

Summer Camp for Slayers  
A Magic on Main Street short story  
By K. M. Shea

Our SUV bounced as Dad drove over a particularly large pothole that he couldn't avoid, because the majority of the gravel road that stretched in front of us consisted of potholes.

"This will be good for you, Jade," Dad boomed from the front seat, his voice so loud he was easy to hear over the rattle of the car. His wide shoulders and broad chest made the car's front driver seat look like a kid's chair. "It's good to try out different environments—it makes us face new challenges and fosters learning new skills!"

"Sure," I said. "As long as I can train as an electrician with Uncle Kenny."

That was the bargain, my parents would pay for my two-year electrical degree, and continue to support me while I apprenticed with Uncle Kenny for two years, as long as I attended this...bootcamp thing.

Two months of training for multiple years of financial support was a ridiculously good bargain. But both Mom's family and Dad's family valued education, even if most of us ended up not using our degrees and worked full time in the family business of vampire slayers. Rather, it wasn't just the education my parents valued, but good, useful careers. Dad joked that Uncle Cash—his sister's husband—was his favorite relative, because Uncle Cash was an accountant and saved the O'Neils months of headaches and a lot of yelling at each other as he balanced all our accounts and recorded expenses.

I leaned towards the center of the car to peer out the front window, and then twisted to look out the rear window.

Trees surrounded us, invading the road so steadily it invited claustrophobia in a way tall sky scrapers and narrow alleyways never had.

"We're in Michigan's Upper Peninsula?" I confirmed for the fifth time. My nerves were starting to get the best of me, so I was desperately trying to get my mind off the fact that I was about to be plunked down with a group of strangers, without any of my family members around.

In defense of my asking our location so many times, the woods were so thick we could have crossed the border to Canada and I never would have known.

"Yes." Mom turned in her seat so she could smile back at me. "One of my childhood friends—a slayer—married into the Pack that will be training you."

That was the truly weird part about this bootcamp.

I wasn't going into an exclusive camp to train against vampires, or to perfect slayer skills I already had. No, I was getting dropped off with a werewolf Pack, who had agreed to train me for the summer.

Werewolves were about the opposite in every way to vampires—they relied on strength over vampire's choice of speed, were rural rather than urban creatures, and you were better off using a gun when facing off with them over a cutting weapon like we slayers typically favored.

I didn't get why my parents thought summer camp with werewolves would help me, but I was getting financial support out of the deal, so what did I care?

“A slayer married a werewolf?” I asked Mom, wondering how that couple had happened. (Slayers didn’t interact much outside slayer social circles.)

Dad grunted. “Weird,” he said.

“It’s not weird, it’s sweet,” Mom said.

“It’s weird. Like a wolf and a falcon becoming mates.” Dad glanced at me through the rearview mirror. “But they make it work. And werewolves are quite strong, which is a good advantage to bring to a fight.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “How did they meet?”

“It’s the cutest story,” Mom said. “Ryan was chasing a vamp through Lincoln Park in Chicago. The vamp tried to escape into zoo, and ran straight into a white wolf who slammed him so hard into the cement it left an imprint. That wolf was Marina—she was visiting another Pack.”

Marina, I remembered, was the Alpha of the Snow Circle Pack—the Pack Mom and Dad were dropping me off at. *So that’s how they swung it, Mom’s friend is married to the Pack’s leader.*

I didn’t know much about werewolves, but I knew Packs followed their Alphas, who were the leader expected to protect, care for, and manage the Pack. It sounded like a thankless and stressful job, if you asked me.

“While Ryan subdued the vamp, Marina shifted from her wolf to human form, found herself some clothes, then came back to yell at Ryan for chasing the vamp towards the zoo and frightening all the animals,” Mom continued. “Isn’t that romantic?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. The story followed most typical slayer romances—sparks fly during a fight probably because we spent most of our lives in combat or training for combat—even if Marina being a werewolf was very much not the norm.

“We must be here.” Dad peeled a finger off the steering wheel to point farther up the road. Two figures stood on the cracked asphalt with a white werewolf, and a yellow jeep parked a few feet behind them.

“Yeah—that’s Ryan.” Mom confirmed.

Our car rolled to a stop, and Dad shifted it into park while I unbuckled my seatbelt, taking in the trio.

Ryan was quite tall, narrow waisted and narrowed shouldered in a way that would make the average person miss how lithe he was and mistake him for a string bean, but that seemed to be his aim based on his oversized white t-shirt, sweatpants, and Berkins. (This look was topped off with shaggy blonde-brown hair that looked like he’d rolled out of bed recently.)

The sweatpants sagged at the pockets—he probably had weapons in them, and when he turned to address his wife, the Alpha, I could see a bulge on his back that I was pretty sure was a gun.

*Interesting. Guns aren’t typically a slayer’s first choice of weapon.*

Marina—at least I assumed she was Marina based on the sappy looks Ryan was giving her—was shorter than Ryan, but had a stockier build. Her white-blonde hair contrasted with her remarkable deep blue eyes that were so vivid they were breathtaking.

Vivid eyes were sort of a signature of werewolves, but after eighteen years of seeing so many vampire-red eyes, Marina’s eyes really popped.

She patted the back of the white wolf next to her, who leaned into her and wagged its bushy white tail. The wolf had to be a werewolf as its head was about even with Marina's hips, and its eyes were the same bright blue as hers.

Mom popped out of the car, all smiles as she greeted the pair. "Ryan, Marina! It's so good to see you two again!" She called before she shut the car door and made her way over to them.

I watched her easy social manners with some wistfulness—I wasn't good in social situations. In fact, unless it was for work, I was downright awkward, and liked to avoid social meetings whenever possible.

Even just watching Mom greet her friends made my throat squeeze so tight it felt like I couldn't swallow.

"You'll have fun, Darling," Dad gruffly said. He turned the car off and looked back at me. "Werewolves are *weird*, but the Snow Circle Pack is a good one. You'll enjoy the challenges they give you." He paused, then added. "They'll be kind, too. And patient. Take your time talking to them."

I nodded slowly, and it dawned on me that maybe the point of bootcamp wasn't to get new combat abilities, but to stick me with a group of people I didn't know in hopes of fostering better social skills.

Dad winked at me, his fierce, thick red eyebrows covering most of the gesture, then got out of the car.

My nerves were already kicking into overdrive, making my palms sweaty and my heart beat erratically, but I made myself open the car door, grab my two duffle bags I'd brought for the summer—one had my clothes and basic toiletries, the other had my basic set of weapons—and slid out of the car.

I slunk around the side of the car, half hoping I could avoid the inevitable greeting, but Ryan glanced in my direction.

"Ah—you must Jade!" He beamed. He raised a hand to scratch the back of his neck. His oversized shirt fell back just enough to reveal the tip of a dagger he must have secured around his bicep. "You've probably been told this your whole life, but you look just like your mother when she was a teenager—the *exact* same features, it's almost uncanny, Amber!" He swung back around to peer at my mother.

I had inherited much of my mother's looks—except for my bright red hair, that was compliments of the O'Neils.

"What's fair is fair. Her brothers resemble Fergus, it's only right I get one child." Mom smiled at me. When I joined the lineup she and Dad made, she curled an arm around my shoulders and squeezed affectionately. "Jade, this is Ryan and Alpha Marina of Snow Circle Pack."

Ryan lazily waved, but Marina set her shoulders and gave me a business-like nod. "Welcome to the territory of the Snow Circle Pack. We hope you enjoy your summer with us, and learn a lot." Marina flashed a smile that was mostly teeth and quite intimidating. "The younger members of the Pack have been looking forward to your arrival—new littermates are always exciting to them."

The werewolf at her side whined—I didn't know enough about wolves to guess if it was agreeing or disagreeing—but when they looked at me, they wagged their tail a few cautious times.

"This is my niece, Ridge." Marina patted the wolf's head, making the wolf flatten her ears in defense. "She's nineteen, just a year older than you."

I opened my mouth to say hello, but my throat squeezed shut, and my heart beat so loud I could barely hear anyone talk. I settled for nodding to the white wolf.

The wolf cocked her head, but she didn't make any additional noises, so hopefully I hadn't offended her.

"Great!" Ryan smiled widely and clapped his hands. "Introductions are over. Fergus, Amber, are you two going to head out immediately?"

*No. There's no way they'd leave without seeing what kind of a base the Snow Circle Pack has.*

Mom patted my back one last time. "We ought to. We need to get back home—the boys are prepping for a mission. We're supposed to join them."

"What?" I squeaked in surprise.

"Sorry, baby. But you'll do great here. Ryan and Marina are fantastic." Mom hugged me, but I was still so shell shocked by their sudden departure that all I could do was stand there.

When mom let me go, Dad immediately scooped me up for a back-breaking bearhug. "You'll do great, Darling," he gruffly said. "And teach these wolves a thing or two. Maybe remind Ryan why he shouldn't wear open toed-shoes."

I couldn't say anything, I just clung to Dad and hoped he'd realize I was still mute with shock and maybe stay a bit longer.

When he let me go, I grabbed his shirt and peered up into his craggy face, then violently shook my head.

His smile dimmed a little, and he glanced over at Marina and Ryan.

Ridge, meanwhile, approached me. She nosed my hand, shocking me so badly I jumped.

When I looked down at her she was staring intently at the strap of my weapons bag. *Does she want me to give it to her?*

Dad backed away as I adjusted my hold so the padded strap was available. Ridge bit the strap, then gently tugged the bag from my grasp.

I let go of it, so I stopped bearing its weight, shifting it all onto Ridge.

Werewolves are the strongest of supernaturals, but the sudden weight must have caught her off-guard because she almost faceplanted, yelped, and then dropped my bag—which fell with a metallic thunk.

Ridge stared down at the duffle bag, then looked up at me with shock on her canine face.

"Oooh! Sounds like you brought a nice arsenal! You'll have to show me everything you packed when we get back to the house!" Ryan nearly skipped over to us, a giddy smile fixed on his face. "Finally, I'll have someone in the house who will appreciate my amazing weapons collection!"

The car doors opened and I looked back to watch my parents climb inside.

"We'll call you when we get back home," Mom called to me. "Good luck!" She shut the door behind her then waved, getting teary eyed.

Dad just gave me a stiff nod before he started up the car.

I tensed as Dad executed a very precise three-point turn, then drove back the way we'd come, leaving me behind.

"Don't worry." Ryan patted my shoulder. "Wolves are really friendly, and I'm sure you'll learn quickly. Probably faster than I did."

"She will *definitely* learn faster than you, because you learned slower than a porcupine walks," Marina declared. "Here, Jade. I'll take your other bag."

"T-that's," the words couldn't pop out of my mouth so instead I took a step back, and shook my head before I tried again. "I can carry it."

Marina offered me a smile. "I'm sure you can, but your summer training starts now, you won't want to be burdened."

I blinked, trying to follow her reasoning. "I...what?"

Marina plucked my second bag from my hand, then scooped up the first with enviable ease. "Ryan and I are heading into town to pick up a few things. You are going to find your way through the wilderness to our Pack's home."

I swiveled, so I could follow Marina with my eyes as she strolled back to the yellow jeep. Its top was removed for the summer months, so she just leaned over the side of the jeep to set my bags on the floor of the bench seats. "Ridge will head out first. You can try to keep up with her, but eventually she'll outpace you."

I would have frowned, except I'd been raised better than that. Still, the statement was basically an insult. As a vampire slayer I was fast—faster than any werewolf. There was no way Ridge could outpace me.

"The terrain is going to be different for you, and probably difficult to handle, so don't push yourself," Marina added.

*Oh. Except for that.* I hadn't taken the terrain into account, which did change the situation considerably.

"Ridge will leave a trail for you," this time it was Ryan's turn to speak. "It'll be your task to follow it back home."

My concern for the situation loosened my mouth where normally I still would have felt uncomfortable. "Home, as in your base...which I have never before visited."

"Yes, that's the point." Ryan nodded. "This will be your first step towards learning how to track a target through wilderness."

"It's a handy skill," Marina added.

I nodded, and couldn't think of anything else to say. What *could* I say? Vampires were urban creatures; they didn't go traipsing around in the wild. Why would I need to track them through the wilderness?

*Well...at least I'll be learning new skills.*

"Right then, let's begin." Marina patted her hands on her thighs, then turned to the white wolf. "Ridge, off you go."

"Awoo!" Ridge howled, then turned on her tail and trotted off into the trees.

I glanced once more at Marina—who smiled—and Ryan—who waved, before I trotted off after Ridge, entering the woods.

Ridge didn't try to hide herself. She trotted through undergrowth—a blob of bright white in the greens and muted browns of the forest.

I followed her, taking a total of roughly twenty steps before I tripped over tree roots covered with dead leaves. My reflexes kicked in and I recovered, catching myself, but I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

*Yeah...this turf is going to be a challenge...*

A crow cawed directly above me, and I automatically pulled for the short sword I typically kept strapped to my back that was currently packed with the rest of my weapons in Marina's/Ryan's Jeep.

Ridge didn't stop to look back, she just kept marching, ignoring the branches that pulled at her fur and scraped at her sides.

The branches couldn't get me through my Slayer uniform, but when the second branch scratched my cheek, I was starting to regret that I hadn't worn my slayer mask and had left it with my weapons.

A particularly thorny branch caught a lock of my hair, yanking me backwards with the sting of pain.

In the end it was easier to yank the hair from my head, and by the time I'd freed myself Ridge had disappeared over the crest of a hill.

I hurried up the hill—at least the incline wouldn't kill me thanks to my training.

When I could peer down the hill I saw Ridge at the bottom—already—still keeping up her very consistent trot.

I started down the hill—hoping I could close the gap between us—and I very quickly learned that 1) running down a hill of rough terrain and underbrush was *nothing* like running down the sidewalk of a hill in an urban setting and 2) Under brush does nothing to slow one's momentum when one is hurtling down a hill at a very dangerous speed.

Thankfully I didn't wipe out—I stopped myself halfway down by running smack into a tree with enough force to knock the breath out of me and get some rug burn—or, since I was in the forest...bark burn?—on my hands.

*It's okay. My healing abilities can keep up with minor wounds like this. I just have to keep going!*

Ridge was still visible, but I'd have to hit it once I got to the bottom of the hill to catch up.

Regardless, I was going to go slower down the rest of the hill.

As I carefully made my way down the hill, trying to watch my footing and keep an eye on Ridge, my goal for the day rapidly solidified in my mind: I was *not* going to embarrass my parents by getting myself killed wandering through the woods before they even made it home!

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“Okay!” Ryan clapped his hands together, his smile extra bright in the early light of dawn that cast a golden hue on his face. “Since you did great following Ridge yesterday afternoon—”

“Great? *Great?*” I interrupted Ryan, too shocked—and outraged by the blatant *lie*—to stay quiet.

I'd managed to keep Ridge in eyesight for the entire trek, but in the process, I'd torn my clothes—which was going to cost me a lot to get repaired—gotten covered in mud and cuts, and I'd made the discovery that apparently slayer healing abilities did not extend to mosquito bites!

*I didn't do great, I was an embarrassment!*

"You were very great." Ryan said with the sincerity of a kindergarten teacher praising his student's first attempt at reciting the alphabet. "So great that we have to make it more difficult!" Ryan threw his hands into the air and waved them with pizzazz, as if he could distract me from the news.

"*More difficult?*" I parroted, my voice so strangled I actually sounded like a parrot, too.

"Yes. We're going to send Cliff and Ridge out ahead of you, giving them a head start. Then you have to try to track them." Ryan pointed to the two white wolves standing at the edge of the forest.

One of them was Ridge—Marina's niece—the other was Cliff, Marina's nephew. I'd been introduced to Cliff last night at dinner—who'd attended in his wolf form.

Cliff, like his sister, was a white wolf. Unfortunately, he shared her blue eyes, and was roughly the same size, so I couldn't tell the two apart.

"Where are they headed?" I asked.

Ryan planted a hand on his chest. "I can't tell you *that*," he said, scandalized. "That would defeat the purpose of trying to track them!"

"Distance?"

"I will not be sharing that either." Ryan shook his head at me, then turned to wave to the duo.

Cliff barked off a quick "*Awoo!*" And then the pair disappeared into the forest.

I watched for a moment, fixing the point they'd disappeared in my mind, then undid the buckle that secured my sword to my back. I also got rid of one of my arm bandoliers of daggers, and the two emergency potions I carried on my belt.

Ryan watched, his eyebrows knitting together. "What are you doing?"

"Lightening my load," I said. "Or is that not allowed?"

"It is, but I'm wondering why it matters."

I looked back at the point where the siblings had disappeared. "Can I go, yet?"

"Hmm?" Ryan twirled around to look back. "I guess, sure—wha!"

I raced past him, using all the speed I could muster to sprint across the meadow—yesterday's experience with the forest told me this would be the one spot I'd truly be able to sprint without taking my life into my hands.

I was vaguely aware of Ryan making more noises as I reached the edge of the forest.

*There!* I saw two flashes of white on the crest of a slight hill. I'd have to get there as soon as possible in hopes that I'd be able to spot their path from the top of the hill.

I adjusted my pace to something slower, but made sure it was a faster pace than the trot I'd seen Cliff and Ridge use—I had to reach them fast.

A branch tore another cut on my face, but I ignored the minor pain for the sake of the goal. If Ridge and Cliff put too much distance between us, I'd never find them, and I had no hope of tracking them like Ryan kept implying I should.

As I raced after them, I decided to start implementing endurance running into my workouts when I got back home. I had superior speed over the wolves, but they could just go *forever*. And I was learning firsthand how advantageous their endurance was.

Obviously, I didn't have the skills for tracking, and I'd never need to learn tracking for vampires as I could rely on my slayer abilities to find them. So maybe this endurance was the real lesson Ryan and the wolves were trying to teach me.

*I'll take it to heart. Endurance seems like a much more all-around useful skill than I ever gave it credit for, and it's definitely something new as I haven't really trained for it before. So, I will take this seriously!*

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"Let's try this again." Ryan had his arms folded across his chest. This time the red light of sunset was coloring him. "Just *stay here*, until Ridge and Cliff have gotten enough distance that you can't catch up with them."

"But if I can't see them, I can't follow them," I said.

Ryan vigorously nodded. "Yes, instead you'll have to track them to follow them."

"But I don't know how to track."

Ryan grabbed tufts of his hair and looked like he might rip them out. "That's the *point*, you overachieving O'Neil!"

"Aren't you trying to build my endurance?" I asked.

Ryan made a bunch of garbled noises.

I watched him, confused. I'd barely managed to catch up with Cliff and Ridge that morning, and it had been a fight to keep them within eyesight for the multi-mile run through the forest. I'd gotten pretty torn up and mud spattered again, so I wouldn't exactly call my efforts victorious as much as barely passable.

Ryan sighed and looked up at the sky. "We're trying to teach you how to track!"

*That's not a no...does that mean he means for me to learn tracking first and endurance is a general goal for this summer?*

At times like this I wished I was a lot better at interpreting social cues.

I weighed out the possibilities of Ryan's words as I looked across the meadow, listening to the birds' chirp as they settled down for the night. "Tracking takes more time," I said. "It'd be more efficient just to close the distance and follow them."

Ryan made a very interesting noise. I'm not sure if it was caused by me, or by the pain from going through with ripping his hair out.

Over at the edge of the woods, Ridge and Cliff made hyena-like noises that sounded like laughter.

Ryan twisted around and shouted at his niece and nephew. "You two stop it! Get running! Has it ever occurred to you to be ashamed that she can keep up with your pace? Have some pride for your Pack!"

One of the wolves—I still couldn't tell them apart—stretched, yawned, then disappeared into the woods. The other used its hind legs to kick dirt in our direction, then hurried after its sibling.

Ryan sighed and muttered under his breath.

I checked my wristwatch and waited a minute before I prepared to begin the chase.



Ryan abruptly straightened up when I pulled my two potions from my belt. “Ah-no! No lightening your load today.”

I paused, thinking. *So, he wants me to add weight on while I run to even further increase my endurance? That’s smart. Sometimes you have to carry extra equipment when chasing after a target.* I’d done the occasional weighted run at home, but obviously Ryan meant for me to go harder.

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’ll take my sword and weapons. But could I leave my potions?”

“I guess. But why the potions?” Ryan held out his hands, and I deposited the potions—both a deep amber color—in his palm.

“They’re breakable,” I said. “I’ll just waste them when I inevitably smash into a tree and get healing potion all over my clothes, and leave glass out in the woods where it might accidentally hurt another member of the Snow Circle Pack.”

“Huh?” Ryan frowned.

“Has enough time passed?” I asked.

Ryan glanced up at the edge of the forest. “Sure. I guess—”

I took off in a sprint, noting how the weight of my sword on my back and all my dagger affected my balance.

*Oh, this is definitely going to add another layer of difficulty. I’m used to running with weapons, but I already know this forest terrain tests my abilities. This is going to make it so much harder. No wonder Mom and Dad decided to send me here for the summer. These wolves really do use an intense training approach.*

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“Okay.” Ryan had his hands pressed together in a prayer-like position. “Because I’m starting to think you’ll kill yourself just to catch up with the wolves instead of tracking them like you’re supposed to, and because I’m very scared of your parents *and* both sets of your grandparents, we’re going to work on something new today.”

I awkwardly cleared my throat. “I didn’t actually catch up to them last night,” I said, feeling honor bound to point out. “I just kept them within eyesight—I failed to close the distance between us.”

Ryan peeled an eye open and glared at me. “I’m starting to remember why I found your mother so annoying whenever our families did drills together. Perfectionism runs deep in your genetics. *Anyway.* This morning, the roles will be reversed! They are going to track you!” He motioned to the five wolves—all of them white, all of them had either yellow or blue eyes, and all of them were roughly the same size.

As I’d found out last night over a late dinner with the entire pack in attendance—with only Marina, her brother and his wife, and her two sisters and their husbands in their human forms instead of their wolf forms—the entire Pack, which was on the smaller side with sixteen members in total, had wolf forms that resembled the Arctic wolf.

Most likely all five of these wolves were Marina’s and Ryan’s nieces and nephews. (The Snow Circle Pack was extremely rare in that all the children born to Marina’s siblings had been born werewolves instead of humans who had to undergo the werewolf “change”. Statically this was impossible, but I was willing to bet it was sheer stubbornness with some kind of magic gene

in their family. There had to be a reason, after all, that no one in the surrounding area had tried to absorb the small Pack.)

“Your goal will be to stay in the forest—without any of these jokers catching you—for ten minutes,” Ryan said.

*Ten minutes, that’s not long at all. Ryan definitely isn’t trying to make things easy on me, so that must mean he expects this to be hard. In that case, what would be the best strategy?*

“Now, experience tells me you could go hurtling off into the woods and they would never be able to catch up with you, even though they could follow your trail,” Ryan said. “But. Look into my eyes, O’Neil, so I know you’re listening, and hear these words from my heart.”

I shifted uncomfortably—it was hard to look someone in the eye for any length of time, it made my spine crawl and my palms sweat, but I made myself look into Ryan’s eyes.

“The goal is for you to learn how werewolves track their prey. It is *not* to build your endurance—that’s why I told you weapons wouldn’t be necessary for this session. It is also *not* to test your agility. I want you to use your *brain* to keep from getting caught, not your speed.” Ryan wrapped his knuckles on the side of his head for emphasis.

*So this is supposed to be a cognitive skill—one I can learn by observation and experimentation. Got it.*

No matter how Ryan had claimed he wanted me to learn tracking, that wasn’t a skill I could pick up just by watching, but this seemed like it was going to be a positive/negative associated situation to help me learn how to evade capture.

“Understood,” I said.

Ryan nodded. “Off you go!”

I nodded, then hustled off to the woods, trying to figure out how I would best learn from the situation.

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At the eight-minute mark, one of the wolves—either Ridge, Cliff, Canyon, Pen (short for Peninsula), or Bay, I couldn’t tell which—caught me, lightly grasping my elbow in his/her mouth.

Normally I would have felt awkward by the contact, and embarrassed by my failure. But when two more white wolves galloped around me, releasing happy yips and wildly wagging their tails before affectionately bumping into each other and finishing with rubbing against my thighs like overly happy dogs, it was easy to be comfortable with them.

The tension in my shoulders eased, and by the time the last two wolves joined me—sniffing me with great interest and a happy tail wag before they galloped off to lead the way—I was feeling remarkably relaxed and concluding that werewolves in their wolf forms were much easier to communicate with than their intense and fierce human forms.

When we returned to Ryan—for the first time since my arrival, I wasn’t scratched up and bruised with my slayer healing powers working overtime—Ryan rocked forward and backward from the balls of his feet to his heels.

“Nice job, you lasted longer than I thought you would,” Ryan said.

I bowed my head. “Yes, but I didn’t last ten minutes—”

“Ah-ah! None of that!” Ryan wagged a finger at me. “Now. What did you learn?”

I thought a moment, then said, “Social interactions would be a lot easier if everyone had tails.”

All the air leaked out of Ryan, and his posture collapsed like a popped balloon. “Ah.” He said. “Yeah...”

The five nieces/nephews all looked up at me with quizzical expressions on their canine faces.

One of them gave of soft “Awoo?”

“Also, the scenting abilities of a wolf are a much greater advantage than I realized,” I continued. “As is their hearing. I was aware it was better than a vampire’s, but I had failed to realize just how much better. It’s in an entirely different league.”

“Yes!” Ryan brightened. “Exactly. Hiding from a werewolf is *much* harder than hiding from a vampire. So if you can learn to hide from a werewolf Pack this summer, it will be impossible for a vampire to sense you. That will give you the advantage in making surprise attacks and strategic retreats.”

“I understand.” I nodded to Ryan and clasped my hands behind my back. “I will do my best to learn how to hide from the Pack.”

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Ten more sessions of hide-and-seek throughout the week, and I wasn’t feeling quite so confident in my ability to learn.

*It’s like they have a GPS signal on me. They just hone in on my exact location!*

I’d tried losing them by zig zagging across a river, but they found my tracks. I’d then tried losing them by setting up camp in a small pond-like lake that had dried out so it was mostly a mudhole covered in cattails.

They’d spotted a few broken cattails, realized where I was, and then flushed me out. (At least, Ryan said they’d found me from the cattails. I didn’t know for certain as all of Marina’s nieces and nephews remained in their wolf form around me, even when the Pack met up for dinner, so I hadn’t talked to any of them. I wasn’t exactly mourning that as this camp was proving to be difficult enough without throwing my social anxiety into the mix.)

*I must be missing something in their skill set.*

I paused at the base of a large tree, and looked up, trying to seize it up.

I hadn’t tried climbing, yet. Mostly because it didn’t seem like it would work. My scent would lead them straight to my tree, and it wasn’t like I was a squirrel and could fling myself from trunk to trunk. Sure, the Pack might not be able to reach me in a tree—werewolves weren’t big climbers in either of their forms—but they’d still *find* me, so I’d still be forfeiting.

*I don’t have any new ideas for this session, so I better just try it.*

I gritted my teeth and jumped to reach the lowest branch of the tree and start my ascent.

It didn’t take me long to realize that while I was versed in climbing—my family had a rock-climbing course for training—that was a very different kind of climbing from trying to scale a tree.

I was going so slow, Bay, Pen, Cliff, Ridge, and Canyon wouldn’t even have to use their noses to track me to the tree, they’d *see* me first.

*My parents had said this summer would challenge me, I hadn’t realized they’d meant it would mentally challenge me to come face-to-face with so many of my failures and shortcomings.*

I was maybe ten or twelve feet up the tree when I heard the snap of a branch breaking. They'd found me already—this was going to be our shortest trailing session yet.

I exhaled and changed my position so I was crouched on the branch and could peer down, pausing when I realized I was hearing *human* footsteps through the underbrush.

A young man appeared in a cluster of large, leafy ferns. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but was barefoot—a werewolf, probably. I didn't recognize him—none of the Snow Circle Pack members I'd met had such dark brown hair.

*But if he's a werewolf, that means he's probably an intruder, checking out Snow Circle's Pack lands.*

I watched with narrowed eyes as he trotted along, slowing down when he got closer to my tree. He was busy looking from side to side, so he didn't see me even though I was barely hidden within the tree's leafy canopy.

*He's going to find me in a second, and I don't have a weapon.*

The realization dawned on me, and I weighed the situation out for a half a second before instincts gave in.

The werewolf intruder sniffed the trunk of my tree. He didn't look up, even after I jumped off the branch.

I hit him, heels first, knocking him to the ground and using the momentum of my falling body to slam the air from him.

I whistled—loud and long so Ryan and the Pack would hear—as I kned the intruder in the back, right between his shoulder blades.

The werewolf was wheezing, his face planted in the turf. Clearly, he wasn't used to combat. But as soon as he got his air back, I'd be in trouble given his strength and my lack of weapons, so I'd need to secure him now, before he recovered.

I locked my legs around his neck in a vise so I could cut off his air supply, and then wrenched his arm up and back.

Normally he'd have no problem pulling free with his strength. But I was counting on the low oxygen supply to help me, and in the meantime, I could do some serious damage to his arm.

Set up to hold him, I whistled again—this time I was quieter since I couldn't use my fingers.

The wolf rocked in my clutches. "It's—" he broke off into a cough. "Cliff! Cliff!"

I frowned as I struggled to hold him. *What is he trying to say?*

Ryan crashed through the underbrush, appearing first.

"O'Neil—it's okay!" he shouted. "That's Cliff!"

I paused, lessening some of the pressure I was applying to the intruder's airway. "What?"

Four white wolves came tearing out of the trees. Four. Not five.

"Oh. Oh." I realized my mistake and let Cliff go, dislodging my legs and rolling away from him to give him space.

*I really stepped in it with this one—they're going to be so angry, and rightfully so!*

Cliff coughed and slapped the ground as he regained his breath.

One of the wolves nosed him, then took off running through the underbrush.

Ryan knelt by Cliff's side and helped him sit up.

"I'm sorry, really sorry." I babbled. "I didn't recognize him. I assumed he was an intruder. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing, O'Neil." Ryan gave me a friendly smile as he slapped his nephew on the back. "Cliff's fine. Werewolves are like cockroaches; they can take a beating!"

I shifted uneasily from foot to foot. "But I attacked him—that wasn't within the rules of the challenge."

"Yeah, well one of these bozos turning into their human form wasn't within the rules of the challenge, either, *was it?*" Ryan grabbed Cliff by the ear and twisted.

Cliff yelped and yanked away, falling over again.

Ryan stood up, turned to the three remaining werewolves, and planted his hands on his hips. "You idiots are lucky O'Neil only went for subduing him given what she's trained to do to her usual targets. Now, which one of you had the bright idea to have Cliff go human?"

The three wolves exchanged guilty looks.

"Bay, Pen. Canyon?" Ryan looked at each wolf in turn—I still didn't get how he could tell them apart.

"*Dang*, O'Neil!" Cliff, having finally gotten his air back, stood up, then shook himself like a dog. "That was brutal!"

I cringed. "Apologies. I should have—I, I didn't mean too—"

"Nah, Uncle Ryan was right." Cliff smiled at me, and I could see he shared his aunt's bright blue eyes. "It was pretty underhanded of me to change."

"I *told* you not to!" A blonde-haired young woman who looked roughly my age jogged out of the woods, wearing a track suit that was a size too big for her.

"Yeah, Ridge, you were right," Cliff winced.

"I'm not only right, you disobeyed a direct order from our Alpha *and* made O'Neil feel bad!" Ridge raged. "Alpha Marina said we had to stay in wolf form—it would make O'Neil more comfortable!"

*Oh. Oh boy.*

I was filled with the overwhelming wish that the ground would open up and swallow me.

Cliff cringed. "Yeah. It was a dirty move. Seriously, O'Neil. Stop feeling bad—I deserved way more than what you did to me." He winked at me and gave me a thumbs up. "Also, your leg strength is really impressive."

"You would have broken out if you had enough air," I blurted out.

Cliff shook his head as he tried to wipe dead leaves and bits of moss off his shirt. "You had me from that surprise attack—I didn't even think to look up when I scented you."

I started to shake my head, but now Ridge turned her eruptive anger on me. "And you!" She started at me like a hungry wolf eying a rabbit for breakfast. "You need to take more pride in yourself. You're overly critical!"

Ryan nodded knowingly. "You are," he agreed.

While Ridge's eyes were blue like her aunt's, I swear in that moment they turned red like a vampire's. "Oh, *is she*, Uncle Ryan? Maybe it's because you keep throwing challenge after challenge at her without making her understand how *great* she's doing!"

I started to shake my head. "But I'm not—"

“You are *so* great!” Ridge shouted loudly enough that her voice echoed. “You have no idea how fast you’re catching on, but Uncle Ryan *does* because he had to go through the same things! He *never* caught up with us when Aunt Marina was first trying to teach him how to track prey! He broke his leg rolling down a hill, and then almost drowned himself because he swam out into the middle of a lake to avoid getting tagged when we were tracking him!”

“Yeah. Uncle Ryan was way slower to catch on.” Cliff eyed Ryan with a mixture of pity and disapproval.

“I was learning all of this in my thirties,” Ryan complained. “O’Neil has the advantage of youth. Also, she’s an O’Neil. They’re crazy. That’s why they thought to send her here!”

I only half listened to the conversation—I was still absorbing the fact that Marina had asked her nieces and nephews to stay in their wolf forms to make me comfortable.

*Mom and Dad must have warned them that I have social anxiety.*

My stomach gurgled, and my embarrassment made me nauseated.

It wasn’t like I could have hidden it. My anxiety would have been obvious to the Pack with their superior senses—they’d smell my sweat and hear my pounding heart. But still. That they had to be warned, and that the Pack was going through extra effort for me? The idea made me want to look for a hole to hide in.

“Whatever. You could be a more encouraging teacher,” Ridge said.

“I’m very encouraging!” Ryan complained. “But if I encouraged her too much, she’d kill herself trying to achieve her goal, did you ever consider *that*?”

Cliff and Ridge paused, exchanging pondering looks.

“She probably would,” Ridge agreed.

Cliff looked at me, expecting me to defend myself.

It was way harder to talk to him in this form, so I just shrugged and looked at the ground.

Silence ruled the forest for an uncomfortable few moments, until Ryan broke it with a groan as he ruffled his hair, making it messier than it already was.

“Let’s try something a little less stressful. For my sake,” he declared.

“How about target practice?” Cliff asked. “Werewolf hunters use rifles. That would be a good skill for O’Neil.”

“O’Neil already knows how to use a gun, don’t you?” Ryan asked.

I nodded. “I was taught the basics of marksmanship and undergo training about once per month for it.”

“Perfect,” Ridge said. “Then she doesn’t have to start from the beginning. Come on, you can play Paint with us.”

“Paint?” I asked.

“Yeah, we’ll give you a paintball gun. Anyone you can hit in their wolf form with a paint pellet loses,” Cliff explained. “We play it when we’re bored.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” I asked.

Cliff scratched his chin. “I mean, yeah. But not much. Plus, pain will motivate you not to get hit, right?”

I swiveled to peer at Ryan for guidance.

Ryan shrugged. “I never claimed my wife’s family had great self-preservation instincts.”

“It’ll be fun,” Ridge said. “Just no chasing after us. You have to be stationary.”

“Yeah, that’s how it’s target practice,” Cliff said. “You’ll be trying to hit moving targets, in the woods. It’ll be great.”

I still felt awkward—especially knowing most of the Pack had been staying in their wolf forms to keep my social anxiety low—so I nodded even though the entire set up still felt dubious.

Ryan patted my shoulder. “You’re doing good, O’Neil,” he said. “Just wait, one day you’ll be thankful for all of this weird stuff you’re learning.”

## SEVERAL YEARS LATER

“Vampire attacked a dryad, and ran. We’re in pursuit. The perp ran down...King’s Court Drive,” I said into my radio before I snapped it onto my belt while running.

I slowed, briefly, when I realized I was leading my team—Brody and Tetiana. “Brody! Scent!” I bellowed, work mode completely overtaking my usual social anxiety.

“Oh, yeah!” Brody loped out in front of me, his nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air. “This way!” He galloped down King’s Court for a block, before turning off into a narrow alleyway.

Brody slowed down, looking up and down the shadowy alleyway in confusion.

*He’s lost the scent? That means the vampire probably went up.*

I pulled my handgun from its holster, racked it, and flicked the safety off—making sure I kept it pointed at the ground—as I peered up.

The vampire was up there—clinging to a drain pipe, which was pretty funny looking as she was wearing a vintage dress that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a 50s housewife.

I raised my gun to aim at the vampire, and Brody slapped his hands over his ears just before I squeezed the trigger.

My shot hit the vampire in the shoulder.

She shrieked, lost her grip on the drain pipe, and fell, hitting the asphalt with a painful, bone-rattling crunch.

“You shot me!” She shrieked.

I fixed my gun on her. “And I’ll do it again if you move at all.”

The vampire groaned—she was probably in too much pain to move between the gunshot wound and whatever damage she got from landing on her back.

I waited for one of my teammates to cuff the vampire, but Brody was busy whistling. “That was a nifty shot, Blood!” he said.

Tetiana wisely nodded. “April is right. Guns *do* beat magic.”

“Cuffs?” I asked.

Brody snapped his fingers. “That’s right!”

Tetiana was already standing over the vampire. She held her hand out—she’d already used her two sets of cuffs on a pair of wizards we’d bagged earlier in the night—and Brody tossed her one of his sets.

I waited until the vampire was apprehended before I flicked my safety back on and lowered my gun, exhaling to relax my stance.

*When I went to summer camp with the Snow Circle Pack, I never knew just how useful my time there would be.*

To this day I wasn’t sure if my parents had sent me in an effort to help my social anxiety—werewolves are the most open and affectionate supernaturals, making them the easiest to practice my social skills on—or if they just wanted me to experience a challenge to help me grow as a combatant.

Ironically, I put everything I’d learned at the camp to use on an almost daily basis thanks to my job—from the knowledge of werewolves, to the additional gun training they put me through.

Brody picked the perp up by the neck of her dress, his werewolf strength making it easy for him, and set her on her feet.



Tetiana reached around him to press a finger to the back of the vampire's head and push her forward. "Start walking."

"I'm wounded!"

"Awww, I don't care," Tetiana cooed. "You better just hope your Family Elder impresses us enough with his apology for your behavior that Blood here doesn't put another hole in you for fun."

"It was just a dryad—not even a human!" the vampire complained. "And his blood tasted disgusting—bitter and *green*." She shivered.

"Just keep on digging yourself a hole," Brody said as he directed her down the alleyway—he still held on to her, and she didn't stand a chance of breaking free of his werewolf strength to run. "If you dig deep enough, you'll bury yourself. That would be convenient for us—less paperwork."

The vampire wailed, and Brody dragged her out of the alleyway and onto King's Court Drive.

Tetiana paused on the sidewalk and looked back at me.

She didn't say anything, but she tilted her head, and her red eyes looked watchful.

I holstered my gun, then jogged up to her, so we left the alleyway together.

Ahead of us, Brody nudged the vampire along—shaking her and rattling her brain when she tried to kick him with one of her stabby-heels.

*One thing is for certain*, I thought as I looked from Brody to Tetiana. *Communication would still be a lot easier if everyone had tails. My future continues to look pretty dismal in terms of open communication.*

I held in a sigh and glanced up at the velvety night sky. *But I suppose, life is a constant challenge. Maybe I'll come across something that will be able to help me grow in social skills.*

Maybe. And maybe some ancient vampire would show up and challenge me to a duel. *Not likely.*

I slightly shook my head and focused on the job at hand.

"Ugh—I can't *wait* for September," Brody grouched. "I'm dying in this heat."

Tetiana snorted. "Nonsense, we need to enjoy summer while we can. You'll get your cold soon enough."

"Whatever. Should we radio in that we caught Miss Dracula here?" Brody asked.

"Of course. I'll do it!" Tetiana volunteered.

"No! Wait!"

I tensed in advance.

"TEAM BLOOD REPORTING IN!" Tetiana yelled into her radio. "WE CAUGHT THE PERP. RETURNING TO THE SCENE OF THE CRIME!"

Brody whined, and even the captured vampire groaned.

"Oh, sorry, I don't think I held down the right button," Tetiana brightly said. "Let me try that again!"

"Don't you dare!" Brody snarled.

*Yeah*, I concluded. *Tails would help a lot.*

THE END