

W i l d e r w o o d

Halli Starling

Wilderwood

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T h a n k s

To Keikei, Agu, Sirius, James, and Leah: for being the best cheerleaders and divine friends.

To Cayla, for being my first reader and artist, and for loving vampires as much as I do.

To everyone who has ever encouraged my writing and told me to do the damn thing.

Chapter One

They say we are born, not made, as vampires. Created vampires are feral, ruthless killers who desire blood above all else. Those who are born into this fate have better control and thus are civilized. That we are only brutal if we choose to be. And so because we have free will, we are more like the humans and the other creatures with souls. I have never once felt human, or like anything else. I know what I am, and it is because of that feeling, and because of the marks on my flesh, that I stand steadfast in my cause.

I know this - each of us bears the marks of the sin that created us on our flesh. These marks tell the story of that crime, committed by an ancestor, which cursed the bloodline and resulted in such creatures. But no matter my ancestor's sin, I will not let their viciousness affect my people. Everyone who lives in my territory, human or otherwise, is under my protection. And I will fight to the death, and then beyond, to keep them safe.

—From the journal of Octavia Wilder, 1824

1889

The rap of knuckles on solid wood broke Octavia's concentration and with a sigh she called out, "Come in, if you must."

"Beggin' your pardon, my lady, but Maribelle says the sheep got out again and one is over the river."

Octavia turned in her chair. "Over the river?"

Simon, the wereboar groundskeeper of Wilderwood, clutched his worn straw hat in his fingers, but his eyes danced with mirth. "Yeah. Over the river."

Ah there's that headache I was expecting. Damn. "That's twice this week. Grab the net, Simon."

"Yes, my lady."

Octavia silently thanked the gods she'd not changed out of the clothes from her morning ride and went with Simon - and his net - to the empty field behind Wilderwood Manor. The ground, muddy from the spring rains, seemed determined to suck at their boots and trip them up. Simon muttered a few curses, each one followed by an apology to Octavia.

She brushed his apologies aside. "It's not a worry, Simon. You know that."

"Still is improper, my lady."

"Yes, well. We have bigger concerns than a few bruised social norms."

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At least that got a chuckle out of the old groundskeeper.

As they neared the river, which split the field in two and preceded the bank of a heavy treeline, a plaintive *Baaa* rang out. Floating above the lazily churning river was Beep Beep, the most troublesome sheep Octavia had ever the displeasure of meeting.

Simon stood beside her, net at the ready. “You’d think the blasted thing was a goat, as much as it gets into.”

“And yet, if Beep Beep were to...wander off and never return, I’d be making one little girl very unhappy.”

Simon sighed dramatically, earning him a snort from Octavia. “Shall I?”

“Please.”

Simon marched over to the riverbank and deftly swiped the net down over the levitating sheep. When his net caught empty air, he was so startled that he began to tip forward, toward the river. Octavia rushed to him, throwing an arm around his chest and pulling him back from the muddy water.

“Much obliged,” he panted, swiveling his head to see where the sheep went.

“Baa.”

Octavia pointed to where Beep Beep was hovering above the river, roughly fifty feet from them. “As if a levitating sheep weren’t enough. Damn thing’s learned to teleport.”

He’d never had the occasion to come this far south, but Roderick instantly recognized Wilderwood as the type of sleepy little village where not much happened and gossip was *de rigueur*. And if he was going to avoid being the focus of all that idle chatter, it behooved him to find the inn quickly.

Rangers tended to attract attention, and he was in no mood.

Roderick hefted his bag over his shoulder, hearing the satisfying clank of crossbow bolts within, and walked into town. He was dressed like a traveler, albeit one not used to such stifling refinery like Wilderwood. So he got a few confused glances from the folks walking in the town square market. But he kept to the shadows and kept his head down, eyes only tracking up to mark locations in his mental map.

Always be prepared, and always know where the safe places are, his mentor Guran used to say. *Know your entrances and exits. And always expect trouble.*

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Wilderwood looked like the kind of place where trouble came to die a wheezing, dusty death. Roderick chuckled as a boy about six years of age came to a frozen halt as he passed, his sweet dropped to the ground in shock.

He was tired, his feet hurt, and he could smell the inviting aroma of roasted meat up ahead. The inn glowed with soft light, the door open to let in the fresh air, and from the noise echoing down the street, they were doing a bustling lunchtime trade.

Perfect. He could slip in while it was busy and start from an advantage; be able to observe the town and listen to gossip. Tracking his prey wasn't going to be easy in the ancient forests around Wilderwood, but if anything strange had been happening lately, it would certainly be the talk of the inn.

Roderick stuffed his hat in his pocket and ran a hand through his too-long dark brown hair before stepping into the common room of the inn. With practiced ease he scanned the space. At first glance it wasn't anything out of the ordinary - a room full of what mostly looked like locals, farmers and merchants and such sharing tables and chatter.

The tall, older woman behind the counter was barking orders at a young man, who bustled by to wipe down a newly vacated table in the corner. And that's where Roderick headed. He gave the youth a wan smile. "Busy in here."

The boy, probably no older than sixteen, blew sweaty auburn hair out of his eyes and gave a spot by Roderick's elbow another swipe with his towel. "Always is." He gave Roderick the kind of assessing look to be expected from someone much more worldly - and much older. It sparked something in the back of Roderick's mind, made him narrow his eyes. "Always is. Mama Stockton's stew is famous. People come from all over for a bowl."

"Must be some stew," Roderick murmured. The boy didn't seem to notice.

"You'll be wantin' a bowl then?"

He nodded. "And some ale and bread, if possible."

The boy gave a salute and ran off. The moment he left, the buzzing in Roderick's mind faded. Strange. He idly wondered if the boy had a touch of fae in him; humans with only a tiny dose of magic in their bloodline often made his head ring like that, but they weren't a danger. They rarely, if ever, knew about their ancestry.

He sighed and leaned back against the wall, content to watch the room and take in the drone of conversation as it ebbed and flowed around him. Most of what he overheard was typical small town fare about engagements and rumors and the state of the crops for the upcoming year.

No one seemed to be paying him much mind, so he closed his eyes. It felt so good to sit and rest. If he could just stay here for a few moments....

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“Beep Beep got out again?” This voice was rough, male, had a bit of a northern accent.

There was a feminine laugh followed by, “Damn thing. Ella would have my head if anything happened to him.”

“Simon said he was floating over the river.”

“Floating. And then teleported. We chased him for two miles before Simon finally got the net on him.”

The man roared with laughter and accompanied it by a slap to the table. Roderick cracked an eye open, his curiosity piqued. What the devil were they talking about? He scanned the room for the voices’ owners and found them two tables ahead, an empty table between him and them. The pair had just arrived, from the state of their unremoved coats.

The man was well...*huge*. Absolutely massive. Easily nearly seven feet tall with a bright red beard, broad barrel chest, and hands large enough to palm a human skull. He was dressed like a farmhand, rough clothes dotted with patches and stains, but there was something about the way he held himself that spoke of more.

The woman couldn’t have been more different. Roderick saw sharp cheekbones and a pointed chin, which were on display due to the elaborate braid she wore piled high on her head. Her riding clothes were of fine make and fit, so she obviously came from money. But she treated the man before her with warm consideration, and the way she patted his hand spoke volumes.

Intrigued, he slumped on the bench and sipped the ale the young man had just brought to him. “Stew be out in a minute, sir.”

“Thank you.”

As the odd pair in front of him settled, that same youth ran over to their table. “My lord. My lady.” He gave a little bow and set napkins and cutlery down in front of them. “The usual?”

“Please,” the woman responded. “And if you know any good recipes for mutton....”

The man snorted. “Don’t listen to her, Jacob. Octavia’s just sore she keeps getting outsmarted by a sheep.” The woman grumbled into her ale but her eyes shone over the rim of her mug.

“Understood!” And the young man dashed off again, leaving the pair to chat.

As Octavia opened her napkin to spread in her lap, a small card tumbled to the table. With a pointed look at Gregory, she flipped it over. Gregory saw her mouth thin as she read the single line, then took the card as she slid it over.

We’ve got a Ranger - table behind you, in the corner.

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“More exciting than Beep Beep’s great escape, isn’t it,” the man asked in low voice.

“Apparently so,” she responded, hand tensing around the card. She caught the flash of volcanic orange in his eyes and she gave his boot a swift kick under the table. It was like kicking a mountain, and had about as much impact. Gregory didn’t so much as blink but as he reached up to scratch his beard, the orange resettled into warm brown. A silent acknowledgement of her authority and what Gregory thought of the whole Ranger situation.

“Don’t let your glamour slip, O’Malley,” she said into her mug.

Chapter Two

Eating a meal while having a regular conversation - all within hearing distance of a Ranger - was setting Octavia's nerves on edge. Rangers weren't unusual in this part of the world, since the ley lines and ancient forests drew all manner of nasty creatures. But having one this close to Wilderwood was trouble. Rangers acted first, thought second (and it was a distant second at best). The glamours around Wilderwood and its inhabitants would hold, but if this man had any level of skill, he might sense something was a bit amiss about their little enclave.

If their talk of a teleporting sheep didn't already set off alarm bells.

As she and Gregory left The Drake's Rest, she had an ale sent the Ranger's way. Mama Stockton delivered it herself, along with the calling card for Octavia's residence. Octavia caught a glimpse of the man's furrowed brow as he read the card with dark, liquid brown eyes, and since he didn't launch himself at her or anyone else immediately, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Going to be trouble," Gregory rumbled as they crossed the square. "Rangers are always trouble."

Octavia frowned and picked her way across the muddy path. "And aren't they usually paired? Why would a Ranger be here, alone?"

"I'll have the clan run a scout trail through the woods tonight. The Ranger could be here for a contract on a beastie, or following his own path. But if he stays too long..."

Gregory didn't need to finish the sentence. Octavia knew what his silence said. Their wards were at their lowest point of the year, waiting to be refreshed by the coven on the hill. It had to happen on the spring equinox, which was a week away. The closer to the equinox, the weaker the wards, and the more unstable their glamours. If the Ranger stayed during that time, he'd eventually see through their magic.

Octavia wouldn't allow it.

Hence the calling card. An invite up to the house on the morrow for the Ranger to discuss his business - and hopefully a swift exit from Wilderwood - with Octavia. She could suss out his intentions, provide assistance, and put on the face of the worried baroness of the land without disrupting the coven's rituals or arousing suspicion.

Probably.

Hopefully.

Octavia blew out a breath and ran a hand over her now loose braid. Gregory chuckled. "No offense, love, but you look a fine state. Might want to go check a mirror before the Ranger comes knocking."

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She wrinkled her nose at him. “I can think of a thousand other things that need my attention than my hair. You worry about the clan. I’ll make the rounds elsewhere, ensure everyone stays as far away from the Ranger as possible.”

Gregory hummed in thought, gaze drifting across the rain-splattered roofs of the buildings across the street. “Odd looking, for a Ranger. They’re normally more...rough around the edges.” He grinned. “He’s handsome. Refined.”

Octavia shrugged as if she hadn’t noticed the man’s sharp nose or dimpled chin. Her vampire eyes were keener than most, and shadows the Ranger had cast hid certain details. But she’d also made out those eyes and an arching jawline dotted with stubble. “You seem awfully caught up on appearances of late, Gregory. Something I should know?”

He scratched at his beard again and she could hear his nails scraping over dry flesh. Faster than he could track, her hand shot out and stilled his; it was a gentle, but commanding, touch. “Sorry, boss. Nervous habit.”

She shuddered at the memory of the sound, but a brunette eyebrow twitched in interest. “What’s their name?”

Now the big man flushed, splotches of red creeping up his neck. “I uh...aw shit, you’ll find out soon enough.” He grinned, looking all the more like an embarrassed hound dog. “Stephan.”

“Stephan. Stephan. Hold up.” Octavia whirled on him with a grin. Her fangs showed now, thin and sharp and indenting her bottom lip. As they were no longer out in the open of town and nearing the road to lead her back home, she felt a tad safer. “You soft touch! From the Friederich clan?”

Now Gregory’s flush was blazing across his face and Octavia’s heart grew a couple sizes bigger. Gregory was one of her oldest friends, had helped her re-establish her ancestral home and build Wilderwood as it stood now - a safe haven for the misunderstood, the feared, the rejected. Both supernatural and human alike. But Gregory O’Malley had been a lifelong bachelor, dedicated to his clan for nearly a century. Seeing him in love was beyond adorable. It made Octavia stupidly, proudly happy.

“Yeah, we’ve been seein’ each other. Just meeting whenever one of us would travel the coast.” Gregory dug around in his jacket and pulled out a dark green velvet box. “I’m seeing him next weekend. Had this made.”

Octavia could hardly stand it. “Can I?”

Gregory nodded and pulled back the hinged lid. Nestled safely inside was a bright gold O’Malley clan brooch, elaborately, gorgeously dotted with emeralds and tourmaline. “Do you think he’ll like it?” Gregory asked, eyes fixed on Octavia’s face.

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“Oh dear heart, he’ll *adore* it.” She ran a gentle finger over the outside ring of the pin. “How could he not? It’s stunning. And attached to one of the best people I know, so he’d be a fool otherwise.”

Gregory looked down at the mud on his boots, his face cracked open with a smile. “And if this goes well, could we -“

She closed the box lid and waited until he’d tucked his engagement jewelry away before tugging him down the road toward Wilderwood Manor. “Don’t you even dare to ask. You know I would love to have the wedding at the house. We’ll fill the halls with the clans and turn out the gardens. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a proper fete.”

Gregory swooped her up in a hug, squeezing on just the right side of too tight. “You’ve always been too good to me, Tavia.”

Octavia tapped the end of his nose. “Says the werewolf who once saved me from a cave troll.”

“Pish, that was easy.” He chuckled and put her down, let her steer him closer to the manor. “Never forget how quickly that thing ran away from fire. It was one little torch.”

Roderick settled on the small bed in his room at the inn and looked around. The tidiness of the room was something to behold, but he doubted the woman running the place brooked much nonsense. She’d taken his money, slapped down a key, and told him in a take-it-or-leave-it voice that dinner was at six and eight and if he missed both, he’d be eating cold meats and cheeses from the cellar.

He’d liked her instantly, and told her as much. Mama Stockton huffed, rolled her eyes, and stomped back to the kitchens, leaving him to grin and snatch up the room key. Wilderwood was an odd little place, but it was much better than camping in the woods. And due to its central location on various ley lines, it was the perfect place to establish a base to return to as he hunted.

As tempting as it was to shuck off his boots and sink into a tub of hot water, he needed to look at the contract again. It was a coping mechanism when chasing something so dangerous; emblazon every little detail about the creature into his mind, so when it came time to dispatch it, he could do so with impunity.

Feral vampires were contracts he *hated* more than anything else. Devious, dangerous, and highly intelligent, they were counter to their genetic cousins. Those born vampire weren’t without their flaws, but at least they had something resembling a soul. Feral was feral, and this was the nastiest contract he’d ever taken on.

Roderick unfolded the pamphlet and let it fall open, its page already worn from being handled so much. He’d stared at this paper every night for nearly two years, ever since Corbin Luther

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murdered his partner. It was the one contract he'd never been able to fulfill and it had cost him his dearest friend.

Corbin was wily, charismatic, and prone to fits of murder and violence that were easily trackable. But somewhere along the line, he got wise to how the Roderick and Yasmin were following him and started to hide. As a rule, feral vampires were only able to hold onto something resembling humanity for so long before their lust for blood and destruction became insatiable. Easy to track, hard to kill.

Corbin's trail went cold overnight, and Roderick and Yasmin chased any hint of him across the continent. They had theories - he bought a fae artifact to help hide him, or contacted the fae and bargained on his own behalf; he found a beacon of power, one of the old stones that lingered in the ancient forests. Or one of a hundred other possibilities. But on the night Yasmin was murdered, Roderick came face to face with Luther hunched over Yasmin's body, her blood all over his hands and mouth. He should have charged Roderick, beyond rational in the middle of a blood lust. Roderick would have dispatched the monster, mourned Yasmin, and then been able to move on.

"He's not coming back, R. He's not that stupid."

"We've been wrong before."

Yasmin sighed. "I know. And I hate it. But this isn't Huntshead, and we aren't green. Someone will spot him if he goes out and then we'll hear about it."

Roderick sighed. His partner was right, like usual. But the desire to finally catch Corbin Luther was weighing him down, from burning need to avenge the people he'd slaughtered to a bone-deep exhaustion that even the fires of vengeance couldn't keep warm. Ferals were ruthless killers, intelligent and canny save in the middle of bloodlust. But Luther had shown an aptitude for disguising his sins with house fires, "farming accidents" and more. It was vile and incredibly smart, since finding fang marks on charred flesh or a decapitated corpse was next to impossible.

The Rangers had some magical detection means but nothing could reverse time or reveal truth. So for every body left headless by a combine, for every person who burned to death, they followed up the lead. There were still several corpses back at the Ranger academy with the description, "Cause of death unknown".

Now they sat on the third floor of a posh hotel in the middle of Portsmouth. Waiting. Portsmouth, a massive city on the west coast, had been besieged by a rash of "inexplicable, gruesome deaths" but one look at the bodies told them Luther had been their executioner. The most recent ones he didn't even bother to disguise as an accident, but they all held something in common: they were filthy rich. Luther didn't like hunting in crowds or high society, so unless this was another feral in town, their bet was on him.

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He'd changed tactics before, but this was the closest they'd ever come to tracking him. The most recent body had been found inside her room one floor below, missing her head, her jewelry, and the contents of the safe emptied. The ransacked room, the stolen valuables screamed frenzy to them both, but Yasmin was more rational in her approach. Luther returning to the hotel to hunt again was insane.

But tonight was a charity ball and the entire place was full of waiters, valets, and other service staff. Roderick suspected Luther's taste in high society wasn't for blue blood, but for their money. Why else steal her ladyship's valuables when he'd never done anything like that before? His gut screamed they were missing something. But at least his family's money and influence was good for something, as they'd secured a room with no trouble despite the event of the season happening on the main floor.

Yasmin pulled out her dagger, checked the blade. "We might as well go down. The ball's just starting up and if he's hunting in the crowd, we can spot him."

Roderick nodded. "Still want to split up? I don't know it's a great idea -"

Yasmin's gloved hand smacked him in the middle of the back. "It's a bloody great idea and you know it. We can cover more ground that way." Her dark eyes bored into his. Yasmin was his friend, his chosen family. And while she could easily best him in combat, he still worried. Losing her would be like losing a limb, or a purpose. "Do you really going to think he'll attack us in the middle of a crowd of hundreds?"

Neither of them thought he would, couldn't see how it would benefit him. But whatever he'd stolen from the woman he'd slaughtered the night prior had let him slip in, set the kitchen on fire, and in a burst of magic that sent Roderick running into the smoke-filled ballroom, had knocked Yasmin to the ground.

She'd never stood a chance. He was draining her when Roderick burst through a wall of flame, eyes stinging, lungs burning. And then the vampire vanished, gone into thin air with another sickening burst of magic.

It took everything he had to gather his partner's body and get out alive, swearing vengeance the entire time.

His lungs sometimes ached in hot weather and he couldn't properly mourn his best friend. Luther still walked freely. Trailing, tracking, and killing him had been his life's goal for two years, but it felt like a lifetime. And now, on what little trail he could find, had eventually led him to a quaint village in the middle of nowhere.

A surge of anger hit him, like it so often did when he thought about Yasmin. She'd been a sister to him. Her loss felt insurmountable even on the best days, and he knew putting Corbin down

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would let her rest. Finally. She deserved every bit of justice he could possibly obtain for her. Roderick fought the urge to crumple the paper or toss it into the fireplace to watch it burn. Instead, he folded it up and tucked it away in his jacket.

One day at a time.

He glanced at the other paper on the bed - the calling card from Octavia Wilder, the baroness of this place. It was a kindness he wasn't often shown, but he'd only just arrived when it had been passed to him. Closing his eyes, he thought back to those in the tavern.

Of course. The woman with the dark braid sitting by that mountain of a man. And talking about....levitating sheep? At first, he hadn't paid much mind to such a comment, since it sounded like a tall tale. But then he'd remembered how the town sat in the middle of a vortex of ley lines and suddenly a floating sheep didn't sound so outlandish. If this Octavia Wilder was dealing with the occasional oddity like that, she may have seen or heard something about Luther, even if she didn't know it.

He would have to be careful. Extracting information from humans was a fine line to walk, and if he showed his hand too early, or she sussed out the truth through cleverness, Luther could run again. That was another reason to call on the baroness tomorrow, to test where her loyalties lay. If she or any of her staff were compelled in some way, or she was one of the reformers who believed even the vilest, most feral of creatures deserved sympathy, he needed to know.

One way or another, he would figure out who this baroness was, and if she would be a help or a hindrance to his hunt.

Roderick took a deep breath and rolled his neck, feeling the stiffness of his long walk bunch his muscles. Time to call for a bath and take a moment to breathe. He needed to be at his best if this hunt was going to be finished.

Chapter Three

Octavia fought the urge to bat away Ruby's hands. The half-fae woman was a saint, dealing with all manner of issues on a day-to-day basis, as she was the head housekeeper. But Octavia was nervous this morning, and it had put her in a foul mood. A mood she didn't want to take out on Ruby.

"It's all right, Ruby," she said, gently lowering the woman's hands. "No amount of brushing is going to get this jacket any cleaner."

Ruby bit her lip, frowning. "I wish you'd let me air out that closet. I know you don't go in there often but it really ought to be done."

Octavia smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Let me get through this morning and you can do whatever you want to any of the closets here."

Ruby gave her jacket one more brush then nodded, satisfied. "Breakfast is ready, and we'll have tea for your guest when he arrives." She hesitated, then said, "Is he really a Ranger? We haven't had one of those around since -"

Octavia's heart clenched. "Please don't."

Ruby's hands flew to her mouth. "Octavia, I'm so sorry." She reached out to touch Octavia's shoulder. "That was careless of me."

Of all the people in and around Wilderwood, only a few knew about Eislen. About Octavia's broken heart and the walls she built after they left. And how, while mending that shattered heart, Octavia had poured her energy into so many projects that went unnoticed and unappreciated, though Octavia never cared about praise. The needs of Wilderwood's people were paramount.

The Baroness of Wilderwood never did anything for a thank you or kind nod. She did so because she believed in their cause and fueled it all with her passion. But those months after Eislen left were dark, and something far more grim had pushed her forward. Almost to her breaking point.

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Octavia let out a breath she didn't need nor noticed she was holding. "No, it's all right. Please don't apologize. I should be -" She turned away, feeling shame tighten her throat. "I should have moved on by now." She took Ruby's hands in her own and squeezed gently. "I am so sorry, Ruby. There's no logical reason to not be able to say a name in my presence."

"Octavia." Ruby leaned in, breath sweet and warm on Octavia's face as she kissed the vampire's forehead. "Don't you worry a bit. I know what it's like to nurse a broken heart. Just because a few years have passed doesn't mean everything goes back to the way it was."

Ruby was so kind, so generous with her love and her spirit. And every time she was touched by the woman's gentleness, Octavia felt unworthy. Out of all the people near her, Ruby was the only one to look past her nature and see the person beyond. Even Gregory, gods love him, understood the ferocity that was in their genetics. Werereatures and vampires were cousins of a strange, tangled sort; but fae, especially those with more than a touch of human, usually saw them as tragicomic figures, meant to be feared, loved, and pitied in equal measure.

Ruby had never seen Octavia that way.

Octavia smiled softly at her before squaring her shoulders and turning to her reflection in the floor-length mirror near the door. "And yet, it must."

Roderick's polite, firm knock at the door to Wilderwood manor was answered immediately by a man in the traditional butler's uniform. But unlike most butlers he'd encountered - aged, greying, and usually tall and thin - this man was young, dark-haired, and short but lithe.

He was also stunningly beautiful; his bright green eyes and shock of thick black hair nearly drew attention away from the strong jaw and angular face. This was a man who could stop a tavern's business just by entering and walk out minutes later with dozens of marriage proposals.

Roderick blinked, then rediscovered his senses and manners. "Good morning, sir. I was given this card by the lady of the house."

The man arched a brow and looked at, but did not touch, the card in Roderick's outstretched hand. "Odd. She didn't say anything about a guest this day."

Beautiful and owner of a voice like that? Sometimes the world is truly unfair to us average looking mere mortals.

Roderick looked down at the card, confused. "Am I in the right place? This is Wilderwood Manor, correct?"

The butler clasped his hands in front of him and shook his head sadly. "Not again. No, sir, this is the Rothstein Manor. You'll want Wilderwood, about two miles east of here." He gave Roderick the once-over. "Let me guess. Hilda, in the town square?"

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“I’m sorry?” This was all very confusing, and Roderick was inches from throwing down the card and leaving the town for the woods, where at least things made sense.

The butler now appeared very concerned. “We have a few people about town who think it’s funny to send Lady Wilder’s guests here. For whatever ridiculous reason.”

“Harken?”

A woman’s voice rang out from above and Roderick ducked his head, trying to see who she was. A pair of black riding boots came into view down the stairs, and then the woman from the tavern was standing at the door. The look on her face was almost comical - it flitted so quickly between the hot lash of rage and a frown of remorse that Roderick wondered what in all hells was going on.

The woman put a hand on the butler’s shoulder. “That’ll be all, Harken. Please go help Ruby in the kitchens.”

Harken bowed, grinned impishly at Roderick, and walked down the hall past the stairs, quickly disappearing out of sight.

“I cannot apologize enough for him,” she said by way of greeting. “You are the Ranger?”

“I - yes.” Roderick shook his head, still trying to figure out what just happened.

The woman sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. Roderick noticed she wore gloves and wondered idly if the house was cold. “Harken is the son of a family friend. I gave him a job, knowing he was a bit of a prankster. He’s really a charming young man but he’s still in training.” She shot a glare down the hallway. “And clearly needs more of it.”

“Right, well, no harm, no foul.”

She stifled a laugh behind her gloved hand. “You’re being polite, Ranger. Honestly, I’d be better off making the boy work the stables but I can’t bring myself to do it.” She sighed, the sound wistful. “My apologies, again.”

Roderick went silent as the woman turned back to him. Her gaze was friendly but assessing. He felt rather glad he’d dressed the part of a Ranger, since she was busily cataloging him in such a way. He tucked away the fact that she was attractive, not wanting to be distracted in the moment. But he was good with nobility, especially the more charming or comely ones. “I am Ranger Roderick Arman, my lady.”

She smiled. “A pleasure. And very observant of you. I’m Octavia Wilder and you don’t need to use my title. We’re not a very traditional household at Wilderwood.”

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Something about the way the words rolled off her tongue made Roderick feel a faint tinge of praise in his chest. He was used to the wealthy and titled being stuffy at best, horrifically egotistical and power driven at worst. Strange butler aside, Lady Wilder was already far more polite and charming than the usual. Plus, she had made the invite to begin with. He was intrigued by her denouncement of typical propriety and her unusual dress, but he supposed everyone had eccentricities.

“Come, I’ve had the salon set up for tea, if you’ll partake.” Octavia led him down a long hall with exquisite deep navy damask wallpaper and polished wood floors. The second door on the right was open and he could hear a squawking inside. Intrigued, he stood in the doorway as Octavia settled on a long, low couch before a china tea set. The room was open, airy, and brightly lit from three picture windows. Lush plants, from spiky ferns to delicate orchids, were arranged in the windows in planters and pots of different sizes and colors, their shiny glazed surfaces glinting like jewels. And in a massive cage in the far corner sat a stunning blue and gold macaw, its eyes watching Roderick carefully.

“Don’t mind Macon, he’s getting cranky as he gets older,” Octavia said, motioning Roderick into the room. “Please, sit. How do you take your tea?”

Oddly charmed by the room and its inhabitants, Roderick took the seat across from Octavia and accepted a cup of steaming black tea. “Black is perfectly fine, my lady.”

As he sipped his tea, he watched Octavia closely. Her dark brown hair was piled high on her head in an intricate braid as when he first saw her. But now he caught the glint of a pin nestled in the pile, something gold and amber. She was turned out in the highest of fashions for riding outfits, with black leather boots into which black trousers were tucked. Her shirt, a dark grey, brought out the deep russet of her eyes, but it was mostly covered by a velvet jacket so red it was nearly black. He noticed she wore only a single ring, but not like any wedding band he’d ever seen.

So, no lord of the manor, then.

Her movements were precise, but he wouldn’t call them delicate. Steady. Even assertive. She was quick, though, another thing Roderick could appreciate. Once Octavia prepared her tea, she sat back on the couch and gave him that assessing look again. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I invited you here, Ranger.”

Roderick nodded. “It is...unusual for the nobility of the area to invite me before I knock on their doors. If they invite me at all.”

She smiled politely but wanted to tell him how much she related to that statement. Money could buy plenty of things in this world, but a place in *proper* society was not one of them. “As I’m sure you’ve already figured out, Ranger, Wilderwood is a little different than most towns. It was built by my great grandfather, right after the Spires War. So many people were displaced, their homes burned, their families murdered. He wanted to give those who were lost a place to call their own.” Octavia motioned to the picture windows, through which Roderick saw gently rolling

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hills sprouting tiny purple wildflowers. “And my great grandfather was a bit of an eccentric himself. Something I think passed down through our line.”

Curious, Roderick leaned forward. His position gave Octavia a better look at his rugged face and deep brown eyes. “Eccentric in what way? Usually that’s a polite word for -“

“Unacceptable amongst most society. Yes, I know. But he was an academic, a learned man, before it became popular among nouveau riche to be ‘book learned’. And when he built the town, he attracted those same sorts of folks, many of whom had lost so much already.” Octavia shrugged, the movement elegant. “And since then, Wilderwood has always been a place for those on the fringes.”

It was Roderick’s turn to assess her. She was clearly telling him all this for a reason - most didn’t make polite chit chat with Rangers. He didn’t want his past interactions with nobility to color every meeting with them; but his instincts and his training belied his inclinations. “I wonder, my lady, why you haven’t inquired as to my business in your town.”

“Why do you think I invited you here?”

She had him there. He huffed out a laugh before setting his half-finished tea aside. “I’m not your first Ranger, am I?”

“You are not.” A look flashed over her face - there and gone in the briefest of moments. But it left him wondering. Asked to swear on it, he would have said it looked like grief. “The last one came through here just over two years ago. Said they wanted to make contact with the Fae portal that was rumored to be in the nearby woods, but since Rangers aren’t supposed to trespass, they came to see me first.”

Roderick frowned. He knew of a few Rangers who stayed in the nearby area, but none of them were invested in Fae matters except one. And that person had been lost to the energies of that strange place, never to return. “Are the woods part of the town?”

“Just outside of its borders. I believe they were being polite, nothing more. They could have gone there without informing me.”

That confirmed one suspicion he had. “I see. So, you understand that a Ranger in your midst means there’s an issue.”

She nodded. “I don’t ask for much, Ranger. You are as free to move about town as any guest. But if the reason you’re here poses a danger to my people, I want to know. As isolated as we are, we’re no strangers to the random beast or creature lurking on the outskirts. And several people here have a little bit of fae or otherworldly ancestry.” Octavia adopted a relaxed pose, but a fire sparked in her honey brown eyes that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. She wasn’t a woman to be trifled with. “But the people who live here do so because they chose it. They chose to trade a bit of isolation for the knowledge that their studies, passions, and hobbies would

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be supported. We're an enclave of academics, artists, researchers, and craftspeople. And we take care of each other. So, if there's a danger, please tell me."

From anyone else, those words would have sounded terribly rehearsed. But Roderick heard nothing but painfully honest concern; a forthrightness he was now understanding to be a part of Octavia Wilder. Mind made up, he steepled his fingers under his chin and said, "Then we need to talk about the forest around the town, my lady. And this includes the Ranger who came here previously for those very same trees."

"So, what's he like?"

Harken leaned against the wall and pouted. "Clearly not susceptible to my charms." At Ruby's glare, he put a hand to his chest. "I swear I didn't try to influence him! Just did the whole 'you've got the wrong house, mate' act." The pout deepened. "Octavia wasn't happy."

With a frustrated sigh, Ruby swatted at the man with a kitchen towel. "No, she wouldn't be! This meeting was already stressful and then you try to prank her guest - a Ranger, no less! Harken, what were you thinking?"

The words flew out of her mouth before she could stop them, and by the middle of her diatribe Ruby could see genuine regret flit over Harken's face. "I know it was stupid," he said softly, looking down at the floor. "But I'm supposed to be coming of age and Mama says stretching my powers is how you keep buildup from happening."

Ruby couldn't yell at the boy anymore. Harken was a young half-incubus, nearly age of majority, and with the wards at their weakest point, she couldn't put all the blame on him. He was likely overwhelmed by his magic and unsure of all the protocols. But he was also boundary-testing, pushing on limits set up and abided by adults. So no, she couldn't blame him completely. Her younger years had been spent running wild through the forests picking berries, befriending foxes and squirrels, and saving deer from human poachers.

Bleeding heart that she was, she couldn't take the boy's pout any longer. With a swift pull, Ruby wrapped her arms around him in a hug that would have squashed a human's lungs. Harken dug in, planting his face in her shoulder and sighing. "After shift, we'll run the woods. Would you like that?"

Harken nodded. "Think Octavia's going to fire me?"

Ruby tapped him on the forehead so he'd look up at her. "I think if you pull that nonsense again, she's going to make you muck the stables and feed the pigs."

Harken wrinkled his nose. "Understood." Then he brightened and Ruby got the full blast of his charming smile. "Think we'll find some poachers to throw sticks at?"

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Ruby smiled at him, a sense of maternal love blossoming in her chest. She'd known Harken since the day he was born and with his mother alone and often working two jobs, she's been the boy's adopted aunt for nearly three decades. "We can certainly try."

Roderick and Octavia stood over a map of the area as he spoke. They'd retreated to her study in the wake of more sensitive discussions and now her wide mahogany desk was home to their cooling teacups and the maps. "The first sighting of a 'restless, necrotic energy' was here, about four weeks ago." He pointed at the forest northeast of Wilderwood, roughly thirty miles outside of the town's borders. The ring he wore on his index finger glinted in the late morning sunlight. "It was chalked up to tall tales about the Grey Lady."

Octavia nodded thoughtfully. "A local legend, one that's been around for several generations." She studied the map, and then looked to Roderick. "So, I'm assuming the mayors of Bridgeton and Veldersmith wrote it off as superstitious nonsense."

There was a tinge of anger in her tone and Roderick wondered at the history there. Another mystery to explore, especially if it tied into his hunt for Luther. "That was quickly followed by reports of missing sheep, then mutilated cattle. Bridgeton and Veldersmith sent out hunting parties but found nothing. And what finally led me to believing this is Luther's doing are the missing hunters. Three, so far, as of last Friday."

He watched her chew on her cheek, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "And yet they saw fit to not inform me. Clearly I need to have a little chat with my fellow mayors."

He was likely treading into dark waters with his next question. "Is that common, to have the leaders of the nearby towns not send word about that which threatens all?"

She huffed. "Oh, if it's a dire issue like our local poet laureate composing in their town square, they by all means send a runner like it's a life-or-death matter. But for something like this, of course not. Why would they? It only puts all of us at risk." She frowned at the map, fighting back the urge to rant angrily about the complete morons who ran Bridgeton and Veldersmith. But it would, ultimately, do her no good and possibly make her look like a vengeful fool in front of the Ranger.

Roderick checked his smile; he could see how tightly Octavia reigned herself in and was impressed by that steady hand on the rudder. It wasn't easy to push aside such powerful feelings, especially when you felt as though you'd been wronged. He knew that all too well. "I do have copies of the reports they made to the local constabulary, if you'd like to read through them. Between the two of us, perhaps we could narrow down the search beyond—" He checked his notes. "Eighty square miles of forest. Good lord. Every time I see that number my head spins."

Octavia nodded her assent. "I'm no Ranger, but I do know the area well. And you are doing us a huge service. You are welcome to use the house as a base for your hunt, and I'll make my staff

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available to you. You should also stay here. The manor is closer to the woods than The Drake's Rest and Mama Stockton will understand." She grinned slyly. "That woman only looks terrifying. She's got a heart of gold, I promise."

Roderick put a hand to chest and bowed. "I am grateful, Lady Wilder. If I may be so bold, you and yours are much kinder than most to us Rangers." His mouth twitched into a brief grimace. "Usually we're met with suspicion or terror."

Octavia nodded. "Because they think you're the ones bringing in the monsters, instead of hunting them?"

"That our presence will doom the town and bring the monsters down upon them."

"That's absurd."

He shrugged. "And yet, sadly, it is not a misconception we've been able to rid ourselves of. So thank you, for both the information and the kindness. I will make good use of it."

Octavia was silent for several moments, her eyes fixed on the map. When she straightened to look at him, Roderick felt a jolt in his gut. It was the oddest thing, but he swore he saw her eyes flare with something like power. He sensed no magic or sorcery on her, and his charms and amulets didn't vibrate in her presence. Roderick pushed it all aside as she said, "Ranger Arman, a couple of things. First, Wilderwood is a peaceful place. We may be eccentrics, but we watch out for each other and we maintain the peace. We do have some assistance with this from the sisters on the hill. They use a...let's say rather interesting combination of hickory witchcraft and hill healing. Mostly they treat burns, cuts, help deliver babies, that sort of thing. But they maintain our wards, and the timing of Luther's attacks and your visit are unfortunate."

Roderick wanted to preen a little at how patient he'd been, and found himself still surprised at her admission. Most rural towns and villages kept some kind of wards up to keep out the worst of the worst - hags, ghouls, doppelgangers. Creatures that had no soul, no morality, and simply preyed and fed on the populace until they were drained dry. Or a Ranger came for them. "Unfortunate how?"

Octavia shifted from foot to foot and he watched a tendril of hair spiral loose with her movement. It brushed her cheek and she absently batted it away. "We always refresh the wards on the spring equinox. And the wards only extend into the woods in a one-mile perimeter."

Oh. Oh no. The realization hit him immediately, like a punch to his stomach. He was afraid to ask the next question. "When do Bridgeton and Veldersmith renew?"

"Bridgeton renewed three weeks ago. Veldersmith renews tomorrow."

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that."

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“Indeed.” Octavia made a pained noise before pointing to the map. “We are the next choice for your feral vampire. I am suddenly a bit more sympathetic to my fellow mayors, if they were dealing with all of this while trying to renew their wards.”

“Lady Wilder, I must ask.”

“No, they don’t keep out feral vampires.”

Roderick’s grimace deepened. “I know it’s not the easiest ward to maintain, since the magic tends to keep out other vampires and weres, but I really must implore you to consider adding this to your wards starting this year. My order has been besieged by feral vampires in the past and they managed to wipe out -“ He paused to will away thoughts of Yasmin’s broken body clutched in Luther’s claws. “We have suffered losses at the hands of feral vampires. And I must admit that this one in particular is...personal for me.”

A note of recognition lit up her eyes. “I see. I am sorry, Ranger Arman, for both this ugly business and for your loss. I had wondered why you were alone. We seem to attract Rangers on solo business.”

“Of which I have questions for you, but it’s not important now. Merely a professional curiosity.”

“Of course. I’ll tell you what I can.” Octavia was only lying a little, as she had no issues discussing Bellemy Eislén but wasn’t about to relate more *personal* details. “But on the issue of the wards, I’m afraid they’re as strong as they can be. I cannot add in what you wish.”

Roderick tilted his head, studying her closely. “Surely you know I must ask why.”

“I doubt the answer will surprise you.” Her face was impressively blank, and Roderick was staring hard at her, trying to read it. “Wilderwood is a safe place for all, Ranger. *Everyone.*”

Impossible. His charms would have gone off the minute he stepped within miles of the town. Other than a few flickers of distant fae ancestry, he hadn’t seen one ounce of other kind anywhere in Wilderwood. “I’m afraid you’ll have to be direct, my lady.”

Roderick didn’t want to admit that the face she now pulled was rather adorable; a scrunched-up nose and narrowed eyes, as if trying to wash away a bad smell. “We’re a town of eccentrics,” she repeated, as if speaking to a small child. “Wilderwood was built by my human ancestors. But I was not born as such, and I swore to ensure the town remained open to all as long as they obeyed our rules and worked toward our common good.”

Her words rattled in his ears. “Born as such” only had a handful of implications, namely fae, were or -

“I was born vampire nearly four hundred years ago, Ranger Arman.” Octavia pushed up her sleeve and he saw the raised carvings under her flesh, like scars that ran deep within her skin. “I am the only living member of my line and you can take heart that it dies with me.”