused. “Oh, Sarah, can you make sure there’s a form on my desk for filing a department vehicle crash report?”

“Wh– um, of course, Officer Haught.”

“Thank you.”

She let Waverly open BBD’s door and followed her inside. Sarah let them go, frowning severely, but just after the door shut Nicole heard Sarah mutter, “They’re gonna get that poor woman killed,” under her breath.

Everyone was inside already, aside from Doc. Wynonna was sitting on one of the desks with Dolls standing rigidly beside her with his arms crossed. Jeremy was lingering by his desk, sipping coffee out of a paper cup. Nicole frowned, wondering where his special Transformers one had gone.

Waverly pulled a chair over for her and Nicole sat, trying to figure out how to open an envelope one-handed. Waverly plucked it from her hands and offered it to Jeremy. “Can you check this?”

“For what, anthrax?” he said, chuckling. She wasn’t laughing, and he sobered. “Oh. Uh, sure.” He took the envelope, rather more carefully now, and headed into another room.

Waverly set up just behind Nicole, one hand resting warm and soft on the back of Nicole’s neck, and Nicole leaned back against her. Doc entered next, dusting off his hands and tugging his sleeves into place, and then he stopped short, looking around at the group. He tipped his hat in greeting.

“Seems the gang’s all here,” he said, though without his usual cheer. The loss of Alice was still hurting, and Nicole knew it would hurt for a while more. She wondered if he cared half as much about Rosita leaving. Hell, she wondered if he even knew yet. He’d need to hire a new bartender. Again.


“Looks like we’re stab wound buddies,” Nicole noted, raising her right hand.

“Ah,” he said, grimacing, and raised his, showing the bloodied makeshift bandages around his palm. “Indeed. But I do not have your propensity for healin’. What’s wrong with yours?”

“Silver.”

“I see.” He moved forward and set his good hand on Wynonna’s shoulder, squeezing once before he took a seat in another chair.
“Safe!” Jeremy announced, re-emerging from his lab. “I mean it’s clean, anyway. Here.” He handed it back to Nicole, and she opened it, pulling out a short stack of paperwork. A post-it was stuck to the first page, in a handwriting she recognized.

*Here you go. I’ll always love you. xx Shae*

“Jesus,” she breathed, and for a moment her heart stuttered in her chest. What was this, a haunting? A coincidence? A joke? She flipped through the pages. A few highlighted blanks were filled in with Shae’s looping signature.

“What is it?” Dolls asked.

“It’s uh.” She swallowed, hard. “Decree of divorce.”

“What?” Wynonna said. “For who?”

“Me,” Nicole said, and grimaced. She glanced up at Wynonna and Dolls. “Guess it doesn’t matter much now, though.”

“I was joking, before,” Waverly said, startled. “You know that, right?’”

“Yes,” Nicole said. “Yeah, I know. Like I said, I sent these to her months ago. Why’d she sign them now?”

“And why send them the day she was planning to kill you?” Waverly muttered, though her voice was a bit darker, anger simmering in the back of her throat.

“Motive,” Jeremy said, and blinked when everyone in the room turned to look at him. “I mean, if you filed for divorce, but then you disappeared with them unsigned, she’s like, a super obvious suspect.”

“Mm.” Dolls nodded. “But if it looks like she was cooperating, she wouldn’t have had reason to knock you off.”

“Timing is a bit tight,” Nicole said, snorting out a derisive laugh and tucking the papers back into the envelope. She tried to push down the feeling she was going to be sick. “Besides, it’d have looked like I’d been mauled. Wouldn’t really be a *murder* investigation.”

“Yeah, but it’s Nedley we’re talking about, and Purgatory BBD, to boot,” Waverly said. “Nedley would never have accepted ‘animal attack’ and just dropped it. Especially not if it was you.”

“Well he’d have had to fight us for it,” Wynonna muttered. “Once he got out of the hospital, anyway.”

“Wait,” Nicole said. A sick knot of fear crawled up her throat and stuck just below her jaw. “I’m sorry, get out of the what?”

“Oh,” Waverly said, her voice suddenly very small.

“The sheriff is a brave and stalwart man,” Doc murmured. Not to placate her, she thought, but to remind her.

“Widow Mercedes,” Wynonna said. “She took him. We found them when she was torturing him to get him to tell her where the third seal was.”

“But he didn’t break,” Dolls said, and there was a note of respect in his voice, and maybe also
pride.

“Can we go see him?” Nicole asked, turning to Waverly and lowering her voice. “Tonight?”

“Might be after visiting hours,” Waverly reminded her.

“Can we try?”

Waverly smiled, and nodded.

“So,” Wynonna said, interrupting. “With that charming topic out of the way, anything anyone else needs to tell me? I need to head out of the Triangle. Tonight, if possible. Following a lead.”

Waverly glanced at her, but she didn’t ask.

“It is worth noting,” Doc said, and cleared his throat, “That I have put Bobo del Rey in the well, for the moment. Until we are inclined to make use of him. Or dispose of him.”

Wynonna’s eyes lit up, and Nicole had a sneaking suspicion she knew why. Indulging her, Nicole borrowed her wolf’s voice and let out a sharp bark!

Wynonna gasped, looked at Nicole, and grinned like her birthday had come early.

Nicole barked again.

“What’s that, Lassie?” Wynonna said, and Dolls, Jeremy, and Waverly all started laughing. Doc glanced around the group, bewildered.

Nicole barked one more time.

“Bobo fell down the well?”

God help her, Wynonna was so earnest about it that Nicole dissolved into laughter too. Wynonna just sat there, beaming, but Doc looked around again, holding up a hand.

“Hold up,” he said. “Are you tellin’ me you all know Lassie?”

Though both of them were exhausted, Waverly did take Nicole to the hospital. It took a little pushing and wheedling to get the staff to let her inside since she wasn’t family, but the nurse took down her badge number and begrudgingly let them through. Chrissy met them at his door and gave Waverly a tight hug, then made her excuses to step out and get some food for herself. Nedley was in a room by himself for the moment, the curtain drawn. He was a mess. One of his eyes was swollen almost shut, most of his fingers bound together in tape and gauze and splinted, as best as one could splint fingers, to keep them in place.

He was awake, and when he saw Nicole staring at him, he grumbled, “Go on then,” and nodded at the chair next to his bed. “Sit on my right side, can’t turn my head the other way so much yet.”

She cleared her throat and sat. If the Widow Mercedes hadn’t realized that she was the wrong officer of the law, it’s possible she could’ve been the one in that torture chair instead of him. It made her stomach churn.

“I’ve um. I think I’ve had enough of hospitals for like the next month,” Waverly said, and squeezed Nicole’s shoulder. “I’ll be in my car. Text me when you’re ready.”
“Sure,” Nicole said.

Waverly offered Nedley a fragile, queasy smile. “I hope you feel better soon, sir.”

“Thanks for comin’ up,” Nedley said. He mirrored her smile, all paternal warmth and understanding.

Once she’d left, Nedley eyed Nicole up and down, and his voice turned gruff, albeit still with that hint of warmth and undisguised affection in it. “I see you’re up and about. Good.”

“Yeah, uh, Waverly. She. Well, she found the ring Wynonna gave you and handed it over, so that they would fix me.”

“Oh,” he said, his eyes a bit wider. “Well that’s somethin’.”

“Yeah,” she said, though it came out a bit hoarse for her liking. She looked him over again. He smelled like blood and antibiotics and gauze and painkillers and she could hear the labor in his breath, the whistle in his chest where something was damaged or overworked. “I wish it’d saved you this.”


Nicole wasn’t sure she believed that, but she nodded and just fussed with the bandage on her hand where it lay in her lap.

“Did you get ’em?” Nedley asked, his voice low.


“Good,” Nedley said, the word almost a growl.

“The one whose orders they were following though,” Nicole said. “We’re still working on that.”

“Hm.”

The demon was still out there and it burned her throat like acid. Her father was still out there. Minus one of his most powerful tools, but he still had so many more at his disposal, and Nicole didn’t have the slightest idea how to start going after him. She looked at Nedley’s bruised face and battered hands and then looked away. This was her stupid mess. Sure, it was the Earp line’s problem too, but she had brought this here. She had brought the Purgatory Sheriff’s Department into this. Maybe “the law” wouldn’t have been involved if it wasn’t for her.

Maybe he’d be walking around and yelling at Lonnie and filing paperwork, if it wasn’t for her.

“Tell you somethin’, Haught.”

“Mm?”

“It’s not your fault I got hurt.”

She sighed and answered on autopilot. “I know.”

“No, you don’t,” he said. “Cuz I can see it all over your face.”

She flinched and looked down. Damn but he really was good.
“You can’t stop everything,” he said. It seemed familiar, like she’d heard it in a dream, maybe.
“That’s what sucks about bein’ a cop. You know it. I know it. You heard that phrase, ‘prevention is nine-tenths of the law’?”

“I thought it was ‘possession’ is nine-tenths.”

“Works both ways.”

“Mm.”

“It’s also only nine-tenths, Haught.”

She frowned, but... she also knew he was right. Even great cops couldn’t prevent every crime. That’s what the justice system was for. Preventing what they could and resolving what they couldn’t.

“This isn’t your fault,” he said, more firm. “You’re one of my best officers, Haught. I don’t wanna lose you to guilt or regret. I just want you to heal up and get back to your desk and keep being a damn good cop.”

Pride and validation made her chest feel tight and she inhaled, sharply, looking away from him. She blinked a few times, rubbing at her face with her good hand.

“Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” she said, and cleared her throat, trying again. “Yeah. I think I can.”

When they got to the Homestead there was no sign of Wynonna. Nicole went inside while Waverly went to confirm that Curtis’ motorcycle was gone from the barn. The kitchen was quiet, almost eerily so after all the action and chatter earlier, and for a moment Nicole just stood there, letting the easy calm of the room settle her. Somewhere distant she could hear birds cawing and singing, the rustle of wind through the tall grass in the fields, and the pipes groaning and clacking now and then as the furnace made up its mind about kicking on.

It felt good, to just have a moment of quiet.

“What do you want some coffee?” Waverly asked, coming up behind her.

“No,” Nicole murmured, turning to look at her. Waverly was battered, bruised, but still fighting. Still strong, despite all the setbacks and the questions. They were back to square one on whatever Waverly’s true lineage was, but they were at square one together. And this time, they wouldn’t keep standing at odds with each other, keeping secrets and fighting over tiny things when the big things were staring them in the face.

They’d figure it out. Waverly was extraordinary, but she also needed answers, and dammit, Nicole was gonna make sure she got them.

Waverly blinked, eyes wide, looking a bit like a deer in headlights. “Uh, do you want something else?”

Maybe it was just the effects of the day. Maybe it was the stress and the adrenaline. Or maybe it was Honey, prowling through her chest and sending pulses of fire through her limbs.
Or maybe it was just how it always was, with them. That pull of love and desire mixing so closely together they were indistinguishable from one another.

“Just you,” Nicole said, and her voice sounded different, deep and a bit hoarse, even to her own ears.

“Oh,” Waverly said, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth even as Nicole moved toward her and scooped her off the floor, holding her in one good arm. Waverly looped her legs around Nicole’s waist and her arms around Nicole’s shoulders. “Thought you weren’t feeling well.”

“Yeah,” Nicole said, and carried Waverly into the Earps’ living room. “But I’ve an idea how to feel much, much better.”

Waverly laughed, but didn’t object when Nicole lay her down on the couch. She said very little at all, really, just reached for Nicole’s face, pulling her closer until their lips could meet.

And just this once, Nicole had no fear of being interrupted.

And god was it good to just have a minute to enjoy each other without Wynonna or somebody else needing something from them. To just enjoy each other, and take their time, and not have to worry about the end of the goddamn world. To finally have the time to touch, and taste, and hear Waverly. To feel the lithe, coiled, almost feline grace of her pressing against Nicole’s patient, constant strength.

Damn but she’d missed this.

Later, when Nicole had her head pillowed against Waverly’s breasts, Waverly pulled a blanket over them. She’d come to rest with her head against one of Wynonna’s numerous decorative pillows and was stroking her fingers through Nicole’s hair. It started out languid and lazy, but as they lay there, an edge crept into it that Nicole found worrying. A lingering, anxious tension. Waverly was warm and soft and Nicole didn’t want to move, but she dragged her mind up from the place where it was hovering on the verge of sleep and smiled against Waverly’s skin.

Waverly breathed out a laugh. “I was so sure you were asleep.”

“Not yet,” Nicole murmured. “What’s on your mind?”

“Mm,” Waverly said, and Nicole could hear the smile in her voice. “You. And how good you are.”

“What, with my hands, or—”

Waverly barked out a laugh and slapped the side of Nicole’s head. “I meant in general.”

“Mmhm.”

“But also with your hands.”

Nicole laughed. After a moment, she tried again. “You’re tense, though. And I usually have the opposite effect on you.”

That light, amused slap came again, and she could practically hear Waverly roll her eyes. But then Waverly was quiet for a moment. “Mm. Just my brain wandering off. You don’t really want to know.”

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise, baby.”
Waverly hummed, and for a minute or so, Nicole thought she might not actually answer.

“You’ve been married,” she said.

“Mm.”

“Told you, you wouldn’t want to know.”

“Hey,” Nicole said, and lifted her head, propping herself up on her elbow so she could look Waverly in the eye. “I still want to. What about it bothers you?”

“I dunno. That you’ve done all that before, I guess.”

“I married her on a crazy, drunken whim at a Las Vegas chapel, high on a jackpot win and a good pop concert,” Nicole said. “I barely remember it, and what I do remember wasn’t exactly special. If you’re jealous that I’ve already done all the wedding stuff before—”

“I’m not,” Waverly protested.

Nicole raised an eyebrow, dubious.

“Oh, fine, a little bit.”

“I really haven’t, though,” Nicole said, and grinned. “But I’m flattered that you’re thinking about it.”

Waverly flushed. “Not... I mean not right away, of course, but. It has crossed my mind. Once or twice.”

Nicole grinned, lazy and warm, and kissed the point of Waverly’s collarbone.

“Arrogant dog.”

“Besides,” Nicole said. “What’s special about a wedding with you, Waverly Earp, wouldn’t be the pomp and circumstance. Not to me, anyway. What’s special about it is that it’s you. You, and me, and the rest of our lives.”

Waverly stroked her fingers through Nicole’s hair. “Then why didn’t you tell me? We could’ve... I dunno, figured this out before. Dealt with it not in a life-or-death scenario.”

“I know, I was just.”

“Scared.”

Nicole sighed, and tilted her head so that it rested on the couch cushion. “Yeah.”

“Because the fact that I didn’t freak out over you being a werewolf meant that you being married was gonna be the final straw. Because definitely I, Waverly Earp, would be more concerned about being a homewrecker than dating a lycanthrope.”

Nicole pressed her lips together. “Okay listen when you put it that way, yeah—” Waverly laughed, hard. “Then it makes me sound like an asshole.”

“Not an asshole,” Waverly murmured, and tucked hair behind Nicole’s ear. “Just human.”

“Mm.” Nicole smiled, but Waverly’s mouth had twisted up into a frown. “What?”
“I guess there’s. Something else that bothered me about it.”

“Tell me.”

“Something Shae said, in the hospital. Don’t wolves...” She sighed, looking frustrated with herself. “Don’t wolves mate for life?” Nicole froze, anxiety rising in her gut like a slowly accelerating metronome. “I mean like real wolves,” Waverly said, a little too quickly, scrambling to explain herself. “But does it... I mean does that matter to werewolves? Maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it was stupid.”

“No,” Nicole said, and gently touched a finger to Waverly’s mouth to stop her. “No, it’s not stupid. And. We do, actually.” She flushed and tried to pick her words carefully. She didn’t worry that Waverly would have an issue with it, exactly, but it would be so easy to abuse it once Waverly knew.

“Then...”

“Then nothing,” Nicole said. “Shae wasn’t my mate.”

Waverly frowned at her. “You’re awful confident on that.”

“That’s uh.” Nicole cleared her throat, looking down for a moment. “That’s cuz I already know who mine is. Honey told me, a little while ago, that it’s a mutual thing. That the bond only forms when both parties decide that it’s real.”

“Both werewolves, you mean.”

“Well,” Nicole drawled, and flashed her a sheepish little grin. “No, not necessarily. Apparently.”

Waverly watched her for a moment, maybe waiting for Nicole to suddenly laugh and say gotcha!, only it never came.

“Wait,” she said, and pointed to herself. “Me?”

“Mmhm.”

“What?” God help her, but Waverly’s eyes were positively twinkling with glee. “When did that even happen?”

Nicole shrugged, laughing. Even for her anxieties about it, it felt good to tell Waverly everything. Honey, meanwhile, was giving her the most smug I told you so vibe from her spot in the corner of Nicole’s mind. “No idea. I swear, I didn’t even know it was happening until after.”

“Wh...” Waverly’s expression turned thoughtful and she frowned. Her eyes were on Nicole, but her mind was far away. “Wait is that why?”

“Why what?”

“Oh my god!” Waverly laughed, and Nicole raised her eyebrows. “I thought I was going crazy! I’ve been, I dunno, sensing more? Smells, sounds. I thought it was some half-revenant thing. I’ve been freaking out about it for like, weeks.”

“Wait, it goes both ways?”

Honey grumbled and flicked her tail over her nose. Nicole took it to mean Oh you utter moron, and almost complained, but. Well. Maybe she’d deserved that one.
“What?” Waverly asked, and laughed. “What do you get from me?”

“I dunno, feelings, sometimes, I guess? Why are you laughing?”

“We’re such idiots,” Waverly said, covering her face with both hands. “Oh god, I can’t believe this.”

“Oh shut up,” Nicole grumbled, but without much heat in it. Waverly knew. She knew, and she didn’t care, and she was okay with it. God, she was even happy about it. It changed nothing, and yet it changed everything.

Waverly grinned, a gleam of mischief in her eyes. “Maybe you should make me.”

By the end of the week, Nicole was back to work. Her car was still in the shop, but she was borrowing Nedley’s car while he remained in recovery at home with his daughter. Which felt. Weird, but also kind of exciting. And unsettlingly familiar, but she tried not to think much about that part. Nicole kept the demon’s ring with her, in a pocket or on a chain around her neck, to keep it safe. One time already, the station had not really been the safest place to hide a powerful artifact, and she wanted to take absolutely zero chances.

She filed the paperwork Shae had sent her, just to cover all her bases, and she and Dolls started comparing notes in earnest about the Cult of Bulshar, looking for any leads. Wynonna had been in touch, and was on her way back, and in the meantime, the five of them—Dolls, Jeremy, Doc, Waverly, and Nicole—were hard at work.

They met at Shorty’s, now that PSD had been compromised more than once and Doc had the power to flip that open sign around to closed. One afternoon, while the five of them were sipping coffee from go-cups and poring over maps, someone knocked on the bar’s front door.

Waverly answered and opened the door for two burly men wearing dark sunglasses and suits with diamond cufflinks. Nicole stood up out of her chair, tamping down a growl. Bodyguards always had a certain vibe going, but these two in particular she recognized.


“Moonsinger,” Luke said, polite as can be. He actually smiled. “I hope you know it wasn’t personal.”

“While my Lady von Holstein does not always approve of your methods, your results impress her. My Lady was wondering if you and your team were interested in some...” He inhaled, thoughtful, as if looking for the right word. “Freelance work. Related to a, shall we say, mutual rival.”

Nicole narrowed her eyes. She glanced at Waverly. While Nicole would have expected Waverly to refuse any news or really anything that came from Loretta, Waverly nodded, slow. Nicole wasn’t sure if she was planning to use such an opportunity for payback or was genuinely interested in leads. Either way, if Waverly was on board, so was she.
She looked to Dolls and got a tight, serious nod. She looked to Doc and got a wink and a sly, eager smile. She looked over her shoulder at Jeremy, who grinned. Clueless, maybe, but excited.

They didn’t know what was coming. They had only the barest bones of a plan for how to take down Bulshar, or at the very least his cult. But they’d do it together. She would do it with her pack—no, her family—at her back.

She turned her attention back to the vampire’s bodyguards and gave them both a wolfish smile.

“All right. We’re listening.”

Chapter End Notes

Well... well shit. That's it, folks.

Big thanks go again to Mischief who read over these last 11 chapters for me and helped make them as incredible as they are, and to BH who put up with me sending random lines and paragraphs almost devoid of context at all hours.

But most of all thank you to all of you who’ve been reading, whether you started on day 1 or yesterday or a year from now. This was a huge learning experience for me both as a writer and as a modern content creator and I’m so grateful for your support, your feedback, and your warmth as I put this together.

Now that this crazy ride is at its conclusion I am looking forward to working on new, original projects. If you want to keep up with me you can find me on Twitter under @lexraevison as I work on my next novel and start shopping it around. But don't take your eyes off my page here on Ao3 completely either! I'm sure these characters aren't completely done with me yet, so keep an ear open for the B-Sides fic and the series in general; there may be more little scenes and moments on the way.

I’ve said this in a few places but it’s worth saying here too: I do not currently plan to write a sequel when Season 3 comes out. I anticipate a lot of wrenches being thrown into Wolves stuff like Nicole’s backstory and the Cult of Bulshar’s identity, so right now, I don’t think it’ll happen. But never say never! So again, watch this space and keep an eye on my twitter. You can probably expect to see me hollering and livetweeting a lot when S3 starts airing this summer.

Also, a kind of an administrative thing. If you enjoyed this story and want to support my work financially in the time between now and when I can start giving y'all links to buy books, if you are so inclined, I have a ko-fi page. A few of you have already offered your support there and please know that I see you and appreciate the ever-lovin’ fuck out of you.

Finally, Earpers, you guys rock. Never lose that.

I'll see you soon.

-A
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!