

## CHAPTER 28: BEARS

Frances was awakened an hour later by Beth calling her name. She'd been dreaming about porcupines, and she quickly sat up to check her body for quills. She sighed relief to find herself fully human. Beth laughed. "Everything where it's supposed to be?"

Frances smiled. "Yes, for once."

"It's time for dinner," said Beth, and they both climbed out of the tent. The sun was just beginning to dip below the tops of the trees.

As soon as she smelled the food, Frances realized she was starving. Two loaded baked potatoes and three grilled corn cobs later, Max came around with a trash bag as Fletcher stood and stretched. "Right!" he said loudly indicating for the group to stop talking. "Who's ready for Capture-the-Flag?"

There were a few "yays" and "yeahs" from the campers as they all finished depositing their trash in the bag and cleaning their hands with wet-naps. "Right," Fletcher repeated. "Now, just as important as it is for you to practice shifting, it's vital that you practice *not* shifting." He turned his attention toward the younger shifters to his left. "You'll feel many times, especially once you're more experienced, that it would be easier to accomplish something by shapeshifting, rather than by staying fully human. For example, when competing against normals in athletics, or, er, if you need to reach the television remote without getting off your lazy arse."

Chuckles ran throughout the group as he continued. "But more often than not, you'll be in situations where you *must not shift* for fear of exposing yourselves to normals. So, this is a normal, human game of Capture-the-Flag. No shifting allowed, and anyone caught shifting will be out for the game, understood?"

Everyone nodded enthusiastically. Mary Ellen spoke next, holding a sheet of notebook paper. “The teams are as follows. (No trades!) Fletcher’s team – Brigid, Gray, Frances, Denny, Carrie, Nick, and Kiera. My team – Beth, Isaac, Eric, Jerry, Clara, Max, and Ben.” She then went over the rules for anyone who didn’t know them or needed a recap while Fletcher passed out flashlights. “This area around the fire pit is neutral territory if you need a quick drink or to change your flashlight batteries,” she concluded. “Any questions?”

There weren’t any questions, so each team left to set up a “jail” on either end of the clearing using wooden stakes and some twine. They then disappeared into the woods to hide the flags. Barely a sliver of moon shown in the now darkened sky, so each flag was attached to a large glow-stick. Fletcher’s team walked a good distance through the thick underbrush to place their flag in a small hole in a pine tree about six feet off the ground. The bright green glow-stick hung against the side of the tree.

Frances, Kiera, and Nick were given the job of staying near the flag to catch anyone from the opposing team who made it this far into their territory. As the three of them spread out to find hiding spots, the rest of the group made their way back toward the clearing.

“I’m going to move up to half-way between the here and the edge of the clearing,” said Nick. “I’ll be able to hear if you call me.”

Frances and Kiera crouched behind some bushes a few feet away from each other, whispering small talk to remind themselves that they weren’t totally alone in the darkness. They seemed to wait an awfully long time without seeing or hearing anyone else. Frances had never played a serious game of Capture the Flag before, but so far, she was finding it a little boring. She was about to point this out to Kiera when she heard a rustling behind her. She and Kiera both froze and waited for more sounds. A few seconds later, a twig snapped loudly, and Frances

stood and spun around, frantically waving her flashlight in front of her. She caught movement to her right and shined the light on someone's elbow, which was sticking out from behind a large oak tree.

Frances snickered as Kiera stepped beside her. Without speaking, Frances nudged Kiera and pointed to the elbow. She then motioned for Kiera to go around the tree on the left side, so they might surround their enemy before he realized they'd spotted him. As Kiera began moving quietly around the tree, Frances said, "We can see your elbow."

The elbow immediately vanished behind the tree. Frances laughed. "You might as well come out. We've got you surrounded."

Eric appeared, along with his flashlight, which he shined directly into Frances' face. When Frances raised an arm to shield her eyes from the glare, Eric took a step backward, turned, and ran. Kiera started after him, but she tripped, and when she landed against the trunk of the tree, Isaac flew by her and ran in the opposite direction. Kiera quickly regained her composure and took off after Isaac. "I've got him," she shouted behind her. "You get the other one!"

Frances pointed her flashlight through the trees in the direction Eric had gone. She could see him just a few yards ahead, struggling to get through some thorny bushes. She raced after him, but just as she was about to tag him on the shoulder, he jerked his pant-leg away from a branch and leapt forward, just out of her reach. Frances made a wide circle around the bushes that had given Eric so much trouble. She continued following him as fast as she could until she realized they seemed to be moving deep into the woods and away from the campsite. She slowed down, shining her flashlight through the thick trees. She could still see Eric's back between the trees about ten yards ahead. "Eric! Stop!" she called, breathing heavily. "We're getting... too far away... from camp!"

She stood still, trying to catch her breath and listening for sounds indicating Eric might be moving back in her direction. She'd lost sight of him a second before she'd called for him to stop. She pointed her light at the space where she'd last seen him and strained her ears. She saw no movement; she heard no sounds. She quickly took up the chase once again, this time trying only to get within hearing distance of Eric so she could tell him to come back.

After another minute of stumbling through the forest, Frances spotted Eric up ahead as he squeezed between two very close-together trees. "Eric!" she yelled loudly and hoarsely.

Eric finally stopped and turned to face her. Frances was so out-of-breath by this point, all she could say was "Time Out!" so he would wait for her to slowly catch up with him.

As Frances approached, Eric looked around and finally seemed to realize that he'd been running in the wrong direction. "I think... this isn't... the way... to base," he said between his own quick breaths.

"That's what I was... trying to tell you... way back there," said Frances, swinging her flashlight behind her for emphasis.

"So should I just start running... back the other way? Are you going to keep chasing me?"

"How about we call a truce until we get back to the clearing?" Frances suggested.

"Alright," said Eric. "Lead the way."

Frances turned and said, "We came in a straight line through there, right?" But when she raised her flashlight to point the way, she saw branches moving in the distance as if someone had just brushed past them. "Someone's there," she whispered.

"Just tell them we're in a time-out," Eric whispered back.

Frances held her flashlight beam on the spot where she'd seen movement. After a few seconds, she called, "If someone's over there, it's just Frances and Eric." She waited another moment, but saw nothing. "Maybe I was just seeing things," she said to Eric.

"No, listen," said Eric quietly. "I hear something."

Frances listened, still holding the flashlight straight ahead. She heard a rustling a little to the right. It sounded a lot closer than where she had first seen the branches move. She slowly moved the light in the direction of the sound and swallowed, trying to suppress the uneasy feeling that was creeping into her throat. "We, uh, we're in a time-out," she said nervously. When the light caught movement again, this time only a few yards away, Frances and Eric heard the crunch of several twigs and a distinctly animalistic snort.

There was another rustling in the bushes, and then, directly in the light of the flashlight beam, the large, black head of a bear appeared. The bear snarled at the light and pushed through the bushes, crushing them noisily. Frances backed into Eric, who backed into a tree. They both dropped their flashlights as they tripped over each other trying to find an exit route. The bear roared and began to charge. Frances grabbed one of the flashlights and quickly spotted an opening between two trees. She got to her feet, pulled Eric off the ground by his shirt, and screamed, "Run!"

They stumbled through the woods as quickly as possible for several minutes. Frances didn't dare look back, for she could still hear the bear's huffs and roars. It was not far behind them. The trees were beginning to thin out a little, and when Frances, who was still in the lead, shined her flashlight ahead, she thought she saw a small clearing. "A clearing!" she said. "We... can... outrun... it! Circle... back! Get... help!"

They picked up speed as they approached the clearing, and right at the edge of the woods Frances spotted a large root sticking so far out of the ground, it created a tiny bridge. She jumped it and began to sprint to the other side of the clearing. But Eric didn't see the root. His foot got caught in the opening, and he crashed to the ground, landing hard on his chest and face. For a second, the wind was taken right out of him. But as soon as he caught his breath, he howled in pain.

Frances was nearly to the opposite edge of the woods when she heard him. She spun around and frantically waved her flashlight to search for him. When the light found Eric, he was huddled on the ground, clutching his injured ankle. And the bear was three feet away, standing on its hind legs with its front claws high in the air.

Frances experienced a moment of panic before she remembered she was a shapeshifter. Now it seemed ridiculous that she'd ever run from the bear in the first place. She ran back in Eric's direction, and she was about to go full-rhino on the bear when she suddenly realized two things simultaneously: that she could hear the soft buzzing of shifted molecules and that the bear seemed to be spending more energy making a noisy show of being terrifying than of actually attacking Eric.

Frances slowed her pace and listened. The buzzing was definitely getting louder as she got closer to the bear. She watched the bear as it stomped and huffed and snarled and waved its bear arms enthusiastically in the air. But it never got any closer to Eric.

"Hey!" she yelled to the bear. "This isn't funny!"

The bear turned its attention to Frances and took a few steps in her direction. Frances continued walking toward it until she was standing beside Eric. "Who are you?" she demanded.

The bear roared fiercely and dropped down to all fours. He stomped a few steps closer.

“Frances!” shouted Eric, now sobbing. “What are you doing?”

“It’s a shifter,” she said. “One of our friends playing a not-funny joke.”

The bear was now so close that, when it roared, drops of its saliva flew in every direction and landed on both Eric and Frances.

“Are... are you sure?” Eric said, his eyes still on the bear.

Before Frances could respond, she heard another roar behind her. She spun around and found herself face-to-face with a second bear, this one even larger than the first. She and Eric were now sandwiched between the two beasts, and though Frances could hear the buzzing of shifted molecules on either side of her, her confidence was beginning to wane. When the second bear pushed off the ground with its front paws and stood on its hind legs, towering at least nine feet in the air, Frances realized that it didn’t matter if these were shifter bears or not – they were not friends.

The larger bear raised a sharply clawed paw in the air as if it was about to strike, and Frances desperately tried to think of a helpful shift. Suddenly there was a loud screech from above, and Frances, Eric, and both bears glanced upward into the darkness. A large hawk swooped into the light of the flashlight and began clawing at the larger bear’s face with its sharp talons. Frances dropped to the ground to avoid the bird’s giant, beating wings. The bear fought back, swiping at the hawk with its claws, but for the first few moments, the hawk seemed to be winning. Frances glanced back at the first bear, who had backed up to the edge of the woods. It looked nervously between the battle and the trees as if trying to decide whether to help its bear friend or to run for it.

Out of immediate danger for the moment, Frances regained a little of her courage. She looked at Eric and said loudly over the bear's snarls and the hawk's screeches, "Can you get up?"

"I don't know," Eric shouted back. He tried putting a little pressure on his injured ankle and winced. "I... I don't think so."

There was a thud next to them. The bear had fallen to the ground as the hawk continued to attack. The bear was a yard away, and Frances suddenly felt a surge of electric power flow through her, just like that day at the bookstore. It started at the top of her spine, then extended through her back and down her legs and into her arms, but this time, when the sparks flared between her fingers, she somehow knew what to do with them. She quickly dropped her flashlight, rolled over, grabbed one of the bear's flailing feet with both her hands, and gripped it as tightly as she could.

Immediately the bear stopped moving. The hawk fluttered back and landed a few feet away. Frances' newfound power was pulsing through every muscle, every bone, every cell, and she focused it all through her hands and into the bear. The bear whose foot was beginning to change.

Eric picked up the discarded flashlight and shined the light on Frances and the bear. The fur on the bear's foot had disappeared, and smooth skin had replaced it. The claws had changed to toenails attached to stubby human toes. As Frances continued squeezing the now fully human foot, the change began to spread up the shifter-bear's leg. The shifter began to convulse, kicking both legs violently, and Frances lost her grip. But she had apparently held on long enough because the bear continued to shift, now quickly and quite violently, into human form. The shifter shook and coughed and rolled around and wailed in pain and curled up into the fetal

position, and, just as the shift completed, he scrambled onto his knees and vomited. When he finished he looked at Frances and shouted angrily, “What did you do to me?”

Eric shined the light onto the sallow and horrified face of a teenager, 18 or 19 years old. Frances thought he looked familiar, but she couldn’t place him. The guy looked behind Frances and Eric, and when Eric shined the flashlight on the place where the first bear had been standing, all they saw was the back of the bear as it ran away into the woods. He turned the flashlight back toward the naked guy, but the guy had gotten up and also started running away in the opposite direction, his white buttocks glaring in the bright light.

“Uh, Frances?” said Eric.

“Yeah,” Frances replied, standing and brushing the dirt off her jeans.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to be able to do that.”