



Felicity was a child when The Rending began and she was pulled from the pack she loved by a father who reviled her existence. Surviving as an Outsider was tough but the harshest battle begins when she stumbles across a plot to overthrow her old pack's trading post, Redemption.

Marek will do anything to protect his pack and their land, including executing any Outsiders who dare enter pack lands. Once a betrayer, always a betrayer. There's no soft in war—until a curvaceous wolf with more sass than sense limps into Redemption with an impossible tale of betrayal.

Together the two discover trust paves the road to Redemption's Forgiveness.

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Chapter One

Marek couldn't believe anyone would think the four idiots in his charge were warriors. He needed five minutes with the dumbass Alpha who'd sent them to Redemption. They weren't ready for real battle. He growled his fury as a new fool took the lead and turned northwest.

Fucking Adrik. He may not have chosen the morons, but he perpetuated the stupidity by ordering Marek and the other sentinels to work them into the security detail. Treat them as pack.

Let them learn from their mistakes. Follow, don't lead. See how they handle whatever problem you run into. They're green. Experience will ripen them faster than coddling will.

Experience was a hell of a teacher. The packs in Adrik's territory fought daily as the sword of the paraspecies. The quadrant Alpha was a hell of a warrior with a gift for handling morons of the green wolf variety.

Green wolves had no place in Marek's pack. They were too busy handling the Rending fallout such as securing the perimeter along Hell's Highway and helping the humans stuck there. They needed it, because their supposed government, the NAH, decided they were genetic mutants and had no place with their kind.

The pack held things together for many years, but recent troubles in Hell's Playground ramped up the need for more paws on the ground. NAH forces had fortified and maintained a secret testing facility in the lawless land south of the Impures in Hell's Highway.

Though the action didn't violate the so-called peace treaty, they left King Bredon nervous. The man had every right to hate their existence—especially since he'd spent years in the one they'd just located. Something ran amuck with the NAH. No one wanted to sit on their laurels and wait for the next shit storm, especially after they barely handled the last one.

Marek growled his frustration as the four two-legged idiots continued going the wrong direction. A two hour circle around Redemption had become an eight hour stroll to nowhere. Clueless dumbasses didn't know north from their ass.

Adrik owed him big for taking on the training. Most of the so-called battle-ready warriors sent by other quadrant Alphas for the culling obviously hadn't fought since the Rending, if even then. The ancient method of vetting warriors for a pack typically proved worth the hassle. But the other Alphas whose packs never saw battle sent their trash instead of true warriors.

Assholes.

Dumbass one turned, suddenly headed the correct direction. Finally. Maybe they'd hit Redemption in time to serve Marek's trainees up as dinner. One of Daryn's dragon warriors might even flambé them.

A new scent assailed his nostrils a few moments later, a fusion of jasmine and rose masked in a burst of...blood. Marek froze, sniffing the ground. The large crimson droplets spaced a short distance apart supported what his wolf scented. Female. Injured.

Wolf.

Dumbass two, three and four tromped their human feet through the trail behind their clueless number one. None of them ever considered the advantage of shifting to wolf form. They'd probably not noticed the blood trail or scented the foreign wolf in the southern wind. The injured female needed help.

Trouble.

Great.

The last thing Marek needed was an intruder with idiots for backup. To hell with Adrik's request. He snarled, purging the rage and animosity he'd held back the past few hours until the four morons halted and turned.

"Oh right. A break would be good," dumbass one said.

Marek hadn't bothered remembering names. The clueless didn't deserve the formality around these parts. They got dead too soon for the monikers to be of any use except on a headstone—which was another decorum rarely offered on the front line.

He pushed past the dead weight and followed the weakened scent dangling in the air like a lush fruit his wolf wanted to savor. She smelled of earthen beauty and succulence, ambrosia he prowled toward with a renewed purpose. Finally. A reason to end the FUBAR afternoon.

A few hundred yards north dumbass two punctured the silence with his wisdom. "Wait. Is that blood?"

"Oh shit! Wait, I smell a wolf," another said.

Idiots.

Determined to ignore their existence, he followed the trail. Each drop intensified his concern. Her continued gait despite the obvious injury vaulted him into a full-out run. The trail's trajectory ignited a restless need to find her before she arrived at her destination. Redemption.

Almost there.

His paws struck the heated ground with brutal force, each impact rattling his teeth with speed and power.

Close the distance.

End the threat.

A foreign scent permeated his nostrils, one he'd smelled too often to mistake. A small mass appeared on the horizon, steadily moving while favoring her right side. He continued forward, surprised when she turned to face him far sooner than an untrained warrior would. She was no slight female in trouble. The beautiful wolf with fur whiter than untouched snow and eyes bluer than the deepest ocean studied him when he closed the distance and halted outside of strike range.

A limp wolf pup hung in her slackened jaw. His mouth ached imagining carrying a weight too long in such a loose embrace. His gut twisted. Blood coated her pelt along her entire right side. One eye barely opened and a deep gouge cut along a damaged ear. A low rumble rolled from her when he took a couple steps forward. She backed up.

Leaning down she set the pup on the ground as though he was glass. The care she exercised soured his mood. She didn't know.

Fuck.

"Surround her," dumbass two said.

"On it." The echoed stupidity made him snarl, but he remained wolf. For now. He'd seen enough warrior females in protective mode to retain distance.

Her attention moved from him to the other wolves encircling her like buzzards smelling wounded prey. She maintained the defensive stance over the pup and erupted in another rumbling growl Marek felt in his veins. Despite the obvious injuries, her posture remained braced, ready for battle.

The men flashed hand signals back and forth as if she wouldn't notice the lame maneuver. Her focus settled on him. Yeah, she recognized idiot too.

Sighing his resignation, he settled onto the hard ground and rested his muzzle on his front paws. The four warriors circled, closing the distance. Marek figured ending the stupidity violated Adrik's request. He wanted them trained via

experience, fine. Besides, if they got their ass handed to them by an injured female, they deserved whatever she did. The stupidity wouldn't last long. Either the female would beat them down, as he suspected, or he'd do it in her stead.

Her lean frame flexed and bent. The awkward, slow shift rattled his wolf. The injuries she'd sustained were more serious than he'd realized. Dumb ass three lunged toward her injured side. Marek closed the distance, slamming his weight into the moron and knocking him away. The others backed a few feet away.

Labored gasps and groans rose behind him, but he kept his focus on the four idiots under his command. Snarls and growls rumbled from his throat as he bared his teeth. One step closer and they died. Summoning his shift, he maintained vigilance. Bones crunched and skin contorted. His shift to human ended first.

Kneeling beside her, he reached out in a slow, methodical move. The pained wolf snapped, teeth aiming for his arm. He stilled a moment and then seized the scruff of her neck. She howled. He snarled.

"Enough!"

The female stilled. A whimper rose from her as she shifted her weight from the injured side. She stared up at him with a soul-searing expression. Desperation tainted her honey scent, darkened her pained gaze. Snarling, she stared. Assessed.

Marek's wolf rose, responding to the feral desperation and terror wafting from the Outsider. Death drifted in the air, coming from her bloodied fur. Where ever she'd come from, she'd fought. Killed.

No female deserved the kill-or-be-killed existence found in the Outlands. While he didn't respect or understand shifters who abandoned their packs and fled south, he realized not many survived the hardened existence. No pack to protect them. No one to trust.

Did the female have anyone she trusted? Loved? Protected. The pup. Was the kid hers? Her slight form quaked with her weakening attempt to remain upright and on guard. He hadn't sensed such desperation and terror since the Rending started decades before.

He'd never been able to leave a woman defenseless. Unprotected.

"Calm yourself. They won't harm you. I'll keep you safe." He stroked her head and eased the hold on her neck. Focusing on the idiots, he released the rage and frustration he'd held at bay. "Get help." When they didn't move he shouted. "Now!"

Three of them sprinted in the general vicinity of Redemption, but since none had managed to find the outpost the past several hours, Marek regarded dumbass one. "What's your name?"

"Roan." He looked back at the three men. "They aren't the best with directions."

"Go. Get help. We're fine waiting here."

"But the...." Roan motioned toward the downed female wolf, her body partially sprawled on the pup and the remainder across Marek's thigh.

"Don't. Not now. Go."

Silence stilled the dry air. He locked gazes with the pained wolf and stroked his fingers through her pelt. Fear and pain sometimes interrupted a shift, especially if the person had been in wolf form too long. Whoever the female was, she'd kept the protective form—probably to cover distance faster.

"They're gone. Shift for me, sweetheart. You're safe now."

Bones snapped and limbs twisted. Howls and whines filled the air. Loud pants pushed warm air on his arm where her head rested. One last whimper rumbled from her and then she collapsed on him, still wolf.

Too weak to shift. How long had she maintained her form? Admiration rose within his, strengthening his decision to protect her. A female strong enough to cross the massive distance she'd clearly gone needed a guardian. No one could wage a war alone. There wasn't any doubt she battled something. Someone. The numerous scents wafting from her increased his unease.

Why was she here? What happened?

He channeled the primal nature of his dominant wolf and tugged on her neck until her ocean eyes rested wearily on him. "Shift, female. Now."

A feral growl rose from her. Snarling, she nipped at him before surrendering to the forced shift. He maintained contact, silently admiring the steely, determined glint in her gaze. With a weaker-willed wolf he'd coax with soft words. A little warrior like her would have his ass for the slightest concession.

Silence punctuated each pained noise as he waited. The plush white pelt gave way to light mocha skin. Soft beneath his fingertips and partially covered by a bloodied white tunic and loose cotton shorts. Whoever she was she exercised

the same caution of wearing natural fiber clothing Marek's pack did. The habit ensured the warriors fit in with their surroundings while in human form, especially in more populated regions.

Long chocolate curls pooled around her heart-shaped face and partially masked the pain-ravaged depths of her gaze. Dried blood covered her cheeks. Deep long gouges along her right side bled crimson. Six, no seven wounds. Raspy breaths made him growl. Where the fuck had those idiots gone for help?

"Relax, I've got you."

* * *

Sharp stabs punctured each breath Felicity forced in shallow bursts. The man smelled of oak and musk. He held her gently in a protective embrace she appreciated more than she should. Who was he? Had she found Redemption?

"Relax, I've got you."

She battled the hazy fog. Why had she violated the land treaty and gone to Redemption? Oh yeah. The threat. Her soul ached, her heart too wary for the memories she'd locked away. Maybe someday she'd recall the atrocities she committed. For now, nothing good came from recalling what she did.

"The boy." She collapsed against the softness at her head and forced her eyelids open despite the harsh sun tumbling from the sky. Mid-afternoon. A stabbing sensation resonated behind her eyes. Her entire side throbbed beneath a constant burn. "Save him. Please."

The wolf—the man who'd forced her shift held her tighter against him. Full lips harshened into a grim expression which accentuated the square set of his jaw. Her gaze trekked upward and locked on the golden amber swirling in darkened chocolate. Thick, dark hair fell around the handsomest face she'd seen.

Massive shoulders, thick arms and an expansive chest tumbled into her field of vision when she collapsed against powerful thighs. Definitely a warrior. Thank goodness he hadn't challenged her. Though she'd kicked the asses of many hulky men, she didn't think such a battle would bode well for her today.

He kept her pinned in his embrace. A shadow spanned the sky above her. Crisp traces of sandalwood, citrus and evergreen assailed her nostrils. Newcomers.

Protect the child.

The strong wolf didn't shift to a defensive stance. Struggling beneath his firm hold, she tugged and twisted as she blindly searched for a weapon. If she'd collapsed near her terrain—Outsider country—any stranger was a perceived threat until proven otherwise.

No. Her mind flashed memories. Walk. Burned paws. Hurt jaw. Dry terrain. She'd fled the Outlands days ago. Right?

"Calm. A white dragon healer is here to help. If you get too agitated Doc will kick my ass for scaring you." The man's lips turned into a slight smirk.

"I see why you insisted on tending the wounded." The uncensored anger forced her wolf forward in an agitated growl. The approaching man halted and grinned. "She's developed your bedside manner, Marek."

Marek. The name suited the strong wolf who'd maintained a guarded vigil. Were the men Redemption warriors? She studied the newcomer with a pained rumble escaping her parched throat. Straight blond hair fell in disarray on his head. Pale, blue eyes maintained her gaze. Curiosity and concern consumed his scent. Sandalwood and evergreen. Where did the citrus come from?

Orange and vanilla assaulted her from behind. Snapping she turned, her hand wrapping around the dagger strapped to Marek's thigh.

"It's okay." Marek squeezed her arm. "She won't hurt you. Settle back and let Doc look at you."

"Don't ever approach an injured wolf, or any shifter, from behind—especially an unknown one," Doc warned.

"Marek had her handled. Stop being such a grump. Drag an ancient whitey out of bed and he's grouch central." The blonde female flopped onto the ground a couple inches from the blade's tip. Her amber eyes widened when they landed on the weapon settled against her jugular by the injured woman. "Oh my."

Pain coursed along her side, knifing each breath into a constant burning struggle. Vision blurring, Felicity focused her strength on the weapon, the heated pulse beneath her index finger as she pressed one knuckle against the female's throat to judge distance.

"H-how did she get your knife, Marek?"

"Don't move, Lynette. Her vision is unstable. See how she's blinking rapidly?"

"I hadn't noticed much beyond the knife at my throat."

“Lynette isn’t a threat,” Marek whispered. Hot breath fanned along her forehead. “She’s apprenticing when she’s not lost. Hell, Doc sends her after supplies and she’s gone for hours. I can’t tell you how many times we’ve tracked her down because she took a wrong turn.” Strong fingers wrapped around hers. “Keep the knife. Stay still so Doc can work, but let’s direct the blade elsewhere.”

Felicity winced. Pain shot through her wrist, into her fingers. She maintained the death-grip on the hilt even though he squeezed and tugged. He guided her wrist until the weapon’s sharpened edge pressed against his throat. Her knuckles grazed the short stubble along his jaw. Swallowing, she settled her head in his lap and allowed the tandem grip. The searing scorch along her side continued, but her attention remained entrenched within the calming gold swirls in Marek’s eyes.

“Help the boy. I’m okay.”

His expression saddened and the grip on her strengthened.

No. She twisted and tugged, but Marek held her steady. Digging her nails into his arms she pushed and growled. No. Impossible. She’d been so careful. The boy lived. He was a squirrely one—the only reason he’d been missed by the death squad who’d killed his family was because he hid after being wounded.

“Let me go!”

The white dragon appeared in her field of vision. Cool tingles burst along her skin when he touched her face. Icy blue eyes demanded her attention. “What’s your name?”

“Let. Me. Go.” The stranger settled a second hand on her arm, above Marek’s. Somehow the dragon’s touch unsettled her wolf. She snapped, but the wolf holding her growled until she stilled.

She closed her eyes, surrendering to the exhaustion, the pain.

Felicity reeled from what she’d heard. Seen. Smelled.

Betrayal.

She had to do something, stop their plan to happen. One against an infantry of humans and nearly twenty wolf shifters weren’t odds she could chance—not when she was the lone witness to a horrid plot.

Death pierced her ears—blood-curdling screams of the victims Felicity didn’t save, protect. Orange flickers from torches lit the otherwise darkened night. Rudimentary thatch huts sat along the softly rolling hillside. The inhabitants lay in broken piles—limbs twisted, bodies contorted. Large chunks of flesh hung from their gaping wounds.

Primal grunts and howls overrode the surging terror as the final death cries ceded to an unnatural stillness. The coppery aroma of carnage overwhelmed her nostrils. Forcing the death stench aside, she tracked the weaker scents.

Human.

The foreign presence alarmed her, but the mingling mesquite and musk in the wind froze her blood. No. It wasn’t possible.

A twig snapped to her left. Terrified green eyes flecked with white peeked at her from the darkness. Straight brown hair framed chubby cheeks and a quivering mouth. Blood coated his clothes, his skin. Crimson pooled in the center of his white shirt. Terror filled his expression as he shifted.

Gunfire erupted a couple hundred yards away, followed by howls. Way too many enemies for her to take on alone, which left one option. Run. Though the option soured her gut, she couldn’t let the little boy staring at her in pup form die.

I won’t hurt you. Come to me. I’ll get you help. You’ll be okay.

The boy skulked toward her, tail between his legs, ass dragging the ground. His little pup form trembled with the terror she tasted in fat tears against her tongue when she lapped his face lovingly. Get him to safety. But where?

No Outsider could be trusted.

Redemption. The betrayers would strike out for the trading outpost. She’d beat them there, warn the pack warriors. She’d been too late to save the unfortunate souls in the encampment, but she’d save far more by running.

At least she’d save the pup.