

# THE MIDNIGHT HUNT

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## CHAPTER ONE

Sylvan hungered to free her wolf. After three days in the city, encased in a steel-and-glass building fifteen hours at a time with nothing but concrete under her feet at night, she needed to fill her lungs with the scent of warm earth, sweet pine, and rich, verdant life. She needed to run with her wolves and lead them on a kill. The insistent pressure between her thighs and the shimmer of pheromones coating her skin reminded her of another critical need, one not so readily satisfied. She'd gone too long without sexual release, but she couldn't risk even a rough-and-ready tangle with a willing female when her wolf seemed insistent on claiming a mate. That she would never do.

Never long on patience, she was edgy and amped on adrenaline and hormones. Even knowing she could be in her Adirondack Mountain compound in thirty minutes didn't curb her temper while she sat at a desk in the New York State Capitol Annex building listening to a politician patronize her. But she needed to do the job that had fallen to her when she had ascended to Alpha shortly after the Praetern species had stepped out of the shadows for the first time in millennia. As head of the Praetern Coalition representing the interests of the five Praetern species—Weres, Vampires, Mages, Fae, and Psi—she had been charged with convincing the senior senator from New York to push PR-15, the new preternatural protection bill, through his committee.

"We'd like to bring the bill to a vote this session, Senator," Sylvan said into the phone, careful not to allow her frustration to bleed into her voice. She spun around to face the view of the Hudson River six blocks away. A breeze through the open windows of the twelfth-floor office carried a teasing hint of the river on a raft of summer heat, reminding

her that her imprisonment was only temporary. “The bill has been tabled for the past six months and the Coalition members are asking why.”

“We all want the same thing, Councilor Mir,” Senator Daniel Weston said, “but we have to remember, this is all very new for the human populace. We have to give the voters a chance to get used to the idea.”

The senator’s patrician tone grated, and Sylvan growled softly, her right hand tightening on the leather arm of her desk chair. The wood creaked, protesting the crushing pressure, and she consciously relaxed her fingers. No one knew better than she that for some humans, there would never be enough time to accept those who were *other* as equals. The nonhuman races had hidden their preternatural essence for centuries in order to survive in a world where they were greatly outnumbered. Eventually global culture expanded until isolation was impossible, and the Praeterns learned to hide in the light, forming uneasy coalitions while building a formidable economic power base. Sylvan’s father had finally convinced the Praetern leaders to make their presence known to the world, arguing that the benefits of visibility outweighed the dangers—their corporations could compete openly in international markets, their scientists and doctors would have access to greater research opportunities, those in politics who now had to work behind the scenes could actively advocate for their rights. And most importantly, they could demand protection under the law for future generations.

Shortly after Antony Mir had spearheaded the Exodus, he had died, leaving Sylvan to assume the mantle of leadership. She had been twenty-six years old, a year out of law school. Her father had been her Alpha, her mentor, her friend, and her greatest champion. She’d had no time to mourn because the Pack needed a leader, especially in the midst of the chaos the Exodus had incited. His absence remained an agonizing void in her heart.

“Over a year now, Senator—and several million dollars in campaign donations. That’s a long time to wait for basic protection from those who would destroy us for simply being different.” Sylvan couldn’t help but think of her father’s death and how little progress she’d made in achieving security for those whom she had been born to protect and defend. Anguish and fury frayed the last remnants of her temper and a low rumble resonated from deep beneath her breasts. Her

skin tingled with the ripple of pelt about to erupt and her claws sliced through her fingertips. Her wolf shimmered so close to the surface that her slate blue eyes, glinting back at her from her reflection in the window glass, sparked with wolf-gold. Her dusty blond hair took on the silver glint of her pelt. Along with the impending shift came an exhilarating surge of power and raw sensuality.

The door behind her opened and a husky alto voice inquired, “Alpha?”

Sylvan swiveled to face Niki Kroff, her second and *imperator*—the head of Pack security. One of Sylvan’s *centuri*, her personal guards, Niki was also her best friend—they’d grown up together, tussled and played dominance games as adolescents, sparred together as adults. Tonight Niki wore her usual uniform—a formfitting black T-shirt, cargo pants, and lace-up military boots. Her compact muscular form looked hard and battle worthy, despite the soft swell of her full breasts and the luscious fall of thick auburn curls that touched the top of her shoulder blades. Niki had sensed the rise of Sylvan’s wolf, stirring Niki’s instinctive need to guard her Alpha against any distress. Sylvan didn’t find Niki’s sudden appearance in the office an intrusion on her privacy. Pack members had very few physical or emotional boundaries. In fact, Sylvan hated having the *centuri* stand between her and the rest of the Pack, forcing her into even more isolation than her status as Alpha demanded. But since her father’s death, the Pack would have it no other way. She was too important to them not to be under constant guard.

“I’m fine,” she *sotto*-voiced, too low for Weston, who continued to try to placate her with platitudes, to hear. Niki, though, could hear her easily, and after one last searching look, backed out of the room and closed the door. Sylvan reluctantly brought her wolf to heel, promising her freedom soon. Breaking in on Weston’s monologue, she said, “Some of the Coalition leaders are beginning to question if our friends in Washington are really friends at all.”

“Now now, Councilor,” Weston said almost jovially, “I’m sure you can explain things to the Coalition and your own...uh...followers.”

“Pack. My Pack,” Sylvan said softly. She wanted to point out, not for the first time, that the Adirondack Timberwolf Pack was not a cult or a religion or a social organization. They were a community, connected physically and psychically. She was their Alpha, their leader, but she

was part of them as well. But she was too weary and her wolf was too anxious to roam for her to repeat what she had been explaining publicly for months. “The Mage and the Fae have never been as solidly behind the Exodus as the Weres. I don’t think I have to remind you how strong a force those two groups are in industry and international commerce. I don’t think you want to lose their support.”

“Of course not. Of course not. The committee plans to convene within the month, and I assure you this matter will have priority on our agenda.”

Sylvan could tell she’d gotten as far as she was going to get with him that night. Human politics were fueled by money, and until the money train carrying funds from the Praetern Coalition to Capitol Hill ground to a halt, the laws to protect them would be slow in coming. Hopefully, once humans began to appreciate that Praeterns had lived and worked among them for centuries, and not only performed many essential functions within society, but were their friends and neighbors and, sometimes, even relatives, popular opinion would swing in their direction.

“I look forward to hearing from you soon, Senator,” Sylvan lied, and put down the phone. Almost ten thirty. Traffic on the Northway would be light this time of night. She couldn’t wait to shed her pale gray linen shirt and tailored black trousers, a necessary concession to her high-profile persona as the head of U.S. Were Affairs. If she and her *centuri* left now, they’d be home before full moonrise. Running under the moon was her favorite time to hunt—the forest took on a primeval glow and the very air seemed to glitter with moon dust. She preferred to run in moonlight whenever she could, even though most Weres had evolved to the point they no longer needed the pull of the moon to shift. She and her Pack could shift at any time, although she alone could shift instantaneously. Even her most dominant *centuri* needed a minute or more to accomplish the change. Her singular ability to call her wolf at any time, to shift partially or totally at will, was one of her greatest joys and helped balance the price she paid in loneliness for being the Alpha.

“Niki,” she said quietly as she packed her briefcase. The door opened and her second slipped inside. Niki’s forest green eyes took in the unfinished meal she had delivered earlier in the evening and

narrowed in displeasure. Sylvan ignored the look. “Have Lara bring the Rover around. Let’s go home.”

“You didn’t eat.”

“Do I look like I need a den mother?”

Niki folded her arms beneath her breasts and spread her legs, an aggressive stance. She met Sylvan’s eyes for a second before looking away. “More like a mate. If you won’t look after yourself—”

“Niki.” Sylvan gave a warning rumble. She knew many Pack members were anxious for her to take a mate, not because of pressure to produce an heir—she had decades for that—but because she would have more protection. The Pack Alpha could accept intimate care and safeguarding from a mate, whereas she couldn’t from anyone else. She had her reasons for ignoring the not-so-subtle hints that Niki and those close to her had been making, especially the last six months. She did not want a mate. She had seen the desolation in her father’s eyes after the death of her mother over a decade before. He had fought his desire—the innate drive—to join his mate in death until Sylvan was old enough to take her mother’s place, but he had been broken, an empty shell of who he had once been. Sylvan had lost her mother, and in many ways, her father, all in a few moments of betrayal and blood. She would not allow herself to be that vulnerable. Ever. “We’ve had this discussion. I don’t want to have it again.”

“You’ve been working twenty hours a day for six months and ignoring your needs. It’s not going to help the Pack if you’re too weak to stand a challenge.” Niki was a dominant Were at the top of the Pack hierarchy, and one of the few who would dare incite Sylvan’s ire in order to protect her.

Sylvan cleared the desk so quickly Niki barely had time to put her back against the door before Sylvan towered over her. Sylvan didn’t touch her. She didn’t have to. Niki dropped her chin and turned her face away. Sylvan brought her lips close to Niki’s ear, and when she spoke, even the Weres outside in the hall, who could hear a mouse in the walls three floors below them, did not hear her. As their Alpha, she could speak to them mind-to-mind as effortlessly as she could with words. *Do you question my ability to lead, Imperator?*

Niki shivered and tilted her head, further exposing her neck. A Were as powerful as Sylvan could crush the windpipe or tear open the

great vessels in seconds. “No, Alpha, I do not doubt you. But I am responsible for keeping the Pack safe, and for that, we need you.”

*Am I not always here for you?*

“Yes, Alpha,” Niki whispered, her eyes nearly closed, her gaze still averted. “But many in the Pack fear what will happen if the humans decide to hunt us. You give them the strength to fight the fear.”

Sylvan sighed and pressed her mouth to Niki’s neck, grazing the bounding pulse with her fully erupted canines. Sylvan’s caress was possessive, not sexual. Niki was her wolf, as were all the wolves in the Pack, and Niki needed Sylvan’s touch, her heat, her strength. Isolation was a form of death for a Were. Niki arched subtly against her, taking comfort from Sylvan’s reassurance. Sylvan growled and bit down gently until Niki whined, her shiver of fear turning to pleasure. Gradually, Niki relaxed against Sylvan’s body, at ease and content. Only then did Sylvan release her.

“Do not worry, my wolf,” Sylvan whispered aloud. “The Pack will always come before all else in my life.”

“I know,” Niki murmured, grateful and saddened at the same time.

“Come on.” Sylvan squeezed Niki’s shoulder. “Keep me company tonight on a run?”

“With pleasure, Alpha.” Niki reached for the door and then abruptly stepped in front of Sylvan. “Wait.”

Sylvan felt it too. Waves of tension streaming toward her from the guards outside the door, but she could sense no immediate threat. No scent of enemies. “Open it.”

Niki did, but continued to shield Sylvan’s body with her own. “What is it, Max?”

Max, a barrel-chested male easily six inches taller than Sylvan’s own five-ten, filled the doorway, his grizzled face tight with strain. “We have a problem. Several of the young slipped our perimeters and left the Compound. We just found out.”

“Where are they?” Heat flared in Sylvan’s eyes. The northern extent of Pack land bordered the Catamount Clan territory in Vermont. The cat Weres were mostly feral and as territorial as the wolves. They would not give safe passage within their territory, even to foolish wolf pups.

“Here, in the city,” Max replied.

“Who?”

“Jazz, Alex, and Misha.”

Three teenagers, two brothers and a dominant young female, all in military training at the Compound—Sylvan’s home and Pack headquarters. The adolescents had strict curfews, not only because they were still too immature to control their shifts in the face of rampant hormonal changes, but because like all young wild animals, they craved excitement and had no sense of their own mortality. Sylvan cursed.

“That’s not all,” Max said grimly.

“What else?” Sylvan fixed him with a hard stare and he dropped his gaze to her shoulder.

“Alex was the one who called us. They’re at Albany General Hospital. We don’t know what happened, but Misha’s injured.”

Sylvan shouldered him aside and was halfway down the hall before he even finished speaking. Niki, Max, and the third guard, Andrew, ran to keep up. Sylvan didn’t bother with the elevator but loped into the stairwell, grasped the metal railing, and vaulted over the side and onto the landing one floor below. She leapt down, floor by floor, until she reached ground level seconds later. When she went through the door into the dark, she was racing on all fours. The others couldn’t shift while moving, and she didn’t wait for them. She was the Pack Alpha, and one of hers was in danger.

Sylvan ran alone through the night.



“Jesus,” Harvey Jones exclaimed, “what the hell is that racket?”

Drake McKennan listened to the steady cacophony of snarls emanating from behind the closed curtain at the far end of the ER. “Wolf Weres. I paged the Were medic already.”

“What are they doing here? I thought they were indestructible or something.”

“They’re extremely long-lived, I understand,” Drake said, “but not immortal. They can be hurt. Killed.”

Her fellow medic didn’t even bother to hide his disgust, and Drake had to work not to make a caustic comment. He wasn’t the only medic who didn’t seem to think the oath they took extended to Praeterns, even though most of them had probably taken care of a witch or a lesser Fae

at some point in their careers without knowing it. Probably not a Were, though. Harvey was right, the Weres rarely showed up in the ER. Their Packs or Prides had their own medics. Just the same, if she'd had the slightest idea how to treat the young female Were who'd arrived with a stab wound to the shoulder, she would have. Assuming the adolescent males with the pretty young brunette would let her get close to the girl without a fight, which she doubted. Just the same, she would have tried if she'd thought she could do any good. The six-foot-tall boys had a few inches on her and more muscle, but she was a pretty solid fighter. She'd had to learn quickly how to defend herself in the series of foster homes and state facilities she'd grown up in. The problem was, she didn't know much about Were physiology—just one of the many secrets the Weres protected.

“Well, I wish to hell they'd quiet down. They're making the real patients nervous.”

“I'll see if there's anything I can do.” Drake had seen the girl when the boys had brought her in. She was scared and she was in pain. The boys looked scared too, but they put up a tough front, snarling at anyone who approached, demanding a Were medic look at her and no one else. Drake's instinct had been to help her, but she'd put in a call to Sophia Revnik, the medic who had worked in the ER for five years and who, after the Exodus, had announced to everyone she was a wolf Were. Drake liked the plucky blonde, but some of their colleagues had given Sophia the cold shoulder since discovering she was a Praetern.

“Why bother with them,” Harvey scoffed.

“Because that's why we're here,” Drake said, realizing that at the next ER staff meeting she'd have to bring up the schism developing around treating Praeterns. The bias had been subtle at first, but as each day passed, the prejudice was growing. The heated public debate over allowing Praeterns the rights of full citizenship hadn't helped. Some, more each day it seemed, argued that the constitution only protected humans.

“Watch yourself,” Harvey grunted as she walked away.

She stopped in front of the cubicle, not foolish enough to surprise the boys when they were obviously upset.

“Hey,” she said to the curtain. “I'm Dr. McKennan. Can I help you at all? Can I come in?”

“No,” a rough male voice snapped back.

“Look—I can start an IV, maybe give her something for pain.”

“No one will touch her.”

Drake took a breath, kept her voice calm. “Someone’s going to have to.” She debated sliding back the curtain, but the sound of a commotion coming from the direction of the ER entrance diverted her. A blonde strode toward her, but it wasn’t Sophia Revnik. This woman was taller and leaner than Sophia, with dusty blond waves that just brushed her collar in place of Sophia’s shoulder-length platinum locks. Keen blue eyes that took in everything around her in one sharp sweep dominated her strong, angular face. Even dressed in jeans and a plain navy T-shirt, she exuded an unmistakable air of authority.

Everyone in her path backed away, hurriedly averting their gaze, but as the blonde bore down on her, Drake couldn’t look away. When the slate blue eyes fixed on hers, an unexpected wave of heat coursed through her. She had seen Sylvan Mir, the Special U.S. Councilor on Were Affairs, on television but the cameras had not done her justice. They had made her look older than she obviously was and had muted her untamed beauty and charisma. She smelled wild too—burnt pine and cinnamon, with an undercurrent of tangy sensuality.

“Are you responsible for them?” Drake said, holding up one hand. “I need to see the girl but they won’t let me in.”

Slowing, Sylvan studied the woman standing almost protectively in front of the closed curtain. Her thick, collar-length black hair contrasted sharply with her ivory skin, as if her face were bathed in moonlight. Her carved cheekbones and slightly square jaw reminded her of the stark beauty of sweeping mountain peaks. She wore scrubs the color of warm blood, and she blocked Sylvan’s path with unwavering courage. This stranger should have been afraid—of her and of her nearly out-of-control adolescents behind the thin curtain—but her charcoal gray eyes radiated only calm. A calm that slid over Sylvan’s skin like the brush of warm lips. Sylvan shook off the unfamiliar urge to let down her guard, to rest for a moment in that seductive peacefulness. She could smell Misha’s pain, the boys’ rising aggression. They were hers to protect, and this human had put herself between her and her wolves. A very dangerous and foolish thing to do.

“Who are you?” Sylvan demanded.

“Dr. Drake McKennan.”

“You’re a human physician.”

“Yes. You’re the Were Alpha, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Sylvan said, impressed with the human’s use of the terms. Many humans preferred to avoid a direct reference to her species or her status. “Sylvan Mir.”

Drake finally broke free of Sylvan’s hypnotic gaze and took in the whole of her long-limbed, rangy body. “You’re barefoot.”

For just a second, Sylvan’s full, perfectly proportioned lips flickered, as if she might smile, but then her expression cooled. She moved forward so quickly, Drake barely had time to get out of her path.

“You’ll excuse me.” Sylvan reached for the curtain. “I need to see to my young.”

“Can I help you?”

“No.” Sylvan pulled the curtain aside.

Drake stayed where she was. The Were Alpha hadn’t said she couldn’t watch.

“Alpha!” one of the boys exclaimed. Both boys, handsome dark-haired teenagers with startlingly beautiful dark green eyes, immediately ducked their heads, seeming to shrink in on themselves. The equally beautiful brunette girl on the stretcher whimpered.

“What happened?” Sylvan growled.

“Rogues,” one of the boys whispered. “They attacked us in the park. We fought them, Alpha, but—”

Drake jerked in shock and barely stifled a protest when Sylvan Mir grabbed the boy by the collar and yanked him up onto his toes, shaking him so hard his thick black hair flew into his face. The Alpha and the young male were nearly the same size, but she handled him as if he were half her weight.

“You brought Misha out of the Compound and then failed to protect her?” Sylvan roared.

The boy trembled in her grasp and the girl, to her credit, forced herself upright on the stretcher, even though she was in obvious pain.

“I don’t need males to protect me,” Misha cried, her dark brown irises circled in gold. “I am strong enough—”

Sylvan whipped her head around and silenced the girl with a glare. “And you? You followed these brainless pups against my explicit orders? You want to be a soldier, yet cannot obey a simple command from your Alpha?”

The girl's pale face blanched even whiter and she shuddered.

"She was attacked," Drake exclaimed, instinctively wanting to shield the injured girl. There'd been a time when she had been the defenseless one, and no one had stood for her. She had stopped hoping for, stopped needing, that kind of caring a long time ago, but she couldn't erase her bone-deep drive to defend the defenseless. "She's hurt and in no condition—"

"This is none of your concern," Sylvan snarled, rounding on Drake, lethal-looking canines flashing. Her eyes were no longer blue, but wolf-gold. "These are *my* wolves."

Drake stiffened, the memory of bruises inflicted by older, stronger youths in a group home suddenly as fresh as if the blows had been delivered yesterday. She heard a low rumble and her skin prickled, the fine hairs on her arms and neck quivering. Forcing herself to think, not react, Drake assessed the scene as she would an unknown clinical situation. The boy was limp in the Alpha's grasp, the way Drake had seen young kittens and puppies go boneless in their mothers' jaws. The teenagers did not appear frightened or abused. Chastised, yes. But not afraid. In fact, all three of them looked at Sylvan Mir with something close to adulation. Drake realized that no matter how human they appeared, these Weres did not live by human social and moral conventions, and she was out of her element.

"My apologies, Ms. Mir," Drake said softly. "I meant no offense."

Inclining her head infinitesimally, Sylvan said, "None taken."

Sylvan was impressed with the human's fortitude. When Pack Alphas went dominant, they exuded a complex combination of powerful hormones that triggered a deeply ingrained flight instinct in the primitive brain centers of every species. Any other human, and even the most dominant wolves, would have cowered in the face of her rage. But Sylvan had no time to ponder why this human female seemed able to absorb her fury without fear. Misha needed her.

Sylvan released Jazz and turned to Misha. When she stroked the girl's cheek, the teenager nuzzled her palm.

"Where are you hurt, Misha?" Sylvan inquired softly.

Misha lifted her chin, seeming to take strength from Sylvan's touch. "My shoulder."

Drake watched the exchange, struck by the tenderness that passed

between the Alpha and the young Were. Anyone who wasn't looking closely would have missed the small signs of caring, but to Drake the subtle gestures said everything. The deep love that existed between these Weres and Sylvan Mir was unmistakable.

"Did any of you shift?" Sylvan asked, taking in the three teens. The two boys had crowded around the stretcher now, each of them stroking the girl, comforting her.

Misha shook her head. "I wanted to, because I thought it might heal my shoulder, but I was afraid to try. You said we couldn't, without permission."

"So you did remember something," Sylvan murmured, rubbing her knuckles along Misha's jaw. "Turn over, let me see."

Obediently, Misha rolled onto her side and Drake eased into the cubicle for a better look. Misha's shirt was in tatters and Sylvan swept it aside, revealing a long gash in the trapezius muscle, beginning high on her back just to the left of her spine and extending diagonally downward for six inches. The wound didn't look like any knife wound Drake had ever seen. The edges were blackened and already beginning to fester. Angry red streaks extended outward from the gangrenous margins for several inches. Something was very wrong.

"That wound is infected." Drake pushed closer. "Let me at least take a loo—"

"No," Sylvan lashed back.

Then Drake heard a sound unlike anything she'd ever heard before—not a snarl, not a growl. A deep, resonant rumble filled with pure animal fury. The air around Sylvan Mir shimmered, and a surge of energy skittered over Drake's skin. Her breath caught in her chest as Drake tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Sylvan held Misha facedown on the bed with one hand clamped around the back of her neck. Her other hand was no longer a hand, but an elongated appendage with inch-long, razor-sharp claws. Before Drake could force her own limbs to move again, Sylvan plunged her claws into the girl's shoulder.

Misha screamed.