

FOREVER MATE SERIES



HER ETERNAL  
MATE

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Her Eternal Mate  
Rejected Mate Second Chance Vampire  
Paranormal Werewolf Romance  
Forever Mate Series  
(Book 3)  
Jaymin Snow

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# Chapter 1

Alexis

“This is a nightmare.”

Those words had only just left Will’s mouth when I saw the scene for what it really was—a herald of doom. A crimson moon was suspended low in the sky with many sepulchral clouds enveloping it. Against this red light, the shadows that lay claim to the sky flew from the direction of the cove toward the commune.

I had known that Ralph could fly. But the fact that every vampire possessed the capability to do so was new to me. It was a terrible sight to behold, all of them with their flapping coats looking like giant wingspans of bats descending upon the commune as if they were airborne soldiers coming here to lay siege.

“Brace yourselves!” Will screamed as he headed out the door and into the street. Suddenly, I could see him as the man who had led the charge of his pack during the second world war. He looked so sure, so adamant, unflinching in the face of fear.

Around us, streamers, balloons, flowers, and decorations that Vince had arranged for the party lay in tatters all around as the pack members ran about, trampling them. But when Will came into the fray, the pack members quickly regained their confidence now that their alpha was here. They gathered

around him as he stared his enemy down.

At that exact moment, the night boomed with thunder, and lightning shone across the black canvas of the sky, revealing rain clouds across the horizon. The first raindrops fell on my face as the thunder growled loudly overhead. It was a scene to behold, Will and the pack behind him bracing for the fight ahead as the vampires descended into the clearing.

I knew this would happen. I had always understood that the vampires would never accept a defeat so submissively. When Ralph fell, the vampires ran away. Their swiftness had suggested that they had, in fact, retreated instead of running away. Biding their time in the shadows, they sought a new leader who could reassemble them and help them get their vengeance. From the looks of it, they had found their leader. Unlike the clothes the vampires wore back when they were under Ralph's leadership, they were wearing garbs that resembled bloodthirsty barbarians.

Ralph's style had been along the lines of Count Dracula meets the modern world, complete with black leather coats and black pants with black shirts. Very suburban gothic. However, now they were wearing wolf furs, and their faces had red handprints on them, signaling their bloodlust.

As someone who had lost a lot to the vampires, I knew them for the terrible ordeal that they were. They had killed my parents. For years after that, they barred the way leading out of the town, preventing me from escaping. Even after the vampires fell for the first time, back when Will killed Ralph, I knew it deep in my heart that sometime later, they would come back. Whether for vengeance or to reclaim their land, they would come back. They were not so easy to get rid of.

And now they had come back.

“Alexis! After me!” Will screamed at me from afar. I could barely make out what he was saying over the sound of the screams of the pack members, the thunder, the rain, and the shouts coming from the vampires as they landed on the field. It was battle-mayhem, all of it.

But the battle had not yet begun. None of the wolves had shifted so far, nor had any of the vampires drawn any blood. They stood on the other end of the field in a line, waiting for an emissary to come forth.

I joined Will along the ranks of the werewolves. We stood on the far end of the field, also in a line, waiting for their emissary. No one had ever written these rules down, but they had been passed down through the ages. Before a battle began, two messengers came bearing conditions from each side and relayed that information to each other.

A muscular, broad, tall, and bulky vampire, easily a foot and a half taller than the tallest of the vampires around him, came forward from the ranks wearing a wolf skull on his head and two gauntlets on these forearms made from bones. Even from afar, I could see his pointed teeth jutting out of his mouth as he sneered. As far as I knew, none of us had ever seen this vampire before. He wasn't built like a vampire. The more I looked at him, the more he resembled a bloodthirsty giant.

This vampire stomped his feet as he traversed the field and came to a standstill at the center. Will looked at me, then nodded silently as he headed out into the field. For a second, I considered staying behind and watching it all unfold in front of me. But that was not me. Ever since I had come into my own, I had taken charge of things. I had never been behind Will, and he

wouldn't have wanted me to be. He had seen that I was always alongside him, matching his stride.

So I joined him as he walked out into the field.

“What are you doing?” Will whispered.

“Two heads and all that,” I said, squeezing his hand. He gently squeezed it back.

“I've never seen this guy before. Do we even know who he is?” Will asked.

“I've crossed paths with plenty of vampires in this town. But I've never seen him before either. Even for a vampire, he seems unnatural,” I concurred.

“You are right. Vampires, by their nature, are thin, bleak, shadowy creatures, lithe on their feet and nimble in their moves. This agility serves them a singular purpose—to pounce upon their prey and suck them dry of their blood. But this vampire, he's humongous in size, taller than even I am,” Will said as we approached the goliath vampire standing smugly at the center of the field. This was the same field where all the werewolves trained and ran laps.

“He's just a big brute,” I said.

“I'm not worried about that at all. In fact, it would be exciting for me to face him in battle. I haven't had a real challenge in so long,” Will said. There was the Will I knew, the brave Will I loved with all my heart.

“Quite an awful night you picked for an ambush,” Will said. We stood just inches away from the tall vampire.

“This is not an ambush, little wolf,” the vampire said in a deep and growling



voice. “We have come for vengeance and to lay claim to this land as ours. For hundreds of years, the vampires have been using these shores for their business and travel. Until the wolves came. And now word has reached me that you have killed Ralph, the vampire assigned to this area. I have only come to make things right. An eye for an eye. You killed their leader. I kill you.”

“And who do you think you are that you can just come and kill Will without facing any resistance whatsoever? Do not take us wolves lightly. We smote down Ralph. You are nothing more than a hindrance,” I said.

“Do you let your woman speak for you?” the vampires spat.

“That is no mere woman. She is my mate and as strong a wolf as any. You should fear her if you know what’s good for you,” Will said.

“Tonight, all the fear that exists in this world falls in your share. Look at our numbers. Tonight, Griswold the Blood-Maddened will end this reign of wolves once and for all,” he said.

“Reign? What reign? This is about all the drugs you were smuggling, isn’t it?” Will asked.

“Correct. You wiped out merchandise worth millions. A loss this severe is not suffered passively. You must meet the consequences.”

“Very well, then,” Will said.

“And after I’m done with the wolves, I will lay siege to Fiddler’s Green and plunder the town dry. Tonight, there will not remain a single living soul in that festering dump of a town,” Griswold said.

“You will find your way barred. You shall not pass. You thought you came here for vengeance. You’ve come here for your doom,” I said. “Too long have we suffered under the shadow of fear cast by the vampires. For too long, they have controlled this town, its avenues, and its resources. You shall never harm a single soul in Fiddler’s Green again. If it’s a war you want, it’s a war you will have,” I said, turning around to head back to the pack.

“A war it is,” Griswold said and then howled in a shrill manner that raised all the hair on my arms. Behind me, I could hear the ground rumbling with the footsteps of stampeding vampires.

Will shifted into a wolf, staying at the center of the field, and met Griswold in battle. I headed back to the pack and addressed them all.

“The vampires think they can kill us and lay claim to our land. Let us show them how wrong they are!” I yelled. With my yell, all the werewolves cried their battle cries in unison and began shifting one by one. I waited for them to shift, then I shifted as well and led the charge on the vampires.

At the center of the field, Griswold clashed with Will, who was a force to be reckoned with in his feral form. The two lurched and pounced at each other, slashing, clawing, and tackling. Griswold was holding his own very well in the battle, blocking several of Will’s hits and inflicting some serious blows. But now that I was at the head of the charge, Griswold saw the werewolves approaching and backed away to the ranks of his vampires. Will joined us as we raced forward to meet the vampires head-on.

*He is powerful,* Will said.

*It does not matter. He is fighting for hate. We are fighting for our family. No power is stronger than the bond of love,* I said.

For a still moment, the vampires came at us, and we came at them, but none collided with each other. It was just the rain, the thunder, and the stampeding steps on the field.

And then chaos ensued as the werewolves clashed with the vampires. I was at the forefront with Will and Vince. We fell upon the vampires with our claws extended and our maws gaping. The first vampires fell under my blows and gave way for the werewolves to penetrate their defenses.

Wolves howled around me, vampires hissed, and the night contributed its fair share of a maddening din as the battle raged on. Will was once again engaged with Griswold, the two of them gripped in a fierce battle. I could see that Griswold was about to dominate Will, but at that ripe moment, Will re-emerged from under him and pinned him to the ground, tearing into his flesh. Griswold howled as Will tore into his torso, ripping apart his barbarian clothing and rending his skin.

Now that Will was upon him, Griswold did not seem intimidating at all. It was Will, with his domineering size and his feral posture, that seemed more fearsome. I focused my attention on the group of vampires who had suddenly surrounded me from all sides. I cast one more look around me to see what was happening before plunging into the fight myself. The werewolves were fewer in number, but they fought much more aggressively. And yet, despite that, vampires seemed to be coming out of the forest in an unending horde. For every vampire that fell, more took its place.

To level the playing field, I pounced upon the group that had surrounded me and brought them all down with one large swing of my claws. As my claws traveled their wide trajectory, they tore open the vampires, ripping out their entrails. There was so much blood on the battlefield, and the battle had only

just begun. And to think that merely an hour ago, I was enjoying a good night's sleep in the arms of my mate.

Just as I had suspected, more vampires took the place of the ones that had fallen, and now I found myself surrounded by fifteen vampires, all of whom thought they had me cornered. I was never one for monotony, so I decided to take them out in a different way. Instead of backing myself into a corner, I leaped on the nearest vampire and landed with my nimble feet on his shoulders. Then I bit down on his head and yanked it off as if it was nothing. From there, I pounced onto the next vampire, repeating the same routine till they were none left.

But this drew the attention of the rest of the vampires as they saw their brethren being beheaded by one lone wolf. Out came spears and their pistols on the battlefield, all of them pointed at me.

From atop my vantage point in the field, I could see that Will was still winning against Griswold, even though now five vampires were assisting Griswold. Vincent was charging into a group of vampires with ferocity. As for the rest of the wolves, this was their battlefield, a familiar ground where they had trained all their lives. They knew the lay of the land and were confident here more than they'd ever be anywhere else. It showed in their prowess in the battle as they overcame the vampires.

What had the vampires thought when they came here? That they'd find the wolves sleeping in their beds and silently assassinate them all? If so, they had severely underestimated the werewolves, and in doing so, they had affirmed their doom.

I spotted a group of five vampires who had gotten free from the main battle

and were furtively heading to the undefended commune. The women and children were still in the commune.

I shot like a dart across the field and overcut the vampires in their steps, coming between them and the commune. I knelt and growled, preparing myself for a jumping attack, when these vampires took out assault rifles from under their clothes.

In just a split moment, I ducked to my right as gunfire unleashed around me. As the bullets landed on the wet ground, dirt loosened and flew everywhere. In that haze, I arced around the vampires and came up behind them, more furious than ever. They had intended to go into the commune with these guns and kill the unarmed women and children. I dug my claws deep into their bodies before they'd even had a chance to turn around. It felt satisfying when I felt their hearts come to a dreadful halt as my claws clenched them. Of the five, only one survived, and he lay on the floor on his back, his assault rifle aimed at me.

I shifted into my human form and approached him, my face aglow with rage.

“Go ahead. Pull the trigger, you coward,” I said, walking up to him.

Perhaps it was that he'd seen what I'd done to his friends, or perhaps it was that he was now the last one standing; the vampire was frozen with fear, his fingers barely able to hold the gun steady.

Before he could pull the trigger, I grabbed the rifle and pulled it free from his grip.

“Only the spineless attack innocent women and children who aren't able to fend for themselves,” I said, pointing his gun at him. “But you will not find

undefended women and children at the commune. Not while I still draw breath.”

And with that, I pulled the trigger and emptied the magazine into the vampire’s chest, relishing the feeling of the bullets meeting his body, rendering it lifeless.

The battle was getting fiercer in the distance. A new swarm of vampires had just landed on the back of the field and were now joining their brethren, outnumbering the wolves. From afar, I could see that Griswold was no longer subdued. Now, he was gaining an advantage over Will with his reinforcements. It was clear that the vampires were not fighting fair.

But war was never fair.

I rejoined the fight after shifting into my wolf form once again. I knew where I had to go. To Will’s side. Once I traversed the sea of wolves and vampires and reached the other side to where Will was, I stood by his side, snarling at Griswold.

*He is relentless, Will said. I have been attacking him nonstop, but he seems to have an affinity for pain. He welcomes it instead of reeling from it.*

*Then let’s give him some more of that pain that he loves so much,* I said, and without warning, leaped on top of Griswold, digging my claws into his skull. To my surprise, his skull was thicker than the vampires that I’d beaten in battle earlier. My claws barely penetrated his skin before he grabbed me by the throat and threw me to the ground.

Griswold roared as he thrashed his fists to his chest and broke into a run toward me. Will intercepted him midway and caused him to trip over his feet.

Once again, Will overpowered Griswold by pinning him to the ground.

I recovered back to my feet and defended Will by driving away the vampires who had gathered around us. They clawed from afar, never daring to come nearer. There were too many of them to take on by myself. I counted at least twenty.

Suddenly, there was a fierce howl behind me, and I saw Vince, with a couple of werewolves, coming to our aid.

Together, Vince and the werewolves lunged at the vampires surrounding Will and me and evened the odds on the battlefield.

# Chapter 2

Will

This battle was pushing me to my limits. I had never come across such a foe as Griswold in my entire life. He seemed to have an unending penchant for violence. The more I inflicted injuries on him, the more he endured them. They seemed to be giving him some sort of maniacal strength. Even now, as I had pinned him to the ground, he seemed to be going berserk with every strike I inflicted upon his body. It was only a matter of time before he'd get back up, spit out some blood, and resume the fight as if nothing had happened.

As if all my blows meant nothing.

Just as I had suspected, he got back up on his feet, roaring like a lion, and grabbed me by the fur. I bit into his hand, my teeth touching his bone, drawing blood. It was as if Griswold had no nerves sending pain signals into his body. He didn't even flinch or wince as I bit down on his hand. Instead, he grabbed me harder and threw me in the air.

But he had overestimated his throw. I was in my feral form, and I was just as heavy as Griswold, if not heavier. Instead of being thrown into the air, I stood my ground, causing Griswold to lose his balance and fall yet again.

I knew better than to engage him in battle once again. He was deranged, and there was no use fighting someone as deranged as him. But I could not leave



him alone. I had a fighting chance against him, but what about the other wolves? He'd kill them with just one blow.

Around me, Vince, Alexis, and the wolves were taking down the vampires who had gathered around us, leaving a clearing where Griswold and I stood circling each other, our eyes glaring into one another's, our bodies readying for the next bout of the fight.

"You fight like a much younger man, Will," Griswold said, spitting more blood from his mouth. "I'd have never assumed you were some old relic who had survived decades in a gloomy prison."

It didn't matter that he knew all these things about me. All that mattered was that I couldn't let him or his vampires win because doing so would mean surrendering the commune to him and allowing him to brutalize all those who lived there. From there, he'd make his way to the town and kill innocent civilians.

As if I could allow that to happen.

There had to be another way. Right now, the vampires were too close to the commune. If the wolves showed even the slightest weakness, the vampires would take the chance and attack the commune, and from there, they'd go down to the town.

*We have to get them into the forest,* I said to Alexis.

*Why the forest?* She asked.

*Because that would break their strength, right now, they have strength in numbers. In the forest, they would not be able to swarm or see around them. They'd be isolated and easier to take on. The wolves will be better able to*

*fight there, I said.*

*But how can we drive them to the forest?*

*You leave that to me, I said.*

I growled at Griswold, knowing he'd take it as a challenge yet again. He mimicked my growl and pounded his foot on the ground, preparing to tackle me. There was one disadvantage to his lumbering size. It was hard for him to stop once he started moving.

Now that I had baited him, he ran in my direction. It just so happened that I was standing in front of the forest. I was faster than him. He trampled the ground as he raced after me, heading deep into the forest. I quickly lunged to the side once the first of the trees came into view and watched as Griswold bumped against the tree and fell on his knees, his head spinning, his movement disconcerted.

The vampires came after their leader in droves, filling in the empty spaces of the forest surrounding us all. But this is exactly what I had intended. Now that they were no longer in the open, it was easier for us to overwhelm them, confound them, and take them apart one by one.

It was as if the wolves already knew what they had to do. All around me, the vampires began disappearing into the groves one by one as wolves picked them up and assassinated them.

“Get out of the woods, you fools!” Griswold yelled but to no avail. Even though the vampires were greater in number, we had the element of surprise and were making good use of it.

Alexis had taken to the trees and was atop the branches. She lunged at the

vampires below her, killed them, then went back up in the trees. It was an effective strategy that was working wonders for her. As for Vince, he was darting between trees, slashing at the vampires as he moved, knocking them out with swiftness. The rest of the wolves had flooded the forest and were everywhere, surrounding the vampires from every direction.

That left the matter of Griswold to me. I had to end it now before it got out of hand.

“You think the forest will avail you? You are wrong. We are the sons of the forest. Not you,” Griswold said. “Long before the first werewolf had even stepped onto this country, the vampires were the denizens of these woods, preying on the people.”

This was just a bluff coming from him. He could already see, just as I could, that being driven into the forest had thrown the vampires. Their numbers were being reduced significantly by the werewolves, who were better attuned to the ways of the woods.

I jumped in the air, ricocheted off the tree nearest me, and collided with Griswold’s upper body, causing him to topple and hit a tree behind him. He was so huge that the tree shook when Griswold collided with it. Instead of reeling away from me, Griswold tore off a large branch and brandished it in front of me like a spear. I leaped yet again, this time landing on top of the branch and using it as leverage to pounce further and claw out Griswold’s face.

My attack was successful as I dug my claw into his face and tore out one of his eyes. Griswold howled in pain and fell to his knees, his hands holding his bloodied face. Upon seeing their leader fall, the vampires halted for a

moment.

However, Griswold was not deterred by the lack of one eye. Instead, he wiped the blood off his face and yelled furiously as he charged at me. I didn't have enough time to recover from my attack. Griswold's body hit mine and threw me into the air. I was flung over the canopy, and the wind drove out of my chest. Upon landing, I struggled to breathe, but Griswold grabbed my legs and pulled me toward him before I could recollect myself.

I shifted back to my human form to get free from his death grip. Once I'd turned back human, I stood up, holding my chest, and recovered my breath.

"You fight admirably, Wilhelm," Griswold said. "Let it be known that I commend your efforts and that I hold you in great regard as a valiant opponent. But all your valor and courage are for naught."

"I'm not the one who just lost an eye and half of his men," I said. "I don't even need to be in my wolf form to beat you."

*Will, what are you doing? He's twice your size.* Alexis called out.

*Don't worry. I've got this,* I reassured her. Of course, I was not going to fight him one-to-one. I could see that he towered over me. But that did not mean that I didn't have a plan. I intended to draw him away from the vampires and lure him out to the cove. With the element of surprise in my favor, I'd be able to kill him in the cove.

Before I could even think about enacting this strategy, Griswold's punch landed on my face. I remained on my feet, recovering quickly from the punch and realizing at the same time that my strategy would never work. He was too fast, too aggressive.

Instead, I lifted my hands and rolled them into fists.

“Come on, then!” I said, beckoning him to fight me.

“Are you kidding me?” Griswold laughed.

He was not laughing anymore when I landed a hard punch on his face and caused him to howl in pain. I’d just hit where his eye used to be. I wasn’t above the odd low blow, especially not when it came to defending my land.

Griswold grabbed me all of a sudden in a bear hug and threw himself off the cliff side in the woods. He did this with such swiftness that, at first, I did not even comprehend what had happened. But as we fell from the cliff, I quickly repositioned myself on top of him and let him take the brunt of the fall. He fell with a loud thud and stayed there motionless, an eyeless monstrosity with bulging muscles.

I looked up and saw that both of us were at least twenty feet below the main fight. It was much more silent here, and the rainwater hadn’t reached the deep recesses of this drop. The ground was dry and vast in front of me. Behind me, there was a small cave on the side of the cliff.

Somehow, in all the time that I had spent in the forest, I had never come across this place before.

Griswold was now stirring from his unconsciousness. He woke up with a start, growling as he sat up, rubbing his hands on his head.

“You took me for a fool,” I said. “You thought that I’d not defend my people?”

“The same people that handed you over to the Occultist? Why does your

loyalty lie with them?” Griswold asked as he got up on his feet. I was surprised at the level of nuance he was showing despite the injuries he bore. Perhaps, after all, he was a worthy adversary.

“The sins of the father are not for the children to bear. Whatever Fred did was on him and him alone. His grandson fights alongside me as dearly and bravely as any loyal pack member,” I said, advancing on him with my fists raised.

“You and your pack have shown some resolve. Pity it won’t be enough for what lies ahead,” Griswold said. “I have traveled across oceans and continents for vengeance against my kin. I shall not surrender so lightly.”

“Ralph was your brother?”

“No,” Griswold said, shaking his head. As he shook his head, blood dripped from his eyeless socket on the forest floor. “He was my father.”

I had never considered that someone such as Griswold could come from someone like Ralph. Ralph was short, long, and lean. Completely the opposite of what Griswold was. Was this vampire lying?

“It is unbelievable,” I said.

“That I could be his child? I agree. But that’s not the contested truth here. It’s common knowledge. My father was an eager traveler at a young age, and when he was traveling the world, he fell in love with a Serbian vampire. I am their child. And I have come to claim what’s rightfully mine,” Griswold said.

“Even if that is true, you cannot just come here and ask for something that’s not yours. Your father did terrible things in the name of his business. I will say it again. The sins of the father are not for the child to bear. You can still

repent. You can go back. Stop this madness. Let us live in peace, and we shall leave you alone,” I only said this because I wanted to make sure that I had explored all avenues before ending his life. Perhaps he’d be able to see some sense and understand that this was for his betterment. Perhaps he'd even stop fighting.

“Repent? Sins? Go back? You must be one hell of a crazy wolf to think that I’d back away from this fight!” Griswold yelled and came charging at me. But because he had only one eye remaining, his perception of depth was all fucked up, and instead of crashing into me, he crashed into the cave entrance.

“Suit yourself,” I said and shifted into my wolf form. I had grown weary of fighting him and seeing him get back up. In its own way, this was very courageous and admirable of him, but for my pack, my commune, and my town, it was very jarring. I needed to kill him quickly so that this battle would end.

Using my agility, I climbed up the cliff side. Instead of climbing after me, Griswold soared through the air, reaching to me with his extended arms. I made it past the cliff’s edge just in time to avoid his snare.

Back on the battlefield, I could see that the werewolves outnumbered the vampires. The vampires who had survived were fleeing into the back of the forest.

“Don’t run, you fools!” Griswold yelled. “Fight till your last breath!”

It was as if he was controlling them with his mind. The moment he uttered those words, the vampires lost their impulse to run away and instead gathered around Griswold.

As if to reciprocate them to show that we lacked none of the teamwork and unity that they possessed, all the wolves quickly came and gathered around me, growling at the vampires from afar.

“It was folly for you to think that this was my true strength,” Griswold said. “This is my true strength.” Then he raised his fists in the air and screeched like a bat. It was as if the reinforcements were waiting for this signal because, at that exact moment, another fresh horde of vampires came from above, below, and the sides, joining the fight.

Our numbers were now once again fewer than the vampires.

“Where will you run now, little wolves?” Griswold laughed. “The time of the wolves has now come to an end. Now comes the era of the vampires.”

The vampires began hooting, shouting, and hollering upon this, many of them raising their guns in the air and shooting airborne bullets, thinking that they’d already won.

And then, out of nowhere, a pack of werewolves tore through the forest and howled as they came behind me and gathered with the rest of the group.

It was a sight that moved me deeply. They were the women and children of the pack who had come to join their fellow men in the battle for Fiddler’s Green. Suddenly, this raised the stakes even higher than before. Now, it was a question of their lives as well as the lives of the townspeople.

I shifted back into my human form, not wanting this to escalate any further.

“Griswold, we both have the forces, the numbers, and the will to wage a perpetual war against each other. But why do we have to waste so much blood? Why not duke it out like men? You and me? The winner keeps the



land. The one who loses leaves the others alone.”

“What do you say?” Griswold yelled as he raised his arms and asked his vampires. They all shouted in affirmation. “Very well, then, Wilhelm Grimm. Your wish is fulfilled.”

A circle formed around the both of us, half of it comprised the wolves, and the other half was made up of vampires. At the center of the circle, I stood with Griswold staring down at me.

*Will, don't do this. There's something very unnatural about this vampire. He seems to be invincible,* Alexis called out to me.

*He's not invincible, Lexie. I took his eye out. He bleeds like the rest of them. If he bleeds, I can kill him,* I assured her.

But she was right. There was something unnatural about Griswold. Maybe, he had worked with Blair, and the two of them had come up with some form of a serum that had granted Griswold so much strength. I intended to find out.

“Tell me something, Griswold,” I said, walking in circles. “How long have you been conspiring with Blair?”

The shock was clear in his one remaining eye. It was as if I had caught him red-handed.

“You may be a vampire, but you are not a natural one by any definition. I should know I am not a natural werewolf. I was poisoned for decades with different substances. I can now recognize someone who has been altered by chemicals. And from the way you have fought, it's clear that you have had some help,” I said.

“You are very astute, but that wisdom is not going to save you,” Griswold said. “Uncle Blair gave me the strength I needed to come to fight you. And it’s thanks to him that I shall crush you like a little bug.”

“Blair could not help your father. He can’t help you either,” I said, once again shifting into my wolf form and charging at Griswold. Now that I knew his secret, I knew his weakness, and I would utilize it well.

# Chapter 3

Alexis

I could already see that there was no end to this battle if the two of them kept at it. It was like an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. Regardless of whether Will was the unstoppable force or the immovable object, I could see that he had tapped into his latent rage and strength and was not going to give up, even if it meant his demise.

I could just as well observe that for Griswold, this was not simply a matter of fighting over territory; this was about his legacy. He was willing to die for it, and so were the vampires that he was leading. I had never considered vampires to be so cause-driven. Seeing them in such spirits, falling for their fallen leader, made me think that there was perhaps more nuance to them than met the eye.

But what could I do? In the face of these odds, faced with a horde of vampires who had now grown more reliant upon their weapons, given that they were in close quarters in the forest, I could see no route leading to our redemption save one.

Kill Griswold.

Seeing him fall would break the vampire's spirits.

There was just the matter of Griswold being surrounded by his loyal

comrades. There was no way in.

*Will, we can end this madness if we kill Griswold,* I called out to Will.

*What do you think I've been trying to do for the past hour?* Will replied. *He's a mutated entity, one lacking fear and all manners of inhibition. Whatever Blair injected him with is working wonders on him.*

*Yes, but don't you think that there has to be a downside to all the chemicals that are running through his veins?* I knew from experience, having lived with a man who had been driven to the brink of insanity and death because of the chemicals that he was poisoned with. Whatever concoction was working its magic on Griswold had to have some sort of side effects.

*His stamina, he's overexerted himself. His body is showing signs of wear and tear. He's overdrawing strength from where there is none. If pushed just a little further, he will collapse,* Will said.

*Then let's do that, shall we?*

*We shall do nothing of the sort. I have singled him out. It's only fitting that I defeat him alone,* Will insisted firmly. *But I need you to handle the vampires if things get out of hand. They wouldn't want to see their leader fall. When the levees break, go berserk on the vampires.*

*Roger that,* I said, getting ready to pounce upon the vampires should they retaliate. For now, they held the circle that had been formed around Will and Griswold. The way Griswold lingered, spear in hand, eyeless, fierce, and bleeding, he looked like some form of a grotesque character straight out of a nightmare. The fact that Will had been so bravely fighting him and continued to do so was admirable, at the very least. I could feel my respect and love for

him growing in my heart. He deserved to be our Alpha.

The two combatants stopped circling each other. Will initiated the attack by leaping on Griswold and clawing the spear free from his grasp. Already eyeless, Griswold scampered around, searching for the spear with his one remaining eye but finding it impossible to do so because Will kept attacking him.

Griswold roared loudly and kicked Will. Will swiftly dodged it. At the same time, when he landed, Will kicked away the spear into the werewolf's side of the crowd. Griswold, now panting loudly, tore off his clothes and stood there shirtless. His body bore many bruises, cuts, and scars. Some were not recent, giving me a greater understanding of who Griswold was. He was a mercenary, a fighter who had made it his singular purpose in life to get into brawls and come out on the other side, bruised but victorious.

However, Will had scars to match as well. And I knew this about Will that he had never backed away from a fight even when all the odds were against him.

The vampires were growing restless from observing Griswold take a brutal beating. But they did not dare attack as long as the werewolves held their side of the circle. The vampires hissed and flailed their weapons threateningly, but that was all they could do. At least now, the wolves and the vampires were evenly matched in numbers. This was the last leg of the battle, this much was certain, and it all depended on the outcome of the match taking place in front of us.

The match where Griswold was now on his knees, his skin breaking into a sweat as his reserves of stamina gave away and forced him to go on the defensive. He threw rocks at Will half-heartedly, all of which Will dodged as

he raced towards Griswold in a zigzag, increasing his speed as he drew nearer. At the last second, Will pounced off the ground and tackled Griswold, causing him to topple and fall. The larger-than-life vampire stayed there on the ground, acknowledging his defeat.

Will shifted back into his human form and stood towering over Griswold's defeated body.

"I hope that clears things up," Will said. "I have beaten you fair and square. This could very well have ended in murder, but I am choosing to end it here. Leave with your vampires and never return to this area again. In this case, we will not seek you out nor will we harm you. Should you and any of the vampires ever come back, you will meet with nothing but your deaths. Agreed?" Will extended his hand to Griswold, who begrudgingly took it and yanked himself off the floor.

"You drive a hard bargain," Griswold growled. "But it is a fair one. I agree. We shall never step foot in this realm again."

Will turned his back and started walking to where Griswold's spear had fallen, presumably to hand it back to him. But in that instant, Griswold threw his arm forward in a fast arc and tried to attack Will on his undefended back. Will turned immediately, lifting Griswold's spear off the ground. And so it was Griswold's momentum that caused him to become impaled on his own spear.

For a moment, everyone stood still and silent, even Griswold. Will stood with the spear in both hands and on top of that spear, Griswold was skewered and bleeding and groping.

He tried to utter something, but only blood came out of his mouth in spurts.

Griswold slid further down till he was practically wedged against Will. Will let go of the spear, allowing it and Griswold to fall to the ground.

It was at this second that I knew what I had to do. The vampires, having just seen their leader fall to his death so suddenly, lost all control and tried to rush forward and surround Will. Instead, they came face to face with the front most rank of the werewolves barring their way. I led the rank, closing around the vampires and making them back off. When they saw that they were leaderless and outnumbered, they began to retreat.

*We cannot let them leave, Will, I said. This is now or never. If we don't end them and their bloodlines tonight, they will perpetually come back with more and more numbers bent on revenge. We have to kill them before they escape.*

He looked into my eyes and understood the gravity of the situation, immediately shifting back into his wolf form and chasing the vampires alongside me and the rest of the wolves. We could all see that the vampires had given up all hope from the way they were running and leaving their weapons behind. They could have made a stand, but they didn't.

With Vince and Will by my side, I led the charge on the retreating vampires. It was their fault that we were hunting them. Will had extended them a treaty. Griswold had chosen to attack Will behind his back. Will killed Griswold only in self-defense. All of the fault lay on the vampires' side.

And it was with this thought that I hunted them as they fled through the forest. The wolves cornered them down and began slashing away at them, killing them one by one as the night deepened and the trail of the vampires became more and more scattered.

Even in defeat, they were heading somewhere. There seemed to be some

secretive location they were all holed up in. It was this place that they had been using as their base of operations after the cove and the cave had fallen. It was a most opportune move that we were chasing them; now we could find out where they had been hiding and smite them there.

As the chase progressed and the vampires picked up speed, I understood that it wasn't in any cove or cave that they were hiding. It was in an abandoned ship floating off the bay. It was derelict wreckage, half sunk in the shallow water. The vampires began flying in the air and across the bay onto the boat.

*What do they think they're going to do? It's not as if there's anywhere they can go from there,* Will resounded in my mind.

*Be that as it may, we have to finish them, or this epidemic will turn into a pandemic within no time.*

Will concurred. He dove into the water, and I followed. The rest of the werewolves also jumped into the shallow bay water behind us, all of us swimming towards that giant ship wreckage. In another life, this ship used to be one of the biggest freight containers that carried cargo from Europe to America. Now it was a haunted ruin host to the remaining vampires.

We saw right away why it was that the vampires had chosen to retreat here with such haste. As I swam nearer to the wreck, I discovered that it was more than just an empty husk of a once-functional ship. It was armed to the teeth with guns and turrets installed on every nook and surface that hadn't gone underwater. The vampires, even though they were without a leader, had decided that they would not go down without one final fight.

A fight that we wouldn't give them.



Under Will's direction, the wolves swam underwater and, instead of approaching the ship from the front, bypassed it and swam under it to where the submerged part was. Here, I swam up the long vessel's length and came above water inside an undefended part of the ship, a part that the vampires had overlooked. They were all still standing facing the bayside, hoping that we'd emerge and they'd rain fire upon us.

Will climbed up behind me, and following him, all the remaining werewolves did so too. We still had the element of surprise on our side. The inside of this ship was as long as it was broad. There were beams of moonlight coming from where the metal had chipped off and from where the windows once used to be. In this moonlight, we headed up the desolated wreckage and came up behind the vampires stealthily.

They realized we were there a bit too late. Before they could turn their turrets and guns around, the wolves were upon them. I took charge and dismantled the most prominent turret in front of me so that no vampire would get behind it and unleash fire upon the wolves. I could spot Vincent and Will doing the same to the other guns on the deck.

As for the werewolves, they broke upon the vampires like a tsunami wave, killing the vampires where they stood, not giving them a chance to fight back. I joined the fray and broke the remaining ranks of the vampires, tackling them and snatching away their guns from them. I could not afford any vampires shooting at the wolves. Now more than ever, the werewolves felt like family to me—a family united by a common cause and a strong patriarch who is also destined to be my mate.

Now that the vampires were being taken care of, I slipped to the side and shifted back into my human form for one final task. The most important task,

perhaps. Vampires, I had learned, were a lot like vermin or other pests. They operated out of a base. Take away the base, and they were left with nothing. For this to work, I'd have to destroy their ship. This very ship that we were all standing on. Inside it, I had spotted tons of caches that were undoubtedly filled with drugs, weapons, and smuggled blood. This was their last reserve. I could tell from the way they had defended this shipwreck with weaponry.

As the final vampire fell, I headed down to the cache and found a crate containing TNT. I began placing the TNT equidistantly everywhere, heading from room to room, discovering that this ship was more than just their smuggling hotspot. There were labs within this ship, labs where they were testing on blood and drugs. Also within this derelict ship were the remnants of Ralph's legacy. One room had been built into a shrine with his paintings, clothes, and memorabilia. Presumably, the vampires came here to pay their respects to him.

After tonight, there would be no more fond remembrance of Ralph by any vampire.

Once I had strung TNT across the entire floor, I headed back to the top, where the wolves were waiting for me. They had all shifted back into their human forms. As had Will. Upon approaching them, I shifted back as well.

"We're going to blow this ship up," I said, addressing the wolves.

"Why? It's a perfectly good structure that we can put to our use," someone said from the crowd.

"Because," Will spoke on my behalf. "This is the vampire's lair. As long as it stands, the vampires can spawn nearby and come back to this place. This is not just their lair; this is their last resort for smuggling. Would any of you

want to see more vampires running around Fiddler's Green? No? Then I suggest we do what Alexis has suggested. We're going to evacuate this ship, and Alexis will blow it up. This is the way."

Murmurs of agreement traveled through the crowd as I lit the long end of the wire that had the dynamite connected to it.

"This ship is going to blow in five minutes," I said, calculating the time it'd take for the spark to reach the first stick of TNT below.

"Well, ladies and gents, I suggest we make a run for it," Vince said, and then, without waiting for anyone, he jumped headfirst into the water and swam towards the shore. When the rest of the pack saw him, they promptly jumped in behind him, all swimming behind each other, headed for the bay. Only Will and I remained on the ship.

"Did we do something rather extreme?" Will asked. "They had retreated. Was it fair that we killed them all?"

"Fair had nothing to do with it. They were vile creatures capable of extreme villainy. With his mouth, Griswold made the promise to surrender and retreat, while with his hand, he sought to strike you from behind. Ralph ran circles around the Grimm Abode for decades, trying to kill the wolves once and for all. They're vicious and malignant. Well, not anymore. Now they're all dead. We haven't done anything extreme," I said, reassuring Will.

"I concur," Will said, nodding. "If it weren't for the vampires, Fiddler's Green would have thrived long ago. Here's to hoping that now the city can flourish under the new mayor."

"I'd really love to continue this talk, my love, but we've got to jump because,

in less than two minutes, this ship is going to blow to kingdom come,” I said, breaking into a run, headed for the edge.

“Let’s see who swims faster,” Will said and then jumped off the boat.

“You’re on!” I shouted and jumped into the clear blue water.

We raced each other as we swam, passing the swimming pack members on either side. In the end, Will and I both reached the shore just a minute apart. He won, but that was expected. He was the alpha. The strongest of us all.

We all made it back to the shore in time to see the ship explode. By the time the last of the pack members had made it to land, the ship erupted into one humongous explosion that rose into the night sky, enveloping the clouds, the stars, and the moon in a plume of smoke, shadow, and flames.

“There it is, the end of the vampires as we know it,” Will said, holding my waist.

“The end of our longstanding foes,” I said.

All around us, the werewolves cheered as the explosion sank the ship to the bottom of the bay. The smoke dispersed eventually, leaving clear blue water in its wake. We could see the shipwreck at the bottom of the bay.

“I feel strange,” I said to Will.

“How so?”

“For the first time, now that there are no more vampires, I feel as if I’m getting closure over my parents’ death. I feel as if justice has been done,” I said, holding him close to me.

“And so it has,” Will said, facing me as he leaned closer to me and kissed me on my lips.

“Promise me this was the last of the vampires,” I whispered in his ears, mid-kiss.

“I promise,” Will said as he plucked my lips into his mouth and sucked them gently. “No more vampires.”

We held onto each other, embracing, kissing, and cherishing each other’s company as the crowd around us thinned and headed back to the commune. Tonight, I thought, I’d finally sleep peacefully.

# Chapter 4

Will

“Where are you taking me?” Alexis asked for the dozenth time in the past hour. Given that it was a surprise that I didn’t want to ruin it in any way, I chose not to reply with the most obvious answer.

And what was the most obvious answer? It was complex. This entire situation was one convoluted Gordian knot. It had been one whole week since we had defeated the vampires in that legendary battle. One whole week of pure peace and bliss in the commune and Fiddler’s Green. Spring had finally come, and it had done so with such splendor and color that the entire world looked like it had been painted green. Green leaves on all the trees as far as the eye could see. Green grass in the lawns, slopes, and meadows. Greenery in Fiddler’s Green, courtesy of the new mayor who had promised a cleaner Fiddler’s Green. Flowers bloomed in every direction, from the flowerbeds to the greenbelts between the roads. For the first time since I had arrived in this town, Fiddler’s Green felt like a fitting title for this place.

It had looked like heaven. The entire pack had been one happy family, partying, celebrating, and partaking in the many communal activities. Now that the threat of vampires was over, the kids of the pack played baseball and basketball outside of the commune’s bounds, using the green field to the left as a makeshift baseball pitch and using the deserted parking lot as a makeshift basketball court.

What was more surprising than this sudden cheery atmosphere all around the commune was the behavior of the townsfolk. In all my time in Fiddler's Green, I had never seen the people as friendly or amicable. They were all very businesslike, curt, and quiet. But not anymore. From the way they behaved, hugging and talking and laughing, it felt like a curse had been lifted off the land. Teenagers and people in their twenties were dancing in the streets and holding beach parties. Girls shopped at the only mall in town, drinking their shakes near the mall's fountain. The old men and women gathered around the town square, reading their papers, drinking their coffee, walking their long walks, and perusing the collection at the new library that had been opened by the new mayor.

What a change all that was. A remarkable change. The sky remained blue and spotless. The seawater was suddenly clearer, the sand on the beaches whiter. People seemed happy, and so did the entire place.

All except for Alexis, who seemed deeply troubled.

For the past week, she had refused to sleep. It wasn't for lack of trying on her part, either. She had gone to bed every single night, and every morning when I woke up from a very peaceful sleep, I'd find her sitting upright on her side of the bed, dark circles under her eyes denoting that she hadn't slept even one wink. Time and again, I asked her what had happened to her, and time and again, she answered with the same response: "I don't know."

It took some introspection on my behalf to reach a valid conclusion. Alexis was suffering. She had been through a lot, especially in the last few months, and as a result, she had developed emotional and mental trauma. What the shrinks these days called PTSD. After learning how to operate a computer, I'd now become a little bit fluent with how to use the internet and search

queries.

I found out that the symptoms of PTSD included being easily startled or frightened, always being on one's guard, self-destructive behavior, trouble sleeping, trouble concentrating, irritability, and guilt.

Alexis had been displaying all those symptoms for the past week.

She'd become jumpy every time a door so much as banged near her. Sometimes, she'd see a shadow in one corner of the room and think it was moving. This would cause her to become frightened for no particular reason. She'd never say a word to me, but I could tell from the bond that we shared that she was coping with fear.

Whenever she walked around the commune and in Fiddler's Green, she walked as if she'd get jumped by someone. She was always on guard, her ears perked up, her eyes darting from one corner to the other, her hands clutching her purse to use as a weapon should the worst transpire. Except, well, the worst didn't transpire. Nothing happened.

She had started drinking more and more in the past week. She thought that I didn't notice, but it was hard not to notice when we lived together all the time. There were empty whiskey bottles in the trash, and whenever Alexis kissed me, there was whiskey on her breath.

The lack of sleep hadn't troubled me for the first day or two, but on the seventh day, I'd made up my mind that I'd do something about her trauma. A person could die from lack of sleep, and from the way she looked and behaved recently, Alexis looked like she might at least go into a coma, if not outright die. She had lost so much weight that she looked gaunt as a ghost.



I'd ask her a question, and she'd answer with something else that was on her mind. I'd ask her if she wanted dinner, and she'd tell me something completely unrelated in return. Last night, she replied, "I'm going to my grandma's home." Alexis's grandma was Ariana, who had long been dead.

Whenever I tried to confront her about these things, she became agitated. She never lashed out at me, but I could see that I was driving her mad. Her face would flush with color, and her voice would become a bit louder. But she never lashed at me.

From all of this, I had concluded that my mate, my partner, the woman I loved so much, was suffering from PTSD. I even contacted a psychiatrist based in Chicago, a fellow who offered online and on-the-call help. He told me that the best way to help her would be to take her away for a few days to separate her from the place where she had suffered her trauma. Of course, I didn't exactly tell that psychiatrist about werewolves and vampires and whatnot, but I got the message across and, in return, was given a followable set of instructions.

The most significant was to take her away for a few days. It had taken me less than an hour to finalize the location where I'd take her. A two-hour drive from New York and a five-hour drive from Fiddler's Green was a small peninsula upstate called Frampton with a lighthouse and an old inn that catered exclusively to couples. Frampton Inn was a Victorian Inn with several astonishing features, such as a swimming pool studded with cyan and green rocks at the bottom, a large library, a hedge maze, rock stairs leading down the cliff side to the beach, and a series of caves that were turned into an underground restaurant by Frampton Inn.

That's where I was taking her. But it was a surprise that I couldn't reveal it

before time.

“It’s a well-earned vacation for us both,” I said.

“What if something happens to Fiddler’s Green while we’re still away?”  
There it was, that PTSD was acting up again.

“I can assure you that nothing will happen. Vince is in charge, and we’re off on a nice weekend vacation in Frampton.” Oops. I accidentally let it slip.

Her eyes widened as her face broke into a wide smile. “The Frampton? The actual location where they regularly film so many TV shows and movies? Those picturesque rocks in the swimming pool! That great lighthouse atop the cliff? That very same Frampton?”

I smiled at her, my eyes full of love.

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” I asked as I waved my hand across just as the car reached the top of the crest on the road, revealing Frampton in all its glory. Pictures didn’t do this place any justice. It was not unlike anything that I had seen. Not even the resort in Vermont where I had proposed to her was as special as this. When we reached the top of the crest on the road, an evergreen slope extended into the distance till it reached the cliffs on the far end of the peninsula. Around here, the water was completely deep blue and opaque, unlike the seawater in Fiddler’s Green.

Behind the cliff, into the unending sky, white clouds hung low on the horizon, revealing the clear blue sky behind them. The sun shone from behind the white clouds, its piercing rays making the water shimmer and the grass glow.

“My God!” Alexis gasped as she beheld the view. “Will. What’s the

occasion? You haven't brought me down here for a surprise wedding, have you?"

"No, my love. I just brought you down here to help you deal with the trauma you've been experiencing this past week," I said, parking the Jeep on the side of the road so we could both come out and view the scene from this vantage point.

"Trauma? You think that I've been going through trauma for the past week?" Alexis asked innocently. I just wanted to hold her tight and hug her and let her know that the world was going to be okay. And so, I did that.

I held her in my arms.

"You have been through so much. It can sometimes cause trauma in even the most resilient of people. I just figured that this would be a good way to help you unwind," I said.

"Do they have a day spa and sauna?" Alexis whispered.

"Oh, yes, they do, and they also have a Jacuzzi on the deck outside the room I've booked. Ain't that simply fabulous?" I asked, holding her tightly, smelling her perfume, and feeling her hair brush against my face.

"Oh, Will, now I feel so guilty," Alexis said. There it was, right on cue, that last and most potent symptom of PTSD. "I feel like I've been bugging the bejesus out of you this past week. I should have done better. Damn it."

"It's not about that," I said, holding her by the arms and squeezing them. The psychiatrist had said that physical touch from a partner could help soothe the symptoms of mental anguish. I was trying to do my best to be a supportive partner, who could bring her back to normal. "I know how you feel. Fiddler's

Green, the Grimm Abode—you feel tied down in those places. You sometimes feel like there’s no escape, and the years are passing you by. That there’s so much to see out there and so little time. Tell me if I’m wrong.”

Alexis looked away from me and stared into the horizon. It was noon, and the sun had finally managed to break through the clouds. It shone in all its splendor, illuminating the entirety of Frampton and the sea around it—a truly mesmerizing scene. Alexis looked at me and said, “I’m in my late twenties. I’ve devoted my entire life to that town. Of course, I feel that way. That doesn’t mean I don’t love it. I love the place, but I want to see more of the world.”

“Well then, how about this?” I pointed at Frampton.

“Oh, this will do fine. Just fine. I love it. And I love you!” Alexis gleamed and hugged me. “Thank you for bringing me here. You know, I never say it all that much, but I just love how you pamper me.”

“It’s my duty,” I said, pecking her on the cheek. “One that I take great joy in performing.”

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We lay in each other’s arms, wrapped under a blanket while completely naked. The room had walls made of expensive stone, which the receptionist had assured us was the highest level of soundproofing. This room was another level of luxury, something that I hadn’t seen before. The floor was original oak hardwood with just the right amount of scruffiness, making walking barefoot an absolute treat. The windows were tall and broad, covering one whole side of the wall, offering a pristine view of the sea and

the cliffs. By the window was a deck with a Jacuzzi, which I fully intended to use later in the evening.

“I love you for bringing me here,” Alexis said, her breast brushing against my chest. “I needed this.”

“I knew you did. And I love you too,” I said, kissing her on the cheek. Then I pulled her closer and lay her down on her back as I disappeared inside the blanket. I could see her slender thighs and her pink pussy tucked between them. I needed to kiss it. I wanted my lips on it. I followed that impulse, licking the clefts of her labia and cradling her clit on the tip of my tongue. Alexis moaned loudly and grabbed me by my hair, pulling me closer to her. I licked faster and enjoyed the sensation of her thighs clamping around my face as she shook and moaned louder.

“Will! Stop! I’m cumming!” she panted a minute later. Her whole body trembled as she orgasmed. I climbed back on top of her and lay with my body resting atop hers.

“My turn now,” I said, kissing her lips gently as I entered her. She was already wet down there. Wet, tight, and deep. I thrust my cock deep into her pussy, reaching places where I was sure I hadn’t reached before.

Alexis’s whole body jolted, and she arched her back up as I pleased her with my gentle, deep, and sure strokes.

Her eyes bore into mine passionately as our faces came closer. We kissed another time, this time our tongues clashing together as I thrust deeply into her.

Then she rolled over and came on top of me, her breasts in my face and her

arms on my shoulders as she straddled me, moved her hips, and rode me swiftly. Perhaps it was the location, or perhaps it was the intensity of our lovemaking, but I couldn't hold it any longer. I came with such force that my toes curled. I gushed inside her just as I felt her orgasm a second time.

Panting, we both fell on our sides in the bed, lying in each other's arms.

"That...was quick and sexy," Alexis said. "Very effective, I must say."

"And you came twice," I said.

"Will!" Alexis laughed, slapping me on my chest. "You shouldn't keep count of your partner's orgasms. It's unseemly."

"Well, I never really had a partner before you, so what do I know?"

"True. True. Well, you have succeeded in tiring me out. I'm going to sleep, and when I wake up, I'm going to take you to that Jacuzzi, and we're going to get massages at the spa, deal?" Alexis said as she yawned.

"Deal," I said, yawning in response.

"I just want you to know that all of this...the vacation and everything else...it is helping. I do feel like things are going back to normal, and I appreciate you doing this for me. Truly," she said.

"I love you so much, baby. I'd do anything for you," I said wearily, feeling sleep tug behind my eyes.

It just didn't occur to me that she'd do something strange while I was asleep. I was so certain that she was going to be okay that I turned to my side and fell fast asleep, only to wake up in the middle of the night to find no signs of Alexis anywhere. She wasn't in the bathroom, nor was she out on the deck.

“Will, you fool!” I snapped at myself, thinking about what I’d done. I had taken someone who was suffering from PTSD out into the open and had gone to sleep without checking to see if she had slept or not. Who knew where she might be?

I hurriedly got dressed, noticing at the same time that Alexis’s clothes were gone from the bathroom. The rest of her stuff was still there, including her luggage. So, wherever she was, she hadn’t gone far. I tried to use my bond with her, but it gave me nothing in response. All I got was pitch black in return, which meant that she was either very far or something very worse.

Not wanting to think more about it, I headed outside my room while locking it behind me and went into the lobby, where the receptionist was still standing behind her desk.

“Excuse me, the woman who came with me, do you know where she went?” I asked her.

“Umm. Yes, sir. As it happens, I did see her leave the lobby precisely an hour ago,” the woman responded, smiling at me professionally. Could she not see that this was a case of emergency and her smile was unwarranted?

“Did she say anything?” I asked.

“Nothing at all, sir. She just headed out of the inn and went to the road.” the woman pointed at the road from the window.

“Great. Thanks for your help,” I said, heading out of the inn and to the car park where I had parked my Jeep.

It then occurred to me that instead of going on my Jeep, I could simply shift into my wolf form. I’d be better able to follow her by picking up her trail.

*Where are you, Alexis?* I called out, hoping that there would be some response on her end.

There was just radio silence.



# Chapter 5

Alexis

How could I have explained to Will what I was feeling? It wasn't that he was incapable of feeling something similar. Of course, he could understand what I was going through. He had gone through so much worse, and he had dealt with his fair share of PTSD. But despite all his efforts, my symptoms were not subsiding.

The Frampton Inn had been a wonderful idea, and I loved him for it, but the minute Will fell asleep and I was left alone to deal with the silence and the blackness, all the dark thoughts crept back into my mind, prohibiting me from sleeping. Even still, I managed to go to sleep, but my dreams were more along the line of nightmares heavily featuring undead vampires lurking in the woods behind Fiddler's Green.

When I woke up feeling disturbed from those unending dreams of undead vampires chasing me all through the town, I decided that staying in this tranquil and serene place was not the right course of action for me. I had to do something productive. Anything that would take my mind off the lingering question that swam in my subconscious.

What if the vampires came back?

What if there was still some threat out there that was conspiring against us?

Blair was still out there as far as I was concerned. He could come back at any time with his forces and destroy Fiddler's Green.

But this was not the pestering enigma that had ensnared my mind at this hour of the night. Having been kidnapped once by Maurice, I had seen the inner workings of the vampires in his secret cave. They came via ships to take the caches and deposit new smuggled goods. What if somehow the ship that I'd destroyed had not been destroyed? What if some part of it was still functional that the vampires were still using? On that note, maybe all the vampires were not dead. Perhaps some of them were still lingering around, waiting for their turn to attack.

How could I vacation in Frampton while so much danger lurked everywhere?

The self-aware part of me knew that all these thoughts were the by-product of the PTSD I was experiencing. I had been through so much recently. From me falling off the top of the building after Will's presumed death to me discovering that Fred had rigged the entire town with bombs—everything that had happened had rattled me to the point that I could not think anymore. As much as I loved my mate, and as much as he was doing for me, I knew that the solution to my fixation was not here in Frampton.

That's why I left in the middle of the night. I went on foot for as long as I could until I reached a thicket of trees where I could safely shift into my wolf form. I calculated that it took around five hours to travel here from Fiddler's Green. It'd take me two and a half hours to run cross-country in my wolf form. I'd make it to Fiddler's Green and come back by the morning. Will wouldn't know a thing.

I had to go to the bay and see if the ship was sunk for good. I needed to

confirm that there weren't any more vampires. This obsession wouldn't let me rest.

It wasn't just obsession. That was the thing. It was intuition as well. The reason why I hadn't been able to rest for the past week was not just because I was suffering from PTSD. Sure, I was suffering from it, which made a much more plausible explanation for my recent behavior, but that did not account for the whole of my behavior.

The real reason was that I could feel it in my gut that something was afoot. It was either the vampires or something else. My sixth sense could anticipate something happening. When I told this to Vincent, he laughed and said, "You know, you worry too much, Lexie. There's nothing out there."

And when I discussed this with Will, he said, "You and I have been through such tumultuousness that it feels strange to experience the calm after a storm. We're so used to the calm before the storm that it's uncanny for either of us to feel that nothing is wrong. Trust me, there's nothing wrong whatsoever."

I got the same response from anyone I talked to in the pack. Even then, Will sent out scouts in the area around the commune to check and see if there was something or someone out there. But there was nothing.

That's why I needed to go back and see for myself. And this is exactly why I couldn't bring Will with me.

I traveled in my wolf form lightly and swiftly for hours until I reached the bay where I'd sunk the ship. The wreckage of the drowned ship was still there on the bottom of the ocean floor. I shifted into my human form and stood there at the end of the shore, looking into the water.

I had been there for no less than a minute when I noticed a shuffling sound coming from behind me. This was what my intuition had warned me about. The vampires were back. I turned around, fists raised, to confront whoever was standing there behind me, regretting the fact that I'd come here alone.

There was a shadow lurking behind the trees. It walked closer to me, growing taller and broader.

“Who are you? Reveal yourself!” I yelled from afar, stepping back. My feet got submerged in the high tide water as I stepped even further back.

And then, the moon shone on the silhouette of the man who had appeared from behind the thicket of trees, revealing that it was none other than Will.

“Will? How? What are you doing here?” I asked, completely perplexed.

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We sat side by side at the edge of the shore, our feet in the water, looking out into the sea.

“When I sensed blackness coming from my bond, I got worried. I thought that maybe you had died. But then, it occurred to me that perhaps you were trying to be secretive. Or it could have been that you were far away. The latter was true. You were quite far for me to track you, but I still managed to do it by imploring the essence of our bond. I've gotten quite good at it, wouldn't you think?” Will said.

“Considering that you tracked me across hundreds of miles, I'd say that you're probably the foremost expert in tracking your mate down,” I said, feeling a little bit resigned and ashamed. I hadn't wanted Will to wake up and

discover that I was gone. I'd wanted for him to sleep through the night and never even notice that I was gone.

"I didn't actually track you all the way. When the bond continued showing me pitch-black darkness, I thought, 'What would Alexis do? Where would she go?' And the first thing that came to my mind was this. You'd been saying that you thought there was something here all week. I should have listened then. I am sorry," Will said.

"Even though I've looked at this wreckage, I still feel like there's something lurking around," I confessed my deepest emotions to him. "Don't you feel the same?"

"I'll tell you how I felt," Will said calmly, putting his arm around my shoulders. "And this is something that I've been thinking about for a long, long time. I just didn't want to prematurely reveal it before it was a fully formed thought."

"What is it?" I asked apprehensively.

"You know the entire story about me coming to America from Germany," Will said.

"Of course. I've heard it from you dozens of times," I said.

"Well, what if I told you that there was more to the story that I've never ever told anyone before?"

"Tell me." I needed to hear this especially if it was related to how I was feeling right now. "And be sincere with me. You've always told me the truth. Tell me the truth now too."

“Always. I promise,” Will said, then began. “Have you ever thought about why I had to move from Germany to America? It wasn’t something I’d just planned without giving it any thought. I could have moved to England or France, or even Sweden without any difficulty. After the war ended, all of those places where the Allied Forces had strongholds somewhat thrived, didn’t they? Look at those places now. They’re doing as well as America, if not more. And they were closer to Germany. So why, then, did I move all the way to the other end of the world?”

“Why did you do it?” I asked. Now that I thought about it, why had he done that? It made much more sense to move anywhere closer. Even Iceland would have been closer than America.

“Other than Pearl Harbor, America was untouched by the war. There were no military establishments such as the ones that we’d seen in Germany and the rest of Europe. What I mean to say is there were no signs of war in America. Not a single sign. America had many other troubles back in those days, such as racism and the great political divide, but wherever I looked, I never saw any signs of battles. No bullet-riddled buildings, no military bunkers, nothing like that,” Will said.

“And what about everywhere else, like France and England?” I asked.

“All of those places were still recovering from the war. Signs of destruction, military outposts, people suffering from post-war poverty, injured soldiers, torn structures—everything reminded me of the war. We didn’t really call it PTSD back in the day, but that was what I felt when I kept seeing signs of the war. I knew that I had to leave and escape somewhere that wasn’t touched by the war. Somewhere where I could keep my pack safe far, far away. I discovered that when I came to America, my PTSD started going

away slowly, all because I'd changed the location and taken us somewhere safer."

"I understand."

"A pack can only remain strong if it's together. That's why I took the entire pack with me and didn't just escape all by myself. And that's why we still live in Fiddler's Green with the rest of the wolves," Will said.

"Is that it?" I asked.

"No." Will smiled. "I was just beginning to feel that you and me, we're like a pack of our own. When we get married, we'll have kids. And then they will be a part of our special pack. We can leave Fiddler's Green and go somewhere safer, where there aren't such things as vampires and werewolves. Live normal lives. Be normal people. Isn't that what you want?"

"Are you serious?" I couldn't believe he was saying that.

"I promise. I've been thinking about this for a long time, and I want to leave this place with you. I hope this brings you some semblance of comfort," Will said.

"Leaving this place and going somewhere else to live with you would be so amazing," I said, letting my emotions show. "Imagine us raising our kids in San Francisco. They can grow up with the rest of the kids in Silicon Valley. They'll already know all they need to know about computers and grow up to become successful engineers!"

"Exactly!" Will laughed and clapped his hands. "So...my love and soon-to-be wife, I just want you to be a little patient, please."

“And I’ll be as patient as you’ll want me to be,” I said, kissing him. “Say, you wanna go back to the inn?”

“Wanna race me back to it?” Will grinned.

“Oh, you’re so on!” I said, my spirits considerably lifted upon hilling Will’s proposition.

We shifted together and raced through the forest, heading back to Frampton. It’d take us a long time to go back there, but at least we’d make the journey together. I was feeling a bit embarrassed about coming here, but given how Will had so thoroughly consoled me, part of me felt glad that I came here.

We had only just reached the brink of the forest when Will stopped in his tracks, his ears perked up, his eyes staring into the distance.

*What is it?* I asked.

*We’re not alone,* Will said.

There it was, that sinking feeling in my stomach that had prompted me to come here. Something had not been right all along. There was someone lurking around, quite possibly a vampire. I looked in the direction where Will was staring, all the while realizing that my intuition had been right in telling me that there was danger yet.

*What on earth is that thing?* Will asked.

I had to strain my eyes to be able to see what he was seeing. It was a long shadow of a man, but it was not moving like a man. It moved almost mechanically as if it was a robot. This shadow was taller than both of us and had a whole militia’s worth of weapons attached to its thick, shiny armor.



*It's a soldier*, I said when I could see clearly.

*It's not just a soldier. It's something else*, Will added.

We barely had a second to dodge the soldier's first attack. He hadn't even come close to us before he attacked us with a rocket launcher. The explosion boomed behind us as we jumped in opposite directions.

I could see the soldier making a run toward Will. From here, I spotted the strange armor he was wearing. His face was entirely covered by a chrome helmet. The rest of his armor managed to cover all of his body, even the joints. There were wires at the seams of his armor. He had two rifles slung over his shoulder, a machete on his thigh, pistols, and grenades in his belt. In short, he was armed to the teeth.

Will pounced on him with his entire force, but to my surprise, the soldier grabbed Will by the throat and threw him back hard against a tree. Will collapsed on the ground.

I couldn't let this bizarre soldier beat my mate like that. I jumped on him from behind, biting down on his neck with all my strength. I could feel my teeth straining under the duress of the armor. I had to let go because the armor was impermeable. But before I could let go, the soldier reached around the back and grabbed me by the neck, throwing me against the same tree where Will had struck.

He threw me with such brute force that I could feel my joints aching when I fell. Any harder, and he'd have broken my bones.

*How is he so strong and fast?* I asked Will.

Will had gotten up and was rearing himself to go back into the fight. He

raced circles around the soldier, clawing at him as he ran, but to no avail. Will's claws didn't even put a scratch on the soldier's armor.

While they were locked in battle, I circled them so that I'd be able to help Will if he needed it. The soldier moved with such speed that it was getting hard for me to track his individual moves. I could just see a blur moving around and Will trying to keep up with it. But as the fight progressed, Will got in a few claws and strikes that slowed down the soldier. The thing that rattled me the most was that Will's strikes were extremely powerful. He had killed so many vampires and soldiers before with these strikes. He was in his feral form, the most powerful form known to werewolves the world over. And despite all of this, he had not been able to take down this impossibly strong soldier.

Even though the soldier was a little slowed down, he was not fazed. He didn't speak or struggle as Will unleashed a flurry of attacks on him. He just stood there, taking the brunt of the attacks without it affecting him. And when Will was done, the soldier didn't fall down or surrender.

Instead, the soldier took out a baton from his belt and pushed down a button on it. High-voltage electric current zapped from the end of the baton. Just as Will jumped to attack the soldier again, the soldier zapped Will in the torso with his Taser, knocking him out.

*Will!* I called out as I gnawed at the soldier's Taser and yanked it free from his grip. Before I could go back to Will, the soldier's backhand met with my jaw with such sheer strength that I lost consciousness.

*No!* Will called out, forcing me out of my unconsciousness. I opened my eyes to see Will standing in front of me, defending me from the soldier. Somehow,

and I don't know how Will had managed to take the helmet off the soldier's head.

The soldier's skin was pale and purple, with many veins showing on his forehead and cheeks. His eyes were unnaturally dilated. He was by no means a natural man. He reached down to pick up the helmet and then put it back on his head, fitting it tightly.

I realized that my intuition had been right about someone being out there. It just wasn't vampires. It was this inexplicable soldier armed to the teeth and seemingly invincible. As much as I admired Will for standing his ground and continuing to fight him, I could see no way either of us could beat this relentless goliath of a human being.

That was, if he was a human being at all.

# Chapter 6

Will

The soldier moved like a robot. His reflexes were faster than those of a snake. I was certain that if I got a look under his armor, I'd find pistons and gears pumping and turning. There was no way that this was a human soldier. His armor was beyond a military-grade. It looked to be the stuff that astronauts wore when they were going on their spacewalks.

It did not matter how many times Alexis and I struck him. He never wavered. There was not so much as a stagger in his steps as he advanced upon us, blocking our strikes as if they were nothing. I was in my feral form, and even then, my attacks were barely scratching his armor. Alexis and I struck in a rhythm. Whenever my strike fell upon the soldier, Alexis followed right after. But instead of staggering or reeling, the soldier kept moving forward.

I was not scared. I had faced tougher foes in the past, Griswold being the most recent one. Ralph, Maurice, Blair, and even my own brother—they were all foes that had tested my mettle time and again, sometimes physical, sometimes mental. And I had vanquished them. Well, almost all of them. If I knew one thing about my tenacity, it was that I'd never let this soldier win this fight. Not while I was still the alpha wolf of the Grimm pack.

*Alexis, I've figured out his weakness,* I said. In all my unsuccessful strikes, I learned one thing. This soldier didn't stop when he was hit at any major body part. But when struck at his joints, he became perplexed. He would stand still,

wondering how to advance while his joints were jammed. *This armor that he's wearing, it's more than just a suit. It's an exoskeleton granting him strength. That's why he's moving like this.*

*That's just perfect; Alexis sounded agitated. How do we take off what appears to be welded to his skin?*

*By ripping off his skin,* I responded. It was what needed to be done. In regular battles, the normal rules of fighting apply. Even when involved in a life-and-death battle with a foe, I had to be humane. If I had to kill them, it had to be swift. If I needed to maim them, I'd do it in such a way that they'd surrender, and the fight would end.

This was no regular battle. Those rules did not apply here. If this soldier could act as a juggernaut, so could I. It had just taken me a little while to realize that. But at that time, the soldier had taken out a gun the likes of which I had never seen before. For one, the gun glowed with an electrical surge that ran across its length. And another thing, the weapon did not have a hole at the end of its barrel. I wondered where he'd shoot from, and in the next second, I seemed to get my answer in a painful way.

He pressed the trigger while still standing ten feet away from me. Instead of bullets, a jolt of electricity zapped from the barrel and hit me square in the face, enveloping my whole body in the deadliest shock I'd ever experienced in my life. I limped to the ground, completely paralyzed by the agonizing pain coursing through my body in the form of megavolts. I could even smell my fur burning.

It was at this moment that I saw from the corner of my eye as Alexis grappled with his gun using her mouth. She took the gun, and despite the shock that it

was delivering to her face, she broke it free from the soldier's iron grip and threw it in the forest. But the soldier was relentless. He wouldn't simply give in without a fight. I rose from the ground, recovering quickly from the attack, and it wasn't before I had risen that I saw that the soldier now had a gauntlet on his forearm aimed at me. There were rockets emerging from that gauntlet. Having just suffered from one lethal attack, I was in no position to take a flurry of rockets to my face.

As he unleashed those rockets, I jumped around, dodging every single one and watching as they exploded all around me, creating plumes of smoke and flame everywhere till there was nowhere where I could escape except above. So I leaped into the canopy of the trees, trying to hide from the soldier's line of sight. He had ditched his gauntlet for yet another weapon. It was some form of a long baton that also had electricity surging through it.

Before he could smash the baton into Alexis's torso, I climbed down from the canopy and came up behind him, ready to rid him of his weapon and his armor.

First, I slashed at his hand that was holding the baton. Even as my blow struck, I got a fair dosage of a shock to my claw, rendering it weakened for my next attack. At that time, I figured out that if I had to take off some of his armor, I had to do it with my teeth.

Despite the soldier's lightning-fast reflexes, I leaped on him from behind and dug my teeth into his helmet. I could feel my teeth crossing beyond the armor plates in his helmet and digging into the skin of his head, drawing blood.

For the first time since his altercation with us, the soldier screamed. It was a harrowing sound that did not belong to a human. Rather, it was a monstrous

scream as if it was coming from some ghoul or undead creature raised by a necromancer.

Alexis, noticing what I was doing, did the same to the soldier's forearms. He had many weapon systems in his gauntlets that he'd have used had Alexis not torn off his armor from his hands. I could see that she had rent his skin free, leaving behind giant red patches on his forearms where once his skin used to be. Now, without a gauntlet and a helmet, the soldier did not resemble a robot any longer.

Now he looked like some horror conjured from the deepest recesses of hell itself. His eyes were red and lacked irises. His whole skin had a webwork of blackened veins running across it, making it look like he had been submerged in a vat full of boiling tar. The soldier's skin was not white or black. It was an unnatural shade of blue, making him look like he had died and then his corpse was forced to go through some unholy ritual that had morphed him into the being that he was now.

As I had initially suspected, there were gears and pistons in his armor. This was an exo-suit, a mechanical machine designed to make him stronger and capable to bear the attacks from a werewolf. Whoever had sent him knew a little too much about werewolves, it seemed.

Could it be Blair? Could it be perhaps that there was some other enemy tucked away in some dark cleft of the world, ready to attack from the shadows?

Looking into his eyes, I could see no signs of life, and yet this man drew breath and snarled and screamed as Alexis and I beat him into submission, tethering him to the ground. Alexis put her paws on his arms while I shifted

the weight of my body on his chest so that he wouldn't be able to move, resist, or retaliate.

Now it was time for me to turn back into a human and interrogate this soldier. Ask him where he'd come from, which master he served, and why did he want to kill us when we had done nothing to him in the first place?

But while I was still shifting back into my human form, I noticed the soldier wedging his tongue into his teeth. I had seen this before almost a hundred years ago. Soldiers loyal to the Nazis had cyanide capsules in their teeth that they used to kill themselves whenever they were caught by their enemies. It was clear to me that this soldier intended to do the same.

As Alexis was holding him down and I was shifting back, neither of us could stop him from swallowing his hollowed-out tooth that contained the cyanide capsule. And so, it was with helplessness that we observed him writhing and foaming as he died.

Alexis shifted back as well and said, "Well, that was a load of bullshit."

"Now we're never going to find out where he came from," I said, feeling defeated in spite of the fact that we had just beaten him together.

"I don't think you know how this works," Alexis said, crouching by the soldier's corpse and interacting with his armor. "This is computerized, Will. Meaning we can trace it back to whoever is in charge. All we need to do is plug his armor's computer system into some source and, well, hack into it. You and I can't do it, but we do know someone who can, don't we?"

"Are we going to drag Maliha, an innocent girl who knows nothing of the world of werewolves and vampires, into this mess? She will go insane," I



protested. “That girl has lived a simple life. She will be traumatized upon observing a dead body.”

“You don’t give her enough credit,” Alexis said. “She did do her part in preventing all those bombs from going off, if you remember.”

“That was one thing. This is a completely separate thing. Think about what you’re saying. You’re asking to introduce her to a world that will overwhelm her senses. As much as I appreciate her moral candor and her bravery, I just don’t think that she must become unwillingly enlightened about the existence of mythical creatures.”

“As valid as your point is, dear Will,” Alexis spoke softly. If anyone else was speaking to me in such a tone, I would think that they were condescending. However, when it came to her, I knew that she was trying to be as patient as she could with me. I understood where she was coming from. It was just that I needed her to see that my viewpoint on this particular matter was just as valid. “We need her help. What do you suggest we do?”

I took a deep breath and then, with my hands rubbing my eyes, said, “I don’t even think we need to confirm to whom these soldiers belong. Isn’t it obvious? This is Blair’s doing.”

“How can you say that with such certainty without any evidence?” Alexis asked.

“Because look at the soldier and observe how abominably he has been tarnished. He looks to be affected by no less than a dozen concoctions and potions that have altered him into this inhuman being. Just look at him. He’s imbued with poisons. His skin is blueish. His veins are about to pop off any second. And if that’s not enough, just see what his eyes look like. And that’s

not even the real reason that I'm convinced this is Blair's doing. Just observe his armor. It is top-of-the-line, complete with extremely advanced weaponry and capabilities. Whom do we know who has such vast resources at their disposal that they can arm their soldiers to the teeth with such tech? It's Blair. You have to agree with me here. It's literally spelled out."

Alexis was nodding, but it was not the affirmative kind of nod. This was how she nodded when she was deep in thought and needed to process faster. Then, lifting her finger up, she said, "On the other hand, this could be someone entirely else, someone richer and more dangerous than Blair. Someone who can potentially end the lives of werewolves with the tech and the soldiers they have at their disposal. Wouldn't it be prudent that we knew about this threat rather than pin it on someone we already know? The last I heard of Blair, he was in the wind. Do you really think that after the financial losses he suffered through the dissolving of his business in Fiddler's Green, he'd still be able to get back on his feet and muster up enough budget to create these soldiers?"

She had an irrefutable point.

"Fine. But we don't have to tell Maliha more than she needs to know. We'll just tell her that these are some bio-terrorists or something like that," I said.

"I agree with you there," Alexis said. "We'll keep her in the dark as much as possible."

Relationships, I had learned, were about compromise from time to time. This did not mean that one did not love the other. I had come to understand in our time together that Alexis possessed a different sort of wisdom from the one that I possessed. A feminine wisdom that sought to nurture and nourish

instead of resorting to fight or flight. And it was for that reason that I accepted her suggestion.

Alexis helped me sling the dead soldier over my shoulder. Together, sneakily and slowly, we crossed the territory of the forest while avoiding the main paths. Who knew how many more soldiers there were out there? The commune was not very far away, but given that we'd chosen a more hidden and convoluted way, it was taking us double the time to reach there.

"I wonder what the endgame was," Alexis whispered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"This soldier...whomever sent it...I wonder what they wanted. What, did they simply think that they'd dispatch a soldier and he'd take care of us? That he'd kill the werewolves all on his own? When you come to think of it, doesn't that seem like something that Blair wouldn't do? Blair's got a personal agenda against us. He wants his revenge against you for killing his father. Wouldn't he try to come and kill you himself?"

Perhaps, after all his failed attempts on my life, Blair had realized his mistake, and instead of coming at me himself, he had resorted to sending soldiers on his behalf. But I had to be sure that this was indeed Blair's doing. It could very well be someone else.

"Will, duck!" Alexis whispered just in time. As I ducked, I saw from behind the thicket that there were no less than fifteen soldiers, similarly armored and armed, walking in a progression through the forest path, all of them wielding those electrical zapping guns, all of them marching in that mechanical way that resembled the movements of a robot.

“An entire patrol,” I whispered back to her. “It’s too much for us to take on right now.”

“Agreed. Let’s just wait for them to pass and then head to the commune.”

As we stayed there, hidden from the sights of the soldiers, I thought more about what this meant. Was this perhaps the first part of a series of attacks against the werewolves? These sorts of things did happen in life. Whenever one stronghold fell, another power took its place. The last of the vampires had been beaten and eliminated, creating a power vacuum that was now being filled by these soldiers and their mysterious leader.

“Will, we can take ‘em,” Alexis said.

“How do you suggest that? We barely beat one of them. There are fifteen out there,” I said. As much as I preferred fighting bravely over hiding, there was no chance that just the two of us could beat all of those soldiers together unless we had some powerful weapon at hand.

Alexis flailed the dead soldier’s gauntlet in the air, saying, “We can use this.”

“Or we can simply use this,” I said. Her suggestion gave me an amazing idea. There were grenades, although not like the ones that I’d ever seen, attached to the dead soldier’s belt.

“Grenades?”

“Why not? It’s not like he’s going to need it,” I said.

“Very well.”

And so, just as the soldiers were passing the intersection where we were hiding, Alexis and I took off the grenades around the soldier’s belt and tossed

four of them at the same time by pulling their pins.

There was a brief moment when the grenades did not explode, and the soldiers looked in our direction with their guns aimed at the thicket behind which we were hiding. And then, in the next second, four powerful grenades blew up and created a chain reaction by blowing up all the grenades and explosives on all the soldiers' belts, completely flattening the entire intersection by destroying the trees in a blaze of fire.

When the dust and smoke settled, the only thing that remained of all the soldiers were pieces of their tattered armor.

# Chapter 7

Alexis

It was nothing short of a miracle what had just happened. It was Will's battle prowess, thanks to which we had just taken down the fifteen soldiers. I was still in disbelief as I stood there at the center of the crater that the collective explosions had formed in the forest. All around me, viscera, guts, and torn limbs hung from the branches of the trees splattered the dirt path and spread in the shape of a blast radius all around.

While I was monitoring the area, Will had trekked up ahead with the dead soldier's body slung over his shoulders. We were both headed for the commune. The werewolves had to be warned of this new threat in such close vicinity to the Grimm Abode.

The only downside to this was that we weren't able to get anything useful from the soldiers we had killed. Their armor had been irreparably destroyed, their bodies were unsalvageable for any identification, and their weapons had eviscerated in the explosion.

The explosion...People as far as the south of Fiddler's Green will have heard it. The pack must be alarmed at something so disastrous happening so nearby.

"Don't think of the pack right now. Think of how we're going to get to the pack," Will called from ahead. I was far behind, scouting from the back to see if any soldiers would turn up. But it seemed that instead of coming from

behind, it appeared that they were coming from ahead.

“More of them?” I groaned. I was tired, not having slept properly for the past week. The exhaustion was beginning to show its many effects on me now. From the blurred vision to the dizziness, I was starting to show signs of fatigue. But I’d be damned if I let myself slow down before reaching the commune.

“Not more of them,” Will said, allowing me to breathe a sigh of relief. “Their truck, the one they all came in, it’s going back to where it came from. There’s no license plate. From the looks of it, it’s a military-grade truck. But from what I know of military trucks, they’re normally camouflaged and bear the license plates of the American Army. This truck is neither bearing any plates nor is camouflaged. It’s jet black. Looks to me more like a mercenary truck than anything else.”

“Is it going away?” I asked, feeling the pain crawl up my legs, beckoning me to sit down. If only I could. My spirit had not broken, but my body had decided to give up. But this wasn’t going to be my end. Not now. With this thought, I shifted into my wolf form, immediately feeling a surge of energy coursing through my body, allowing me to relax my muscles and recover my strength. The moon was still out in the sky, granting me the opportunity to siphon its power into my body.

“Why have you shifted? Is there something wrong?” Will asked as he turned around and looked at me in surprise.

*Just tired. There’s no other reason,* I confided in him.

“You’re my good girl. You have been so brave of late. I appreciate everything that you’ve done. I love you, Alexis,” Will said with such

kindness that my heart brimmed with joy and purpose.

*I love you too*, I said. Before I could await his response, I realized something. It struck me as bizarre as to why I hadn't thought of this before. *Will, there's got to be some form of tracking mechanism on this soldier. Don't you think so?*

"Yes, there has to be. That would explain why the soldiers were wading so deep into the forest. They were looking for him," Will said, putting the soldier's corpse on the ground and examining the functional parts of his armor. "But I don't know where it is."

*It's futile to search for it. It may be a Nano chip, no bigger than the tip of a needle. Or even smaller. My point is we can't just take the soldier's body to the commune. That would connect his death to the werewolves. Right now, whoever is behind this has no clue that it was us who killed this soldier. But if we take him to the commune, it could trigger a fight. We're not there yet. We can't have another full-blown battle on our hands, not so recently after that fight with Griswold's vampires. So we can't take him to the commune*, I said.

"While normally I would agree with you, the point remains that if we leave this body anywhere else, the soldiers will come for it and reclaim it. We cannot have that. If we take it to the commune, all the wolves will be around it. They will be able to help if the soldiers come. Our pack is strong. It can defend itself," Will said.

*Okay*, I said. This was his decision. He was the Alpha. My role in this relationship, other than the romantic component, was to give him the advice that I sought fit. It was not obligatory for him to follow it every time. He must have some genuine reason to do things his way. Otherwise, he, quite



often than not, listened to me and implemented my advice.

Finally, after traveling from thicket to thicket under the cover of darkness, we reached the commune's entrance. Here, I shifted back into my human form. I felt relaxed, comfortable, and quite relieved that I was back here. It was utterly strange that this new calamity had somehow wiped away the negative mental effects of the previous one. As much as I tried to dig into those old feelings of PTSD, I found that they had no place in my mind right now. It couldn't all be because of this temporary adrenaline rush; Will must have had a part to play in it as well. His words had resonated with me earlier on.

But when I thought of it, my words resonated harder. I had been anticipating something disastrous happening for the past week, and everyone had been telling me that there was no cause for worry. It was clear to me that my intuition had been right all along. The danger was upon us, whether the pack liked to admit it or not. We were not out of the water just yet. And to top it all, this new threat was more vicious and far more dangerous than any that we'd faced yet.

Once in the commune, we took the soldier's corpse into the back of the Grimm Abode, in the horse stables. Back in the old days, when Will had newly consecrated this place decades ago, this place used to have horses. The commune members used horses, donkeys, and all types of livestock for their livelihood. Ever since the advent of cars and machinery, livestock had been rendered pointless except for the cow and the sheep that some of the commune members had kept for the purpose of organic farming and having fresh farm-to-table food available all year round. But these sheds were pretty much abandoned and secluded from the rest of the commune. Behind them was a great wall made of cement that barred the sheds from the forest in the back. All around them, there was a wire fence that ran up to twenty feet high.

Atop it were barbed wires that prevented any wild animals from crossing over.

Will threw the corpse onto a pile of hay and regained his composure by taking long breaths.

“Now, we defer to your judgment,” Will said. “If you want to invite Maliha, you’re more than welcome to do so.”

“On it,” I said, taking out my phone and dialing my best friend’s number.

“Yo, yo, yo, what it is, homegirl?” Maliha spoke from the other end of the line. Her voice was raspy and coarse, making it obvious that she had been smoking weed.

“I need your help, and just as before, you’re not allowed to ask questions,” I said.

“No way. The last time you pulled that trick on me, it involved actual fucking bombs. There’s no way I’m going to be involved in whatever shit you’re pulling, and I mean that as your best friend. Beyond one point, someone as smart as me figures out what’s happening. So what really is happening?”

“Fine. You want the truth? There’s someone out there who has it bad for me and my family. I mean my extended family—the ones who live in Grimm Abode. Someone sent a murderous soldier with machinery and armor, the likes of which you have never seen. We have this dead body right now and want you to come here and identify the computing parts and use those parts to see who sent this soldier,” I said.

“Who’s we?”

“Me and my...oh, I didn’t tell you. Will and I got engaged very recently. It was a little hush, hush. We didn’t hold any ceremony or anything of the sort. It was just him proposing to me and me accepting his proposal,” I said, bracing for what was about to come next.

It came with such force as I had never imagined, a high-pitched scream of glee and celebration that nearly tore a hole in my eardrum. Maliha, after she finished screaming that everlasting shriek of ecstasy, finally said, “You have to tell me all the details. I bet it was magical. Will is such a fucking great guy, the absolute best of the best. You two have my blessing! Oh, man, when you have kids, I’m going to be an actual aunt!”

“Maliha, please let’s come back to the topic at hand. Will you come down and help us?”

“Consider it my engagement present to both of you,” Maliha said. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Well, that’s that,” I said, looking exasperatedly at Will, who had heard the entire exchange from afar and was now giggling.

“She is one of a kind,” he said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to retrieve our things from that resort. I trust that you’ll be able to pull this off.”

“Oh, right, the things at the resort!” I had completely forgotten the fact that right now, we were supposed to be on a mini-vacation. “I’m so sorry for running out on you.”

“I am not. If you hadn’t run, we wouldn’t have had that talk by the cove. We wouldn’t also have come across these soldiers. It’s good that you did that. It’s almost as if it was fated,” Will said, then leaned down and kissed me. His

kiss was long and seductive, as if he was relishing the taste of my lips and the texture of my tongue. I kissed him back by coiling my arm around his neck.

“Kinda feels weird, doesn’t it? Kissing in such close vicinity to a corpse?” Will asked, chuckling to himself.

“Yeah, kinda, but no regrets,” I said, grinning back at him. “How are you going to go and come back?”

“I’ll manage. I’ll shift and travel as a wolf on the way. And I’ll come back with all our stuff in the car. I hope nothing’s happened to the car.”

“You mean the monstrously large Jeep. Don’t worry, it’s probably fine,” I said, waving him off.

As he bade me goodbye and stepped out of the shed, I watched him go. He met with Maliha, who was just coming into the commune. The two of them exchanged remarks that I could not hear, but then Will pointed at the stables, and Maliha shook his hand. Then she skipped and jumped to where I was, toting her laptop bag at her side.

“What the fuck!” she yelled out right after she stepped into the stable. “I mean, I knew what to expect, but Jesus Christ, what the fuck. That man...his skin is blue, and not the dead person kind of blue. It’s like someone freaking put a lot of silver in his skin. Do you know that whole thing about people turning blue because they inject silver into their bodies?”

“What?” I was lost. Was this an actual thing?

“Yes. There’s an actual physical condition called argyria. It’s when someone has been exposed to so much silver that their skin turns blue, mostly by injection or some other form of imbuing. Look at this poor chap. His skin

looks like that of some Dragon Ball Z character,” Maliha said.

It occurred to me that her remark was quite close to home. Of course, someone would inject a soldier with silver in hopes that they’d have a better chance against werewolves in battle. Is that why this foe seemed stronger than any other enemy that we had faced?

“Maliha, my friend, I need you to find the computing unit in this armor,” I said.

“First, tell me how you killed him. I’m not one for gnarly details or anything, but it’s sort of like necessary to ask in case this whole thing blows up and goes to court. I need to know,” she said.

“First of all,” I said, shaking my head, “nothing’s going to court. The only thing you do need to know is we killed him in self-defense. He came to attack us. We fended ourselves and killed him.”

“Holy shit, with what? Giant swords? Look at all the slash marks on his armor, the gashes on his skin. You lynched executed him,” Maliha said, fiddling with the armor and finding the input terminal.

“It had to be done,” I said. “Otherwise, Will and I would have been dead.”

“Well, I am glad that you’re alive. Aha! There’s the computing chip. Let me just plug it into my laptop and bingo! We’re in. Uh-oh, what’s this encryption? Haven’t ever seen this before. This is like quantum-level encryption,” she said, her face turning into a furrowed frown.

“Can you get past it?”

“I don’t think we need to. You wanted to find out who controls this person? It

says right here on the login screen. Look.”

I turned the laptop towards me, and my jaw dropped as I read the name “Beckett Corp” written at the top of the login terminal.

“Blair?” I spoke out loud.

“I didn’t know you were on a first-name basis with that motherfucker. He’s the vilest person in this town, you know?” Maliha said. “He’s been involved in so many scandals and controversies regarding his pharmaceutical business, it’s no wonder he had to shut it down, and now look at what he’s doing. Creating mercenaries.”

“It’s more complicated than that, dear girl,” I said to Maliha.

“You have my ear. No matter how dubious this whole thing is, I’ll believe you.”

It just so happened that right at that moment, the west wall of the stable broke open as if it was made of cardboard. I didn’t understand how it happened. There was a ten-inch thick cement wall on the other side. Who could have gotten through?

And then, through the smoke and the rubble, a soldier stepped through, wearing the same armor as the one that the dead one was wearing. Except, this time around, there was something remarkably different. For one, this soldier moved like a maniac, as if he was out of control. Almost frenzied.

He cast one look at me, then at Maliha, who was bent over the corpse’s body, inspecting the computing terminal.

“What’s happening?” Maliha screamed, but it was too late. The soldier was

upon her, attacking her. He threw her against the wall as he lifted the corpse of the soldier and slung it over his shoulder. Then he did the same with Maliha's unconscious body.

I confirmed first to see that Maliha had indeed passed out, then immediately shifted into my wolf form and attacked the soldier. My first tackle struck him square in the chest, causing him to fall over. But as he fell, he delivered a strong kick to my face, causing me to become disoriented.

In response, I slashed at his face, taking his helmet off with my brute strength. And there it was, the difference between the soldier we had just killed and the soldier who faced me in battle right now: Every single vein on his face was pulsating so hard that it was about to erupt. His eyes were glowing a deep orange as if there was a fire burning behind them. His mouth was bleeding, and so were his eyes and ears. Instead of speaking, he snarled loudly, spitting blood everywhere.

If he was a man, it was a lifetime ago. Now, this soldier had been reduced to some frenzied being that was only capable of insanity. And yet, through all his erratic behavior, it seemed as if he was being controlled by someone or something.

Using his grenades against him was out of the question. There was Maliha in the blast radius. I tried to snag his gun away and dominate him by climbing on top of him and ripping his armor piece by piece with my teeth, but before I had gotten half the breastplate off, the soldier zapped me with his gun right in the face at point-blank range, throwing me in the air, lurching as the jolts stunned my entire body.

As I lay there stunned and helpless, I watched the soldier leave with Maliha

and the corpse through the seven feet tall hole in the stable wall.

Before I passed out of sheer exhaustion and pain, I called out to Will.

*They're back! They have Maliha!*

And then I knew no more.



# Chapter 8

Will

The inside of the stable looked like the sight of a massacre. The amount of blood left at the scene looked exactly like that of mass murder. The building's back wall had been torn so brutally from the other side that I couldn't fathom who or what had done it. There were no signs of any tire tracks on the other side of the wall beyond the commune, which left only one plausible explanation as to the cause of this—one of those soldiers had done this. If so, they were far more powerful than we had previously imagined.

Secondly, it meant that the commune was no longer safe.

Alexis lay on her back in one corner of the stable, unconscious. There were no signs of Maliha anywhere.

Vince and a few of the pack members who had woken up because of the commotion came running behind and entered the stables.

“What could have possibly done this?” Vince gasped.

“There's a new threat lurking out there,” I said while still tending to Alexis. I sat her up and held her body as she opened her eyes.

“Will!” Alexis said. “They have Maliha. The soldier came through the wall and took the dead body and Maliha with him! We have to save her, or I'll never be able to forgive myself!”

“We’re going to save her,” I said. The moment she had called out to me, I had just stepped out of the commune to head to the resort. When she called me, I immediately turned on my heels and went back to see this horrendous sight. This had happened within the time span of a few minutes. It surprised me that something of this magnitude could happen within such a short time.

“This is on me. Not on you,” I added. “You were the one who didn’t want the soldier to be brought into the commune. This is not your fault. It’s my fault that the dead body was tracked by another soldier.”

“What are these soldiers, Will?” Vince asked confusedly.

“They are Blair’s people,” Alexis said as she stood up. “Maliha confirmed this before she was kidnapped. Put two and two together, and you’ll understand. Blair has created a task force of soldiers who are united in their purpose.”

“And what is that purpose?” Vince asked, although I could tell from his voice that he had already understood what Alexis meant.

“They intend to kill every last one of us,” Alexis said.

“Last night, we killed sixteen of them,” I said, putting things into perspective. “So it’s best not to lose any hope. They are not an undefeatable enemy.”

“How did you kill them, Will? Is there something that we should know?” Vince asked.

“Just that their grenades are what kill them best. Ironically, they’re carrying weapons of their own destruction around their belts. But under no circumstance should they be allowed to use them on the wolves or any of the townsfolk. You understand? Right now, the five of us are going on a rescue

mission to save Alexis's best friend and an invaluable resource to us. Her name is Maliha, and she has been kidnapped by one of those soldiers," I said.

"Will...there was something different about this one. His eyes were glowing orange, and his veins were fit to burst. It was almost as if he had gone crazy. He had no control over his movements either!" Alexis said.

"There are five of us. If two of us could take down sixteen last night. I am certain that we can take down a lot more today," I said. "Let's move out!"

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For the next half hour, our group waded through the forest, picking up the scent and the footstep trail of the soldier who had taken Maliha. It was not an entirely fruitless endeavor. We eventually found his trail, which led us right to where we were all standing right now.

At an encampment.

There were ten soldiers at this camp that they'd set up in the forest. A fire was burning on one side of the tent. Five ATVs were parked along the side of the tent. As for the tent itself, it was not very large. It was just big enough to hold three people.

"There's been something wrong with Agent Bert," one of the soldiers said. "He disobeyed direct orders and went to retrieve the body on his own. Even now, we're unable to subdue him."

I looked around to see if the rest of the group had heard what one of the soldiers said. They were not wearing their helmets right now. Instead, they were gathered around the fire, sitting there and eating from their MREs. It

was one of the strangest sights I'd ever seen in my life. All of those soldiers had been morphed into something that didn't resemble humans. They looked more like aliens, and yet here they were, being civil, sitting around the fire, talking, eating.

"I guess Agent Bert's just a little overzealous. Wants to get into Blair's good books," another soldier said. "Besides, they didn't just inject us with all this stuff so that we'd be docile and obedient. They want us to behave like this. Isn't that what you want too? To crush some wolf skulls and burn up their homes?"

"Aye, but those are not our orders. Our orders are to capture the Alpha and bring him back to Blair," another soldier responded.

I surmised that it would be a good time for us to talk with them. Maybe this whole thing could be resolved without fighting? So I stepped out into the clearing, my arms up in the air to show that I meant no harm. Behind me, the rest of the wolves followed.

"Come a step closer, and we'll blow your head off, wolf," the soldier nearest to me said, quickly picking up his rifle.

"I just wanted to talk, seeing as that's what you're doing. I take it from your dialects and accent that you were all military men. Well, I was a military man myself once upon a time, and I believe in the military code of conduct. Do you as well?" I asked.

They nodded, lowering their guns.

"Very well. Then let's parley and discuss this before we let it escalate," I said. Behind me, I could see that Alexis and Vince, and the others were

becoming restless. This was a very nerve-wracking situation that I had to somehow balance with the utmost sensitivity.

“There’s no point talking to them,” Alexis said.

“Yeah, Will. Let’s just get this over with. Do you think these jarheads are going to listen? They’re fucking doped up!” Vince whispered.

“Hey, I heard that,” one of them said, pointing his knife at Vince. “And for your information, we’re not doped up. We’re chemically enhanced. There’s a difference. A difference you’ll be able to tell when I fucking kill you!”

“There’s no need to kill anyone,” I said, stepping forward. At my stepping forward, they all raised their guns and aimed them at me.

“You killed sixteen of our good men,” another soldier said. “That precious military code of conduct you talk about states that we do the same to you and your lot.”

“We did that in self-defense,” Alexis said, coming up behind me. “We were ambushed.”

“Yeah, princess, cuz that’s what the mission was!” the soldier standing nearest to us said. “We were sent to capture you both.”

“Instead, you captured an innocent human being,” I said. “I’ve come here to talk about her release.”

“It’s simple, wolf,” the soldier said. “You come with us, and the girl goes free. You don’t come with us, we’ll kill the girl, and then we’ll kill you.”

“Listen, now, I’ve been very patient with you up until now. If you so much as mention killing again, I will see to it that you have a very painful and

prolonged death,” I said slowly. “You think you know pain? I will drag you myself to the lowest circle of hell and ensure that you burn there for an eternity if you even think of harming anyone close to me. That includes my entire pack and that girl you’ve got in that tent.”

“Is that so, wolf? Why don’t we see how strong you really are? Let’s have at it, you and me,” the soldier said.

“Sure, come at me without all that armor, and we’ll see what’s what. Don’t think I don’t know that all your strength comes from your armor and those weapons. Without them, you’re nothing but a drugged-up junkie.”

“And what are you without everything?”

“Without everything, I’m still a werewolf at the end of the day,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” the soldier said. “Within a week, there will be no werewolves in or around Fiddler’s Green. Blair has created an entire army full of soldiers like us, all of whom have one purpose—to kill all the werewolves in Fiddler’s Green. Eventually, we’ll spread out throughout the country and kill all of your kind. That’s the kind of man our leader is. He’s devoted, fanatic, passionate, strong, and intelligent! He wants to reclaim this country from the horrible beasts who killed his father and who have been terrorizing these lands all this time.”

“You think we terrorize these lands? We settled these lands. We never terrorized anybody. It was Blair, with his propaganda, that terrorized the people. His father kept me as a prisoner for more than seventy years. That’s why I killed him. For my life! Don’t come here and talk to me about what’s fair and what’s not. You don’t know the half of it. You’re just a foot soldier in a deranged lunatic’s chaotic game of chess, and you don’t even know it,” I

said.

“That’s it. I’ve had it!” the soldier said, then quickly put on his helmet. The rest of the soldiers copied him, armoring up and picking up their weapons. What they didn’t count on was my rage for retribution. I shifted immediately, and behind me, all the wolves did the same. With five of us on one side of the field and the ten soldiers on the other side, it didn’t feel like a fair battle.

We’d win without a doubt.

I pounced on the soldiers standing closest to me, using all my feral strength to jam my claws into their throats. Sludge-like blood spouted from their jugular veins as they fell to the ground. This left only eight more. Through this attack, I had just learned one of the most powerful techniques for fighting these soldiers—their armors were weakest at the necks.

Alexis and Vince leaped from behind me, falling on two more soldiers and tackling them. The other two wolves who had come with us did the same with the rank of soldiers behind the tent.

Perhaps it was because the wolves were greater in number, or perhaps because we’d caught the soldiers off guard, but this fight did not take as long as I had expected. I killed two more of them using their own grenades against them by pulling the pins and pushing them off the forest slope. As they rolled backward, their grenades exploded, killing them that very instant.

In the time that I’d killed four, the rest of the pack had taken care of the remaining six. This left only one soldier who had refused to come out and join the fight, Agent Bert.

I entered the tent in my human form and saw him standing there with Maliha

in front of him. Agent Bert held Maliha by the throat and had a gun to her head.

“Move one step closer, and I’ll fucking blow her brains out!” he yelled. I could see now that Alexis was right about him being utterly deranged.

“Will! What is happening?” Maliha whimpered.

“Shh. It’s okay,” I said, raising my hands.

“Don’t lie to her. I’ll kill her first, and then I’ll kill you!” Agent Bert said, his eyes glowing fiercely.

Before he could make good on this threat, the tent opened up from behind him, and Alexis pounced at him from behind in her wolf form, catching him off guard. Agent Bert hadn’t been wearing his helmet. As he turned around, Alexis bit down on his head and ripped it off his neck.

“Holy fuck!” Maliha yelled as she witnessed this macabre spectacle of a larger-than-life wolf beheading a maniacal soldier. She came running to me and then hid behind me, peeking from under my arms. “What is my life right now? What is happening?”

And then, Alexis, now done with dismembering Agent Bert, shifted back into her human form. “There’s something I have to tell you, Maliha.”

“Alexis?” Maliha stuttered, then swooned and fell unconscious.

I looked at Alexis and said, “I can understand how it can be hard for someone to see their best friend shifting from a wolf.”

Alexis sighed, then lifted Maliha in her arms. “She’s had a hell of a day. I’m going to take her back to her apartment and wait for her to wake up. Then I’ll



explain everything to her and swear her to secrecy.”

“Take Vince and the others with you. I will not let you go without protection. It’s not safe out there,” I said.

“What about you?”

“As you can see, I can take care of myself,” I said, pumping my muscles in the air and waving my arms at the fallen soldiers. “They’re not hard to beat once you learn the trick.”

“Hit ‘em in the neck?” Alexis asked.

“That’s my girl!” I said, patting her head.

She grinned at me, then delivered a quick peck to my cheek before exiting the tent.

I, in the meantime, looked around the tent to figure out what the soldiers were doing here and what kind of weaponry they had left behind. It would prove to be very useful if we could use their weapons against them.

Once all the werewolves were gone, and I was left entirely alone in the clearing, I did something I’d intended to do ever since I’d laid my eyes on it. On every soldier’s body, there was a comm that was still working. A comm that undoubtedly connected to Blair. I picked one up and pushed its button. Static noises came from the other side.

“Hello?” I spoke.

The static continued for a whole minute, and then a voice spoke from the other end of the line. “Well, well, if it isn’t Wilhelm Grimm.”

“Don’t you dare take my name with your filthy mouth,” I said.

“Ah, there’s that spark that I’ve been missing in my life. I missed you, Will,” Blair said sardonically from the comm.

“Why are you sending these soldiers? Haven’t you had enough? Or would you rather I tracked you down and killed you like I killed Ralph and Maurice?” I snarled.

“Not to mention your own brother...tsk...tsk,” Blair said. “How terrible is that.”

“Don’t preach morality to me,” I said. “You’re hardly one to talk.”

“Oh, I’m afraid that this is all about morality to me. You see, Will, the day you killed my father, I swore an oath. I promised myself that I’d kill you no matter what it took. Granted, this is an extreme measure, but I’m afraid that I have to take it. You’re proving very difficult to kill. If past experience is any indication, I guess it would take an army to kill you again. Oh, right, I did kill you the first time, didn’t I? Well, this time around, I’ll nail the fucking coffin myself to make sure you can’t get out,” Blair said.

“Big words from a man hiding behind shadows. Why don’t you come out and face me yourself?” I asked.

“And let you do to me what you did to Griswold? No thanks. I’ll stay a safe distance away and let my cronies take care of you. I don’t need to kill you myself. I just need you and your pack of rabid dogs to die. And soon, I’ll finally be able to complete my father’s work. After this, there are going to be no more wolves left howling in the night,” Blair said. “It was good to catch up with you. Hopefully, the next time we meet, it’ll be me looking upon your

beheaded head on a silver platter.”

“We’ll see whose head is on a platter,” I said. “Now that you’ve threatened my pack know that I will do whatever’s in my power to end you and your army of drugged-up mercenaries.”

“Blah, blah, talk is cheap. Show me you mean it. Why don’t you try to find me? I’ll be impressed if you do,” Blair said, then hung up.

“Oh, I will,” I said to myself, looking at the crates of weapons that the soldiers had left behind. I opened them up and saw, to my surprise, that they were filled with grenades and those special guns that the soldiers used.

That was their first mistake. They would regret losing these weapons.

# Chapter 9

Alexis

It wasn't a comfortable ride as Vince drove the car to the apartment building where Maliha lived. My escorts included the two wolves from the pack who had helped us, Morgan and John, making that battered-up Mitsubishi Lancer a very confined space with no room to breathe. As for Maliha, she was knocked out cold in the back of the car with her head in my lap. I could not wait to get out.

While the car took us to the flats, I tried to come up with a speech that I'd deliver to Maliha the moment she woke up. She had been through a lot and had seen just as much, not to mention watching her friend shift from a wolf right before her eyes. Things like that stayed with a person for the rest of her life. Knowing what I knew about my best friend, I understood that she would not take this sort of thing lightly. First, she would be mad at me for keeping such a big secret from her all this time. This would make her feel as if she was betrayed, kept out of the loop, and untrusted. Secondly, she'd fail to see how this didn't link with some conspiracies out there. This would make her go crazy.

She'd end up thinking in tangents such as "If werewolves are real, then vampires are real, and if vampires and werewolves are real, then the Big Foot is real, and the aliens are real..." and so forth. She'd have to be admitted to the trauma ward in a mental hospital. There had to be some way I could break

the news to her without compromising her mental health.

“Alexis, we’re there,” Vincent said. It was very rare that he called me by my first name. He was always calling me Lexie or Alex or something like that. This must mean that he was in a very grave mood.

“What’s up with you?” I asked as I got out of the car. Morgan and John helped me get Maliha out of the car. Morgan held her in his arms. She was still unconscious.

“Just this realization that we’re never going to be out of danger,” Vincent said. “I’m tired of all of this. Aren’t you? Isn’t it about damn time that we had some peace? First, the vampires, now the soldiers. And have you seen what the soldiers have done? Just a single one of them was able to break down one of our strongest walls as if it was made of play dough. Aren’t you a little bit scared?”

“Being scared is not one of my strongest suits. I’ve learned the hard way that being scared is just a synonym for being unprepared. I was always telling everyone that we should not let our guard down because there was something yet still out there. And there was. These soldiers. At least now the entire pack knows. What we can do instead of being scared is to look to Will for his leadership and arm ourselves so that when the soldiers come—and they will come, mark my words—we’ll be able to hold our own against them,” I said. It was odd that I was feeling this resolute after my brush with those soldiers.

Deep in the sea, there was a certain type of fish that thrived under pressure. They dwelled deep below the surface, never seeing any light and never coming in contact with the reefs and the shallower part of the sea. All they ever did was thrive under pressure. When they were forcefully taken out of

that pressurized zone, they died because their bodies had adapted to such brute force being pushed down on them at all times.

Perhaps I was like those fish. Whenever there was no stress or pressure around me, I felt like my life was spiraling out of control. I'd get symptoms that would resemble PTSD or some other mental malady. But now, when such pressure was being applied, I felt normal. As if this was supposed to happen and I was just supposed to deal with it.

It was a disturbing thought but one that had crossed my mind many times. What if I was not suited to peacetime? What if my domain was the domain of war, battles, and uncertainty? If that was indeed the case, then I'd have to say goodbye to that distant utopian life that I'd thought I'd one day have with Will. A life where we'd have a family, a house, some boring white-collar job that he'd go to, and me being the traditional housewife.

Maybe that would never be my fate.

"You best hurry up. She's waking up, and she'll be wanting some answers quick," Morgan said, nudging his head at Maliha, who was shaking in his arms and wincing in her state of unconsciousness.

I lifted her in my arms and took her inside the building. By the time we reached her floor, Maliha had woken up and was acting hysterically.

"Let me go! I don't trust you! Who are you?" she yelled as I dragged her against her will into her apartment.

"Would you calm down, for fuck's sake? I'm trying to help you," I said and sat her down on her sofa.

"You!" Maliha lifted her finger blamefully. "You're a bad friend. A liar."

“A bad friend, a liar who just saved your life,” I said. It was not beneath me to play the hero card, and in this case, I did have to so that she’d realize that I wasn’t her enemy and that she was alive because of me.

“Fair enough, but don’t think I’ve recovered mentally, emotionally, or spiritually from the shit that I’ve just seen,” Maliha snapped, rubbing her temples with her fingers. “I saw you shift. You were a wolf one second ago, and then you were a human. And you killed that soldier with your teeth. You bit his entire head off!”

“Again, I saved your life, so you’re welcome,” I said.

“What are you talking about? It was only because of you that my life was in danger in the first place!”

I didn’t know what to say to her. She was agitated and not in her right senses. I wouldn’t blame her. Given what she had been through, anyone would be rattled. Truth be told, she was processing it better than most.

“Do you want an explanation or not?” I asked calmly.

“First, I want ten shots of tequila and a rum and coke chaser to go with them,” Maliha said. “And then I want an explanation, not for how you can turn into a wolf and back, but for why you never told me. I thought we were besties.”

“And we are. We still are. It’s nothing like that. Imagine it from my perspective, will you? I’m a werewolf, and I belong to a pack of werewolves, all of whom have been sworn to secrecy to hide the ways of supernatural creatures from normal human beings. It’s an oath as old as time. That’s why your kind never sees dragons flying about in the air or fairies in the prairies.

There's a fine line that separates our worlds, the very same line that makes sure that when you sleep at night, you don't have to worry about vampires. It's a whole world out there, a world filled with fantastical creatures."

Maliha's eyes had gone wide, even though I knew for a fact that alcohol had the opposite effect on her. "Ghouls are real?"

"Ghouls are real. And sprites too."

"Just to be clear. You're talking about sprites and not spirits. They're different things," Maliha clarified.

"Yes, sprites, spirits, they're both real too. Vampires as well. All those folk tales that you used to hear growing up they're all true. The world does have unicorns and magic. There are leprechauns and dwarves out there somewhere too. Probably," I said, feeling overwhelmed by just telling her all this and wondering if she'd be able to keep this secret.

"That thing you said about trying to see things from your perspective, I get it. I'd have a hard time trusting anyone with this. I am glad you trusted me," she said.

"Is this you or the booze talking?"

"Shut up, silly. It's me talking. I wasn't really mad or anything. I was just jittery from my life being in danger," she said. "So, what else can you do? Are you like one of those classic wolves are shown in the movies? Are you weak to silver? Can you only turn on the full moon? Do you go crazy with bloodlust when you're shifted into your wolf form?"

"Some of those are stereotypes, but yes, we're somewhat weak to silver. Other than that, it's all hogwash. But the moon does grant us some strength.



We can shift pretty much as we want,” I said.

“Would you shift now, for me, please?” her eyes were as round as quarters as she asked this.

To placate her, I shifted in her room, filling up most of the space.

“Holy Mary, mother of Jesus!” Maliha gasped. Once the shock wore off, she came near me and patted me on the head. “Can you make sense of what I’m saying?”

I nodded in response.

“That’s so fucking cool!”

I promptly shifted back, seeing as I had my work cut out for me. “I figure I owe you an explanation, and so I’ll give you one,” I said. And then, I unpacked everything that had ever happened to me, starting with Will’s journey from Germany to my parents dying and ending with me rescuing Maliha today.

It took me a total of two hours to tell her everything.

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“So how did she take it? You were there for quite a while,” Will asked, pouring himself some whiskey. He poured me one as well and handed me the glass. It was strange for me to see how disaffected he was by what had just happened. I wondered why he was being so calm about all this.

“Well, I told her everything, then made her swear that she’d never tell anyone anything and then explained to her why we needed her help. She’s in. She’s

going to help us from now on,” I said somewhat happily. A huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders now that I knew that my best friend was in on my secret.

“I’m glad,” Will said, then gulped his whiskey down in one. “We’re tending to the wall right now. I told the pack to reinforce it with lead.”

“Lead, iron, silver, what does it matter? They’re just going to break in again whenever they want to,” I said.

“I don’t believe that’s true,” Will said. “They must have learned that attacking us on our home front will only result in countless casualties for them. Last I checked, we’re still on the winning side. Sixteen we killed earlier, and ten we killed later on. That’s twenty-six dead soldiers.”

“In the face of an army, twenty-six is barely a number. Didn’t you hear what they were saying? They have an army at their disposal. An army, Will! That’s hundreds of soldiers. How are we going to take on so many of them at once?” I slammed my glass down on the coffee table. Alcohol was the last thing I needed right now. I wanted my head to be as clear as it could be to process everything that was happening around me.

“Haven’t we faced worse odds?” Will asked quietly.

“And look what happened! Once, you got almost killed, and I fell off a building. The second time, I got kidnapped and was held captive by Maurice. The third time, our entire town was about to be blown to the heavens with bombs! If it weren’t for me taking all those bombs out to sea, we’d have all been dead. Not to mention you lost your brother. The fourth time, we were quietly and calmly asleep when all the vampires attacked us at once. Have we taken it upon ourselves to come into the crosshairs of danger and recklessness

every chance we get? Why can't we do something else?" I was exhausted, not out of any physical exertion but because it was so difficult right now to make Will see where I was coming from.

"And what is it that you suggest we do? Abandon ship? Run for greener pastures? Stop fighting and surrender?" Will's voice was raised.

"In another life, if things had been somewhat more normal, I would have loved to run away with you, but I know we cannot do that. The pack needs our help, and we must be there for them. I understand that. But for how long will we keep dragging the pack with us? How many times will it anchor us and be used as an excuse not to leave this godforsaken piece of land?" Tempers were running high, especially my own, but if I didn't have this confrontation with Will right now, I'd never get the chance to do so. We had to air our dirty laundry right now, even though we might end up hurting each other.

"As long as I am the Alpha, I cannot leave the pack. You, of all people, should know better. You're my fated mate. We're bound to each other. Aren't all these thoughts pretty much intuitive to you by now? Can't you see what I'm thinking?"

"And can't you see what I'm going through, then? If we're fated mates, you should be able to sense that your mate is in mental anguish, that every day I wake up, I have to relive all my traumas over and over again, all those haunting memories of everything that has ever gone wrong in my life!" I didn't want to scream, and I didn't, but my voice had raised itself to match his, and I was certain that if it went just a decibel higher, it would devolve into a scream.

Will took a deep breath and then stood up, his hands on his waist, his face furrowed into a frown. “What would you have me do?”

“I would have you pass the baton to the next person in line to be Alpha and come with me so that we can start our lives together. Away from all this madness and danger and desolation,” I said. This time, my voice was soft and slow.

“Lexie,” Will said, then held my hands, “what are we going to do about the soldiers? Leave the pack to fend for themselves? Blair is the sort of person who makes good on his promises. He’s going to hunt both of us down just for revenge. Not to mention all the people who live in Fiddler’s Green, their lives would be in constant jeopardy.”

It was hard to argue with him when he was making such a strong and valid point, but this was not about valid points and strong arguments. This was about him validating my feelings and understanding what I was going through.

“I do understand what you’re going through,” Will said, smiling warmly at me. “And, if you, please bear with me, once this Blair dilemma has resolved itself, I promise you that we will fulfill your dream. It’s not just your dream. It’s ours.”

“Really?” I asked, holding his face in my hands and pulling him closer to me.

“I promise, baby,” Will said, then kissed me on my lips. There was a certain power to kissing after a quarrel. It was like reconnecting on a spiritual level and rediscovering my partner in a new light entirely. His lips felt supple, his tongue smooth and wet. The way he sucked on my mouth as he held me in his arms made me feel turned on, and there I stood, wrapped in his arms,

forgetting why we'd just squabbled with each other.

As he kissed me, all my worries dissolved. I kissed his cheek, then planted my lips on his neck to give him one heck of a hickey. He put his firm hands on my butt and squeezed, making me hornier. We'd crossed the borders of kiss-and-makeup territory and were stepping into makeup-sex land, where all things were solvable by lovemaking and orgasming together.

I nudged his hand between my thighs just as I grabbed the outline of his cock over his jeans.

But before we could make good on our foreplay's promise of sex, there was a knock on the door. This was a strange knock that rapped five times at the door with a certain harshness to it. Almost businesslike.

"Who is it at this hour?" Will sighed as he headed to the door. "Don't you go anywhere. I'm coming back to finish what we've started."

He winked at me as he went to the door, causing me to blush in anticipation. I stood there as decently as possible in the living room, watching from behind him as he opened the door.

A gentleman holding a grey cane, wearing a deep purple suit, and sporting a long blonde ponytail stood at the door, his eyes shining blue, his jawline sharp and angular.

"Good day, Wilhelm Grimm. Good day, Alexis Richards. I come to you on behalf of the Clandestine Order to deliver you these summonses for your appearance in the Clandestine Court for the crimes that have been committed in Fiddler's Green pertaining to the safety and harmony of the supernatural beings who reside in the vicinity," this man stated in a strange accent.

“The Clandestine Order?” I asked Will.

He turned around and looked at me, an expression of shock on his face, and then shook his head dejectedly.

# Chapter 10

Will

“I’m sorry,” Alexis said, looking confused and coming to join me where I stood at the door. She extended her hand, which the emissary shook at once. “But I’ve never heard once of the Clandestine Order.”

“It wouldn’t be called the Clandestine Order if everyone knew of it. We excel at working in the shadows to maintain a delicate balance between all species that aren’t, strictly speaking, human,” the emissary said. “Where are my manners? My name is Rogelio. I serve the Clandestine Order as their messenger.”

“And do you often make it a habit of showing up at people’s doors out of nowhere?” Alexis asked.

I hadn’t yet become an active participant in this conversation because I was racking my mind to remember what the Clandestine Order was. I had heard of them operating in the United States even as far back as seventy years ago. While no one had officially told me what the Clandestine Order was, the chain of Alphas of the Grimm pack shared intel about different organizations in different countries who oversaw the rules, regulations, order, harmony, and maintenance of the supernatural world. A world that werewolves were a part of.

From what the previous Alpha had told me, I remembered that the

Clandestine Order existed in the United States. The Syndicate of Secrecy existed in Europe. And in Asia, the League of Shadows oversaw all affairs of supernatural beings. Many such organizations were serving as governments for their designated continents.

All I knew was this: The Clandestine Order was supposed to be the most powerful organization to exist in the world. There was no running from them and no way to avoid their judgment.

“I appear when needs be, such as now. I have this summons for you, Alexis Richards, and one for you, Wilhelm Grimm, from the Clandestine Order. Both of you are to appear in front of the Clandestine Court in Manhattan tomorrow sharp at eleven o’clock.”

“But that’s on such short notice!” Alexis protested.

“Madam, I do not decide upon these timings. I am merely the messenger. If you have any questions, you may register them with me, and I shall convey your official message to the Order. But I must warn you, failure to appear in front of the Clandestine Court will result in imprisonment as well as a heavy fine.”

“Will, can you believe the nerve of this guy? He fucking barges in, demands us to show up at some looney-tunes court, and then threatens to imprison us if we’re not cooperative?” Alexis turned to Rogelio and lifted her fist. “What if I make it impossible for you to go back to convey your message? Will they still imprison us?”

Rogelio moved so fast that even I couldn’t completely register what had happened. He disappeared from in front of Alexis and teleported behind her. His cane had turned into a long sword that he was pointing at Alexis. I had to



act just as quickly to disarm him and throw his sword on the ground.

Then, I lifted it and handed it back to him.

“Alexis, we’re not harming the emissary,” I said, pulling her behind me. “And I must warn you, Rogelio, not to take up arms against the Alpha wolf and his mate in their house. It won’t go well for you.”

“I was attacked first by the madam,” Rogelio said, taking his sword and turning it back into a cane in one magical swish.

“She doesn’t know what the Clandestine Order is. Forgive her. Let this not come up as a charge against us in the Court,” I said.

“Will, what the fuck is happening? Is this even a real thing? How can you let this random ass guy...”?

I lifted my finger to my lips. That stopped her from speaking further. Then I turned to Rogelio and quizzically raised my eye.

“I will overlook this slight against me, but only because your mate was unaware of the existence of the Clandestine Order. I understand that sometimes there is a confusion that can cause people to lash out,” he said matter-of-factly.

“May I inquire as to what the charges against us are?” I asked. It was not without reason that the Clandestine Order summoned someone. This Order comprised all kinds of beings—werewolves, vampires, fairies, ghouls, wizards, and whomever else was important and powerful with a large enough demographic to warrant a governing body.

“The charges against you are,” Rogelio said, taking out a scroll from his coat

and reading it, “disruption of the peaceful coexistence of beings in the county of Fiddler’s Green, threatening the lives of other fantastical beings such as vampires, witches, gnomes, ghouls, and the fae folk. As per the Order’s diction, your warmongering in these parts has resulted in the disruption of the balance that exists between all beings, including human beings. Do you deny these charges?”

Now it was my turn to be angry. If the Order were really as omniscient as I’d been led to believe, they’d have overseen what was happening. They would have taken notice of the vampires and the chaos they had bred in the form of their militaristic control of the town for the sake of their smuggling. They must have seen what Blair had been doing all along. Worse, they must have been aware of the Occultist Edward Beckett and his inhuman experiments. In all this time, they had done nothing and had remained “clandestine.” And now they had the gall to come here and paint me guilty.

“I deny the charges. In fact, I have a good mind to show up tomorrow at the Court and inquire as to how they dare to charge me with a crime when all the fault lies with those who have wronged me!” I stated.

“And yet you’ve been at the center of all those occurrences. So whose fault is it? Yours or theirs?”

“Theirs!” Alexis came to my side. “How can the Order be so blind to what has been happening here?”

“Very well,” Rogelio said. “Then, for the laws that you have broken and the crimes you have committed, Wilhelm Grimm and Alexis Richards shall appear before the Clandestine Court tomorrow. Good day to you both.”

I watched as Rogelio bowed to both of us and left through the door. When I

went after him to see where he had gone, he was not there, leaving me standing there alone, trapped in a state of indecision.

On the one hand, I had to care for the pack, especially now that the soldiers had suddenly popped out of nowhere. No one was safe, at least not while the soldiers were running around. Blair had to be taken down. His army needed to be controlled. Both those things were extremely imminent. The more I'd delay them, the more casualties would be on my hands. At this critical juncture, the thought of going away for a day to answer the Clandestine Court made me feel as if the rug had been pulled from under me.

And on the other hand, the Clandestine Order was an organization that commanded respect and authority over all of North America, not just the United States. If a Wendigo crossed the border from Canada to America, they knew of it. If some bruja attacked a bunch of innocent people in Mexico, they saw to it that the bruja was contained. And yet, despite all of their control and authority, they had seemingly ignored this town and the events that had taken place here for the past seventy years. Going to them tomorrow would not only be a chance for me and Alexis to clear our names but also an opportunity for me to find out why they had been so lacking in their diligence in this part of the country.

“Will,” Alexis’s hand touched my shoulder gently and pulled me back inside the house.

“What do I do?” I asked her. It was not out of a lack of confidence that I was asking her; it was because she was my better half and knew me better than I knew myself. She’d know the right answer.

“We’re innocent—both of us. The first thing we do is clear our names.

Meanwhile, the pack is already on high alert after the recent attack. They're rebuilding the wall, circling the perimeter, and going on scouting missions to find out more soldiers. I believe that we can delegate the role of temporary leadership to Vince while we're in New York. We have to trust in him to do the right thing. He's proven himself to be very mature and present-minded."

I looked at her lovingly and placed my palm under her chin. Then I reached down to kiss her while embracing her body.

"I'm sorry that we got into an argument earlier," I said. "It was never my intention to hurt you."

"And you haven't hurt me in a long time, Will. I am so proud of you. You know, I'm glad about that little squabble that we had. Neither of us resorted to screaming or raging. We talked it out. It was rational. Do you remember when you first came to me? How quickly you'd give in to rage? And now look at you, you're like so contained and calm, it's remarkable. You have come a long way, and I'm just so happy that you're my mate," she said, hugging me back. "We're good. No apologies needed whatsoever."

It was as if I had stepped into an oasis in a desert. In Alexis's company, I felt strong, sure, and comforted. Outside of that oasis, Blair lurked with his soldiers, and the Clandestine Order loomed from on high, and just as I had felt the first day after securing my freedom, the danger was everywhere. But it was not in here, not in this safe space with Alexis next to me.

"Well, I believe we're heading for New York then," I said, breaking free from the long embrace.

"Not so fast," Alexis said, then pulled me closer by hooking her finger on my belt. I looked at her, eyebrows raised, and she nodded slowly, seductively.

She took off my belt and undid the buttons of my jeans. I obliged by taking off her top, leaving her only with her black bra that showed her breasts and her cleavage quite liberally. Alexis ran her fingers up my thighs, making me feel pleasure at a cellular level as her hands reached up to my hardening cock.

I turned around to check if the door was closed and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that it was. Then, anticipating what was coming, I closed my eyes as a ring of ecstasy closed around my penis and enveloped the entire shaft.

I peeked and saw her holding my erect length in her hand while sucking it from the top. It felt so good that I could feel a surge of sexual pleasure running down my legs and up my waist.

She pushed me as she sucked my cock, causing me to fall on the sofa behind me. I lay there as she worked her magic with her hands and her mouth, closing my eyes against the waves of pleasure that drove me to bliss.

Alexis opened her mouth and swallowed my tip within, sucking on it gently while licking the underside with her tongue. Then she intertwined her fingers with mine as she took it deeper into her mouth. She moaned softly as she sucked it, and I let out a low breath as my tip erupted with a sexual current.

I pulled her up on the sofa and sat her on top of me. From here, I lifted her dress and slid her panties to the side as I entered my wet, hard cock in her pussy. It felt like a hot, tight, slippery, and deep glove wrapped around my penis. She took off her bra and lay on top of me as she rode me, all the while pecking my neck with hot kisses.

I held her by her back and guided her as she rocked back and forth, taking my cock as deep inside of her as she could. Her face had contorted into an expression of liberation, pleasure, and desire. She moaned as I touched her

breasts, fondling her nipples, and thrust myself deeper into her.

Then, I wrapped my arms around her and spun her around so that now I was lying on top of her, and she was under me. Our eyes met, and our breaths became one in the close vicinity of our mouths. I kissed her on the lips, taking her tongue in my mouth and letting it slide against mine, our mouths emulating sex on an oral level.

In this position, we were at our most intimate. My body was atop her, feeling every inch of it as I moved slowly and firmly, letting my dick explore her down to the deepest part. It then occurred to me that I could exponentially increase her pleasure if I just put my thumb on her clit as I moved on top of her.

It drove me crazy with pleasure when I rubbed my thumb on her clit and watched her go into a sexual frenzy, her hair whipping everywhere, her loud moans escaping her mouth, her nails digging into my back, her legs constricting around my hips, and her breasts heaving as she orgasmed with my thumb on her clit and my cock in her pussy.

More than the pleasure that I was deriving from this lovemaking, it was seeing her in this state that caused me to cum hard inside of her.

As I lay by her side on the sofa, I said, “Now, that’s one way to take my mind off everything.”

“And don’t forget it’s great cardio,” Alexis said, then burst into giggles.

“I love you so much,” I said, kissing her cheek.

“Oh, Will, I love you too,” she said and kissed me on my chest. Then she went to sleep with her head resting on my shoulder.

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Vince had done me the service of bringing my Jeep back from the resort along with all of my and Alexis's things. The Jeep stood parked in front of our house, and the entire pack stood assembled in front of me.

"I am not abandoning you. An Alpha would never dream of such a thing. It is a time of need for the pack, and I understand that better than most. We are surrounded by danger even after all the victories that we have achieved in battle. Now is the time for every single wolf amongst you to take up arms and rise to the occasion. Be ever so vigilant and never let even so much as a shadow cross without you knowing of it. It may well be that an enemy is hiding in that shadow. It's only together that we can protect each other. So look after each other, especially the women, children, and those who need help. Besides, I'm not leaving you alone. Vince is going to be taking care of all of you. He's proven himself quite capable of doing that," I said, patting Vince's shoulder.

"But how long are you going for?" Morgan, a pack member, asked.

"Well, Morgan, the Clandestine Court has called us for a hearing tomorrow. So, we're probably going to take one day to go, attend the session, and come back. I hope that nothing bad happens in the meantime," I said.

"The Clandestine Court?" Vince asked. "What do they want from you?"

"You know about them?" Alexis asked him.

"Just in passing. Dad used to mention them when he was the alpha, but I never really understood his context. But I know that they're very powerful

and not to be trifled with,” Vince said.

“Well, I’m going with an actual case prepared for the court,” I said. It was true. After Alexis had gone to sleep and I was lying there wide awake, I had thought up what I’d say to them. The crux of it was that my conscience was clear, and everything that I had done, I had done for the safety and protection of those around me. Some of the actions I’d taken were also for my own well-being. After Alexis had woken up, I had shared my speech with her and asked her what she’d thought of it. She’d said that if I delivered it exactly like I had done to her, the Court would have no choice but to declare us innocent.

Perhaps they would even admit their mistakes and do better from now on. If they had been involved in the first place, the vampires would never have gotten a stronghold in this area, and Blair wouldn’t have gotten as out of control as he had. Maurice wouldn’t have become Alpha, either. My well-crafted speech had these points included in it as well.

“Well, wish us luck,” I said, getting in the Jeep. “I trust every single one of you to take care of the commune and each other. And should any soldier cross your path, they should regret doing so.”

The crowd chanted in affirmation. Some said goodbye, while the others waved. Alexis got in the Jeep with me, waving to the pack members as I reversed the car out of Grimm Abode and headed for the interstate that would lead us to New York.



# Chapter 11

Alexis

“Aren’t you gleeful?” Will asked, passing me a smile as he drove on the interstate that headed to New York.

I just couldn’t help myself. We were out of Fiddler’s Green, and for me, that was occasion enough to be happy. Granted, we were headed towards something unknown and potentially terrible, but how bad could it really be? Compared to the weight of the horrible memories that I had in Fiddler’s Green, how bad could the future really be?

“It’s a nice night for a drive. We’re going to the greatest city on this side of the country. And, if I remember correctly, the whole court appearance thing isn’t until tomorrow. Do you know what that means?” I playfully placed my hand on Will’s thigh and ran it up to his pelvis.

“Someone’s in a fine mood,” Will said, still grinning, but his eyes fixed on the road. “You do realize that if they charge us with some crime that we haven’t committed, it could make things complicated for us and the pack. We may get banished, and in some cases, they can even pass the death sentence.”

“Please,” I said, scoffing and waving my hand. “They have zero precedence to do something like that. Think about it for a second. We haven’t taken any innocent lives. The things we have done are just to defend ourselves. Our existence is still a secret that we’ve guarded well. Not counting Maliha, of

course. But I doubt that they're going to bring that up in the court hearing tomorrow. My intuition is right about these things. They don't have anything solid. No leg to stand on, as they say. We're going to be fine."

"I wish I had your confidence," Will said. We were now passing through the Lincoln Tunnel and heading towards downtown Manhattan.

"Will, aren't we supposed to be uptown? I booked rooms for us for the night in that Airbnb," I asked. It had been a while since we'd entered New York and were now heading toward Broadway.

"See, I was thinking along the same lines as you," Will said. This time, he pulled his car to the side, parked it by the curb, and looked at me as he revealed his big surprise. "I kinda wanted to surprise you. You're right. The court session's tomorrow. There's no reason why we shouldn't have a fine night."

"Sweet!" I said cheerfully as we got out of the car. "So, are we painting the town red? What's the agenda? It's been so long since we were last in New York. I want to visit Central Park, see the Grand Central Station, and maybe even take a few pictures in Times Square. We can catch a show on Broadway. Aah! There's so much to do." I was letting my excitement get the better of me. In my defense, New York was like this bustling microcosm where all the good things seemed to happen. Everyone was either busy in their daily hustle or enjoying the wonders that this great cultural capital had to offer.

For me, it was the polar opposite of Fiddler's Green, where nothing exciting ever happened, and everything was monotonous.

"Easy, easy," Will said, taking my hand and guiding me to the inner sidewalk

under the scaffolding. In New York, it seemed like there was always scaffolding around on the streets. “We’re going to this secret Michelin-starred restaurant called Captain Black.”

“Where’s this coming from?” I threw him an inquisitive look. I was pleasantly surprised by this. Everything that had happened in the recent days had been so tumultuous, bearing the air of finality, especially that last part with the emissary from the Clandestine Order. But this was nice. This brought to memory all the wonderful times that Will and I had shared throughout our relationship. Times that had been completely unburdened by the tenebrous things happening around us.

“I realized something earlier tonight when we were driving to New York,” Will said, taking my arm as he led me past the scaffolding and into a seemingly abandoned building. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I noticed that fairy light hung from the ceiling of the foyer. Compared to the rush of the traffic and the people outside, this place was in stark contrast with its dim lighting, quiet atmosphere, and the soft trailing smell of delicious food. When I stepped further in, I could hear faint music playing in the background.

“What did you realize?” I asked, taking his arm as he led me past the entrance hall and up the stairs.

“I felt that because of everything that was happening around us, we lost sight of what was truly important. Each other,” Will said. “We’re engaged to each other. There’s a very real possibility that we’re going to be married to each other in the next few months.”

“Why is that a real possibility?”

“Because I can’t wait more than a couple of months. I don’t want this engagement to hang over our heads forever. I want to be married to you as soon as possible. Together, we’ll start our new life. And that’s a promise,” Will said.

Now, a waiter appeared from behind a door and greeted us as we stepped onto the rooftop, where the whole sitting area was decorated with wooden paneling, gazebos, and palapas. The whole place had a tropical feel to it. Miraculously, even though we were out in the open, there was no noise coming from below. It was as if magic was at work here.

“Will, is this place sort of like enchanted?” I asked, feeling a bit worried that he might have led me to some magician’s den or a sorcerer’s lair.

“Relax. It’s just a little bit of acoustic engineering. Nothing else. The only thing magical about this place is their food,” he said, taking my arm and guiding me to the far side of the rooftop, where a table for two was reserved for us. Candles were lit atop that table in tiny glasses.

“Fancy!” I cheered as I sat, clapping my hands twice to show my appreciation for the interior décor and the table presentation.

“Would the monsieur and madam like to try our red wine?” the waiter asked, bowing in front of our table with a bottle in his hand. “It’s a Chateau de Frost, aged a hundred years. Straight from the French vineyards.”

“We would like it if you left us the bottle, my good man,” Will smiled at the waiter, who obliged and placed the bottle at the center of the table.

“Our menu tonight includes the chef’s special of roasted duck served with an exquisite oriental gravy. If you’re in the mood for something vegan, we have

an excellent Greek salad topped with vegan cheese, nuts, and Italian seasoning,” the waiter said.

“Ooh, I kinda feel like eating an entire duck,” I said.

“What else do you have?” Will asked, perusing the menu.

“We have wagyu steak seared to medium rare perfection, served with some of the best organic vegetable sides that are available in New York. We recommend serving it with our Neapolitan cocktail that contains fifty-year-old Glen McKenna whiskey. The aroma of the whiskey brings out the cocktail’s finer tastes and goes perfectly with the steak.”

“Then I’ll have that because I’ve worked up quite the appetite tonight,” Will said, handing him over the menu.

I promptly handed the waiter the menu back and poured myself some wine. I wasn’t in the mood for whiskey. Whenever I’d drunk anything that contained whiskey, I felt immediately energized. Tonight was all about relaxing with my mate.

“I must thank you for treating me to this fine dinner,” I said, raising my glass to him.

“No thanks needed, my love. I am your mate, and such are my duties,” Will said, clinking his glass with mine.

“I know we’re not supposed to talk shop while we’re on this nice date, but what do you think will happen tomorrow?” I asked. It was something that was at the forefront of my mind, and no matter how much I tried to tether myself to the present, I couldn’t help but think about it.

“I am not worried about it all. Whatever happens, I know that my mate is with me. Our bond has never been stronger than it is now. Besides, the Clandestine Order is nothing but medieval bureaucracy. They’ve been too out of touch with the real world. They literally sit in their ivory tower and judge the world from on high. It might open their eyes to our troubles if we take a stand tomorrow instead of just letting them berate us,” Will said. “And that’s why I’m not worried. I intend to give them a piece of my mind. So should you.”

“That’s good advice,” I said, mulling his words in my mind. “Maybe they need to know how lax they’ve gotten.”

“Exactly, and I’m afraid that’s enough work talk for now. It seems that our waiter has arrived.”

I looked around and saw our waiter arriving with two big trays balancing on each arm. From the moment he set the trays on our table to the moment we finished eating, it was all a fantastical blur of great taste, excellent drinks, good times, hearty talk, and cheery laughter. It was exactly what I needed.

After that, Will and I got into our car and headed to the Airbnb that we’d booked. The night was still young when we checked into our cozy little crafty one-bedroom apartment, but I had some ideas in mind as to how to remedy that.

“Nightcap, my love?” I asked, standing at the kitchenette where the Airbnb host had graciously left some wine in the decanter.

But instead of replying, Will came behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist, and kissed me deep on the neck. It was so sudden that a moan escaped me as I felt his coarse beard brush against my smooth neck.

For a second, it seemed as if this was our life. That everything we had left behind in Fiddler's Green was just a dream. In reality, we were this couple who lived in a small loft-like one-room apartment with brick walls and overflowing indoor plants. I closed my eyes and imagined myself deeper into this fantasy.

But Will's hands were on my hips, making them gently sway, and his lips on the back of my neck brought me back to the real world, a world where I was feeling sexually charged. There was no more anticipation about what would happen tomorrow. Tomorrow was tomorrow's problem.

Right now, I wanted to make love to my man.

I reached behind me to where he stood, my hand tracing the outline of his rock-hard cock. It throbbed against his tight jeans, begging to be let free. I slowly turned around and found myself staring into his intent eyes, his face all huffed up with sexual excitement, his arms wrapped around my shoulders, snugly fitting me in his tight embrace.

"You have been by my side every step of the way," Will whispered into my ear. "And I cherish you for it."

"I am your mate. It is my duty, my desire, and my honor," I whispered back, caressing the back of his neck with my fingers, then lowering my fingers past his waist, grabbing his firm butt.

"I love you," Will said.

"I love you too."

What happened next was truly magical.

He lifted me off my feet, holding me in his arms as he took me to the bedroom, kissing me on my lips all the while. I felt protected and safe in his embrace. He laid me down on the bed, then, while towering over me, took off his shirt and his jeans.

I cast a glance to the window on my right, seeing the rain clouds gather over the city, those rain clouds rumbling low with their thunder, lightning shining in their gray vastness. The first of the raindrops began pattering on the windowpane as Will lowered himself onto me.

It was warm in this room. Against that infamous New York coldness outside, being with him, sharing this warm bed, rubbing against his warm body—it all felt supremely wonderful.

I reached out to Will, grabbed hold of his shoulders, and pulled him closer. He looked battle-worn, his body covered in muscles and scars. But there was a quiet sort of dignity in the way his naked body shone in the light of the lamp. A subtle attraction.

He slowly positioned himself between my thighs, his dick prodding against my vulva. I was already wet down there after everything that had happened tonight. The dinner, the talking, the slow drive to the apartment, and the cresting of the sensual tension between us that had been teetering towards a climax all night long. That climax was so near now.

Part of me wanted to skip the foreplay and go down to the heart of the deed. The sex itself. But the other part of me wanted to touch that glistening cock, rub its shiny tip, and play with it. Stroke it. Suck it.

I slid down from under him till I was facing his penis. It looked so tempting, hanging there all erect, veiny, and pulsating.



Gently lifting my face, I slowly took it in my mouth and heard Will moan as I swallowed the entire length of his cock into my mouth, sucking it vigorously, all the while running my tongue down its length and cradling the balls in my hands as I blew him.

We picked up a slow rhythm where he thrust his cock, and I took it deeper into my mouth, allowing him to get pleasure from the insides of my cheeks, my tongue, and my throat. But while I was doing this, Will turned around such that his face was between my thighs. With his cock still in my mouth, he bent down and licked my pussy, making it tender with his lips, spit, and tongue.

We lay in bed, comfortable in this dynamic position where I was sucking his cock, and he was cradling my clit on the tip of his tongue, and it wasn't until I had my first orgasm from his exquisite oral sex that we stopped.

Panting, I let go of his bulging dick and propped myself on the bed, ready for the taking. He came over me again, stooping below to kiss me on the lips, rubbing his tongue against my tongue, and then gently sliding his cock down my wet vagina.

A loud moan escaped me as he went balls deep into me, his cock pounding inside me like a hammer, and then I was all right. His sturdy, warm, and long length inside me brought me sexual ecstasy. It was as if all my pleasure sensors were being engaged a hundred percent.

And then, just as I had wanted it, just as I had thought of it in my mind, he became rougher. He grabbed my shoulders and laid on top of me, vigorously plowing me, causing me to wrap my legs around him and buckle up for what lay ahead.

Here, in this anonymous neighborhood where we were staying for one night, I didn't mind letting myself go and moaned loudly, truly equating my vocality to the pleasure that I was experiencing. It was something that I'd never been able to do in Fiddler's Green.

I let myself come as he thrust himself hard into me one last time. There I lay, splayed, tired, sweating, orgasming as Will gushed into me, his ramrod cock pulsating inside my pussy.

After everything that had happened—the appearance of the emissary, the sudden travel to New York, that exciting dinner, and the passionate sex—I was too exhausted to stay awake.

The last thing I remembered was being cradled in his arms as sleep lulled me off into the world of the unconscious.

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“Hurry, Lexie! We're going to be late.”

Those have always been the worst words to wake up to, but coming from Will, the harsh implication of those words was lessened. He was only looking out for me.

I took a shower and got dressed at warp speed. The next thing I knew, we were both in our Jeep, racing down downtown Manhattan.

“Where exactly is the Clandestine Order located?” I asked, feeling hunger pangs clamor in my stomach. Perhaps they were panic pangs, but there was no way of telling.

“All the way to the top of the Empire State Building. On the 103<sup>rd</sup> floor,” Will said, his entire focus on making it past the deluge of traffic clogging the roads.

“But the Empire State Building only has 102 floors.”

“That’s what’s known to the public. There’s a secret floor at the top, one that has been concealed by great magic. After all, it wouldn’t be the Clandestine Order if they didn’t exhibit the first part of their name in everything that they did.”

At nine sharp, we reached the Empire State Building, where in front of the parking, a disappointed-looking Rogelio was standing, looking at his timepiece. He resembled some gothic character that had popped out of a Bram Stoker novel, wearing his gigantic top hat, wielding a cane, sporting jet-black bifocals, and wearing a long coat that went beyond his knee-high leather boots.

“Late,” he said, shaking his head.

“Not late,” Will said. “We were supposed to arrive at nine. It’s nine.”

“Moving on, the Order will not tolerate such tardiness,” Rogelio said. “Now, please follow me to the Convergence of the Order.”

“The Convergence?” I asked, feeling out of the loop.

“It’s what the Order calls their headquarters at the top,” Will looped me in.

We followed Rogelio as he took us to the lobby, then pressed an invisible button nowhere near the panel, causing the elevator to shoot upward at breakneck speed. I held onto Will for support.

Suddenly, the elevator came to a halt, and we came out into a hall made of pure white marble. The roof was at least a hundred feet high, with everything about the place spelling luxuriousness and grandiosity. At our right was a receptionist behind an ornate alabaster desk. She smiled at us and then winked at Rogelio as we headed toward her.

“This one has a court appearance in less than ten minutes,” Rogelio said, pointing at me.

“And the other one?”

“The other one has to wait until his mate gets done with her hearing.”

“So we were on time,” Will said, a victory in his voice.

“Well, here at the Convergence of the Order, early is on time, and on time is considered late,” Rogelio said, his tone completely disaffected.

It was now—when I was led to a giant black door—that I felt the grip of panic stifling my throat. Will let go of my hand after squeezing it once. I looked at him.

Nodding slowly at me, he said, “Whatever happens, know that I’m with you on the other side of this door. I shall wait. And after this, everything will be okay.”

I gave him a brief kiss as Rogelio let me in through the door. As the door closed behind me, I caught a glimpse of Will one last time. He was smiling at me.

Turning my attention to the room I was in, I saw an elevated platform at the far end with five seats on it. I could not see the people seated there on

account of their faces and bodies being covered by a luminescent white shield. Will was right. They were really big on being secretive.

“Alexis Richards appears before the Clandestine Court,” Rogelio called out, then bowed, and then walked out of the room.

I cleared my throat, standing there on the shiny white floor in the middle of this gigantic room, wondering how on earth it was architecturally possible for the Court to have so much space in a building with limited space.

“Greetings, Alexis Richards,” a female voice spoke from the platform. Because they were all being guarded by that white shield, I couldn’t narrow down who was speaking. “Welcome to the Convergence of the Clandestine Order.”

I took a deep breath, knowing very well what was about to happen, then closed my eyes, visualizing Will standing on the other side of the door. Suddenly, I wasn’t afraid anymore. Whether or not he was in the room with me, my mate was with me in spirit.

# Chapter 12

Will

One of the benefits of having a bond with my fated mate was that I could tap into that bond whenever I needed and see what was happening to Alexis.

For instance, while I sat there outside the courtroom, I tuned into what was happening there. I did it partly for Alexis's moral support, to let her know that I was there with her in her mind. And partly, I did it so I could have a brief idea of what was to come for me.

She had stood her ground very bravely, and now it was my turn.

When she came out the door, I hugged her before saying a word to her. Then I whispered in her ear, "You did it wonderfully."

"I just told the truth," she replied, hugging me back.

"Wilhelm Grimm, you are now called before the Clandestine Court!" Rogelio said sternly.

"Okay," I responded, then followed him into the courtroom.

There they were, the Clandestine Order, all hidden behind their magical shields. It did not matter. I was going to be as truthful with them as Alexis had been, and when I'd be done, they'd be forced to come to terms with the brutal truth—that none of this had been our fault.

“Mr. Wilhelm Grimm, you are charged with disturbance of peace in Fiddler’s Green, and your activities, as the reports state to us, have only yielded death, destruction, and the abominable risk of our species being discovered by humans. What do you have to say in your defense?” A loud female voice resonated through the room.

“What do I have to say in my defense? Let me rephrase that. What do you have to say in your defense? Last I knew, the Clandestine Order was supposed to serve as a beacon to all species, whether they were werewolves, vampires, fae-folk, ghouls, witches, or sorcerers. But for the past hundred years, it seems that you have shirked your responsibilities. There is more to the Order than just the Court, you know.”

“Be very careful as to how you address us, Mr. Wilhelm,” the woman snapped. “You are present in the company of supreme beings whose cause is holier than the self-righteous crusade that you’ve been on in your town.”

“My self-righteous crusade? How dare you?” Now it was my turn to raise my voice. “It all began when I came here seeking shelter from the horrors of war. I took my pack from Germany and brought them to America, hoping they would be safer here. Within a few months, I was kidnapped, tortured, and experimented upon by a deranged Occultist. This continued for decades on end. Was the Order aware of that? If not, then that was a terrible lapse on behalf of the Order. If, on the other hand, the Order was aware, why did the Order not come to save me from a violent madman who altered my body chemistry and rendered me a mutated werewolf?” There was pain in my voice, pain that lingered in the form of echoes in the walls of this hall.

“While we are saddened to hear your plight, know that we cannot do anything about human atrocities. The Occultist who captured you was a

human being. And we do not deal in human affairs,” the woman said. Other murmurs rose from the platform, murmurs of agreement and sympathy.

“But I wasn’t a human. Your Order was in charge of protecting the different species. You could have saved me. Yet you didn’t appear. And when I eventually freed myself and reclaimed my pack and my land, you are all here to find me guilty?” I growled. The anger in my voice was not going to subside now. I knew it. They knew it. They had brought me here thinking that I’d be on the defensive. It did not occur to them that I’d have a case all along and that I’d play on the offensive.

“Mr. Wilhelm Grimm. May I remind you that the travesties that happened under your reign included vampire lives? Vampires such as Ralph and Griswold were murdered by you. Do you deny that?” It was a man’s voice this time around.

“I don’t deny that. I acknowledge that I murdered them in cold blood. If given another opportunity, I will do it again. These vampires were not harmless bloodsuckers who resided peacefully in the forest. They were running a drug and blood smuggling cartel that my pack and I took down. While they were running their drug ring, they were threatening the lives of werewolves and humans alike. They even killed several humans and werewolves while they were at it, including the parents of my mate, Alexis,” I said.

“Yes, yes, she did tell us about that,” the man said.

“Then she might have also told you how Maurice, Ralph, and Blair, three corrupt people, held the town as ransom while they plotted their crazy schemes. Everything that I did, everything that my pack did, was done in



self-defense. Do you really think that you have a case anymore?”

“As we said, we do not interfere in human affairs. Blair Beckett is a human being.”

“He is a human being, all right, but he’s out there hunting werewolves. He’s been conspiring with vampires all this time. He’s the fucking son of the guy who kidnapped and tortured me in the first place. Are you so blind that you do not recognize a threat even when it’s right under your nose? This won’t stop with us. If Blair wins, he will seek out other beings. He’s a maniacal person who has been carrying out his father’s legacy. Instead of bringing innocent people like Alexis and me into the court, you should be striving to help us bring Blair down!” I said.

“Perhaps you do not understand that the Clandestine Order does not play favorites. We cannot upend some human being’s business and his life just because we’re obliged to protect the supernatural species. This entire fight between you and Blair seems like it’s none of our business. As far as our records go, we see that you started this entire affair with Blair,” the woman said.

“So instead of helping me out, you would rather be neutral? You know, I was in the Second World War when millions of people were being persecuted by the Nazis. If only those who had been neutral then would have chosen the right side, the atrocities of that war could have been avoided altogether,” I said, stomping my foot on the ground.

There was silence from the court’s side. I knew that I had made my point, just as I knew that they had nothing left to say in their defense.

“Given your statements and Ms. Alexis Richard’s statements, it’s time for the

Court to reconvene and pass a verdict. We will do so in the next half hour. For the duration of that time, we recommend that you wait outside.” It was an old man’s voice that spoke this time around. He hadn’t spoken before. Because there was a shield shrouding them, I couldn’t tell which of these people did the voice belong to. But compared to the other two voices, this third voice was a very calm, complacent, and sympathetic one.

“I’ll wait outside with my mate,” I said, taking my leave.

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Outside, I saw Alexis sitting on a bench, a bottle of soda in her hand with a pack of fries.

“Where did you get these from?” I asked, surprised.

“I was just waiting here, fidgeting, when the receptionist asked me if I wanted anything. I told her that I hadn’t had breakfast, so she brought me these fries and this soda,” Alexis said. “I can have her bring some for you too.”

“No, thank you. I’m not particularly in the mood for anything to eat or drink. After speaking in there, I’ve got all this rage and anger that was pent up inside me now running amok. Suddenly, I have someone to blame for all this. It’s the Court’s fault, isn’t it?”

“You did say before that they are medieval bureaucracy,” Alexis replied. “Perhaps that’s all that they are. Effete. Powerless. Political.”

“They’re going to call the verdict in about half an hour,” I said. “Or sooner.”

We sat there side by side, looking at the extravagant decorations in the hall, those giant statues of werewolves, minotaurs, vampires, and wizards. There was a large dome at the top of the hall that had been painted with Renaissance-style artwork.

After half an hour had passed, Rogelio appeared from the other side of the door and beckoned us both in. Since my conscience was already clear, I was calm in my heart. I could sense through our bond that Alexis was too.

As we stepped into the room, I saw that the white shields were not there anymore. Instead, the five people who had been seated on the high platform were visible. Three of them were withered old men, and the other two were women who, by their looks, seemed to be in their forties.

“We have pondered much over your unique cases,” the first woman spoke, her eyes exploring the contents of the file laid out in front of her. “And it has not been an easy verdict, especially after taking into account everything that has happened, including the lapses of the Clandestine Order in matters such as the vampire cartel and the Occultist’s son, who is now leading an army of mercenaries.”

“So you admit that you have done wrong,” Alexis said.

“The Court is just one part of the Clandestine Order. We, who belong to the Court, are very impartial about everything, including the Order. And so, we must recognize that there have been lapses in the behavior of the Order. But you two are not without your fair share of faults,” one of the old men spoke.

“So what’s it going to be, then?” I asked, staring at him. It appeared that he had cataracts in his eyes and was not staring back at me.

“Patience, Mr. Wilhelm Grimm,” the second woman said. “It would seem that patience is not your strong suit.”

“I have been patient for more than seventy years when I was captured by Edward Beckett. Do not make a mockery of my suffering by telling me that I’m not patient.”

*Will, calm down. They’re trying to get a rise out of you. It seems that they’ve already made up their minds. So, don’t give them anything that would turn their minds otherwise. Alexis spoke softly in my mind, her words soothing me. Let me handle them for you.*

“While you waste our time here,” Alexis said, “there is a war happening out there. A war where our brothers and sisters are endangering their lives to keep the humans of Fiddler’s Green safe. You have recognized the fact that Blair is a threat. Well, we are doing what we can to subdue that threat. So, without further upset, if you’d rather not waste any more of our time, what is the verdict? And what happens if you find us guilty?”

“If found guilty,” the third old man said, “both of you will be sentenced to death in a manner of the Court’s choosing. Though, when it comes to werewolves, the death sentence dictates that we have them shot through the heart with a silver bullet or have their heads chopped off with silver machetes. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We have not yet stated whether you are guilty or not.”

I looked at Alexis, our minds already communicating nonverbally about the possibility of them finding us guilty. If they did, we’d have to make a run for it. There was no way in hell we were letting them execute us.

“And now, the verdict,” the first woman said, clearing her throat and bringing

up the file in front of her face.

# Chapter 13

Alexis

My heart felt as if it was jamming in my throat. It was not out of fear or worry, or tension. It was out of anticipation. Back when I used to be in school, I was always anticipating what my GPA would be or if I'd get valedictorian or not. And then the results would come in, and I'd find that I'd made valedictorian.

This moment, this unending abyss of a moment where the Court was silent as it readied itself to read out the verdict, was all about anticipation.

And then the woman who was holding her file opened her mouth, "On the count of disrupting the peace and quiet of Fiddler's Green, we find you not guilty. As both your testimonies have shown, the werewolves were never the perpetrators of disturbance."

"Phew," I said out loud.

"We are not done!" one of the old men boomed through the room. "There are four more charges to read."

I cast a look at Will, wondering if he was thinking the same thing. There were five charges in total? Was that the reason there were five people present in the court?

The second woman spoke this time, "On the count of killing other

supernatural species, such as vampires, we find you not guilty. Clearly, from your statements, we have gathered that you were provoked and were acting in self-defense.”

*They're just dragging this out as long as they can, Will said in my mind. Bureaucratic bullshit.*

This time, it was one of the older men who spoke. “On the count of endangering the secrecy of the supernatural species by bringing us out into the light of the humans, we find you not guilty. The Grimm pack has taken extreme measures to ensure that the truth remains hidden from the public. Although, a warning could be issued to you, Ms. Richards, for divulging secrets to your best friend, Maliha.”

“She has been invaluable to us on several occasions,” I said. “And she has been sworn to secrecy.”

“Regardless, if you ever do this again, there will be a penalty,” the old man said.

He hadn't stopped speaking when the next older man spoke. “The fourth count, the count of eliminating a public official who also happened to be a werewolf, we find you not guilty. After the circumstances of Maurice's betrayal were explained to us, we no longer deem it a crime for you to have killed him.”

The last person took his time stating the final verdict. He grabbed the file and brought it close to his face, then peered at me and Will. “Necromancy is strictly prohibited by the Clandestine Order. It is not in our charge to bring back those who have been taken by death. For this last count, the count of necromancy, I will ask you both again. When Wilhelm Grimm rose from his

grave, was there anything unnatural about it?”

I spoke before Will could. “If Edward Beckett hadn’t altered Will so severely, he would have died. It was the mutation that Will suffered at the hands of Edward that made him strong enough to survive. He had never died to begin with. So that last count of yours, that’s completely bogus.”

“Mr. Wilhelm Grimm? Do you have anything to say on the matter?”

I looked at Will, uncertain as to what he would say. But then, when he spoke, it filled me with calmness and certainty. Will said, “My mate speaks the truth. I have been altered too much, and I don’t know how it is that I’m still alive. But when Ralph, Maurice, and Blair tried to kill me, they failed. I strictly believe that necromancy is a dark art that should be left alone. And I can assure you that nothing of the sort happened.”

The old man who was holding his file placed it down and banged his gavel, stating, “Then, on this final count, you are also found not guilty. Let this court adjourn and let it be stated that neither of the parties was charged with anything.”

“Then this was a phenomenal waste of our time!” I said, unable to believe what had just happened. All that pomp and circumstance for nothing.

“Young lady, there is nothing wasteful about these proceedings. We take everything very seriously, especially the dealings of this court. Or did you think that your activities would go unnoticed forever? Mark my words, you may not have been found guilty, but there can come a day when we deem something vicious, and on that day, you will truly understand the gravity of the Clandestine Court,” the old man said.



“Is that it? We’re free to leave?” Will asked, taking my arm and stepping towards the door.

“You are free to return to your lives,” the woman said.

By then, we were already out of the courtroom and heading for the elevator that led out of the building. For me, the anticipation had been for naught. Despite what they had said, I still felt like it was a colossal waste of our time. Time that we could have used better to strengthen our defenses against Blair’s mercenaries.

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My view about returning to Fiddler’s Green at once to see if our defenses were strong enough changed after I stepped out of the Empire State Building and beheld the day. It was a very sunny afternoon that had dispelled all the cold from last night’s rain. Every tree, sidewalk, shrubbery, and building was washed clean and shimmered in the mid-noon sun.

Just being here, out in the street, made me want to take a long walk with Will and just go around eating bagels, buying falafel straight from a cart, and going to see the Hudson. I’d never seen the Statue of Liberty up close. Perhaps today could be a good time to do that. How often was it that I got a chance to come to New York?

“Your thoughts are so loud I can practically hear them without even tapping into our bond,” Will said.

“Oh yeah? And what am I thinking about?” I asked, twirling on the sidewalk, letting my sundress flow in the wind.

“You intend to stay here for a bit,” Will said. “And I don’t blame you. We’re out from the eye of the storm. The Clandestine Order is not going to be a matter of concern for us any longer. So, yes, it does make sense to stay here for a day longer than we intended.”

“But? I sense that there’s a but coming,” I said, the smile disappearing from my face as I studied his grave face.

“But we’ve got an entire town and our whole pack vulnerable back there. Without my leadership and your resourcefulness, how long do you give them?”

“Will, that’s not fair. Vincent is more than capable enough to take care of the pack. You know this,” I protested. I wasn’t really in the mood to have an argument with Will, but given how polar opposite stances we’d taken in this discussion, it felt as if an argument was right around the corner.

Will was standing by his parked Jeep, the doors open. He beckoned me to follow him. As much as I wanted to walk in the sunshine, I obliged.

“Last time, we had to rescue Maliha from those soldiers. Who knows how many people are in danger now that Blair’s sending more and more soldiers out there? It’s something that we can’t just leave to chance,” Will said.

“You’re right,” I said. “And I’ll admit that I’m being an escapist right now. Look around you. It’s so bright, sunny, and lively here. It’s nothing like Fiddler’s Green. You can see what I’m talking about, right? It’s not like I’ve gone crazy. I’m not even talking about staying for an entire day. Just a couple of hours longer. We’ll be back in New York by nightfall.”

Will didn’t start the Jeep immediately. Instead, he looked at me with an

exasperated expression on his face. “Do you really feel that way?”

“Yes.” I figured it was about time I made my stand. Whether or not I got my way, I had to at least communicate my needs, desires, and wants. “You are someone who takes responsibility very seriously, and I love that about you. But you have to understand that there are more important things than responsibility on the horizon, Will. We’re going to get married soon. And then what? Then we’ll maybe have a baby. You’ll be a father to that kid. You will eventually have to leave your responsibility as an Alpha behind to fulfill your responsibility as a husband and a father. What are you going to do then? Sooner or later, you’re going to have to let go.”

“I will admit that I have thought about it time and again. I cannot be the Alpha of the pack forever. Even I know that. It’s just that this whole timeline is moving faster than I expected. In a short while, we’ll be married, and that will be the end of my reign as the alpha. And you’re right about Vincent. In fact, I’ll even share a secret with you. I’m thinking of appointing him as the next Alpha. He’s got the right talent for it,” Will said.

I was about to respond, but then my phone rang at that exact second. I brought it up and saw that it was Vince calling.

“Speak of the devil,” I said, pointing at my phone.

“Let me talk to him,” Will said, taking the phone from me.

“Hey, Will,” Vince said from the phone. “Hope everything went well with the Clandestine Court.”

“Surprise, surprise, they found us not guilty,” I chimed in before Will had a chance to do so.

“Big whoop, we were all rooting for you and knew that they’d find you not guilty. It’s like what Will said; they’re a bunch of bureaucrats,” Vince said. “But that’s not why I called.”

“Tell us what’s happening, Vince,” Will said.

“Okay, but it’s a doozy. So, last night, there was a whole patrol of those soldiers in the town. Except, they didn’t go into the town. None of the citizens of Fiddler’s Green were harmed or anything like that. But those soldiers tried to get near the commune. They even went into the forest and tried to ambush one of our scouting parties. But the wolves were more in number than the soldiers, so the soldiers didn’t do anything. But they didn’t leave, exactly.”

“Let me guess, and you’re tracking them down?” Will asked.

“I had to. There was no way I was letting them out of my sight. I’ve been tracking them since last night, and I’ve found one of their hotspots in the forest. Will, there are so many of them here. Around twenty of them, armed and dangerous.”

“Promise me you’re not going to engage them all by yourself,” Will said sternly.

“I promise. I’m just on the lookout. I won’t do anything before you’ve gotten here. Speaking of which, when are you—” Vince’s voice was suddenly cut off, followed by sounds of struggling.

“Vince? Vince?” Will called repeatedly on the phone but got no answer.

I looked at Will, extremely worried as to what had just happened, partly feeling guilty that I’d suggested staying in New York for a couple more hours

to begin with. Will had been right all along. And now, something had happened to Vincent.

“Help!” Vince’s voice came from the phone, but it sounded very distant. Will and I pressed our ears close to the phone. After a lot of rustling and static, I heard the grunts of those soldiers.

“Fuck,” Will said, punching the steering wheel. “They’ve got him.”

“From the sound of it, it seemed as if they ambushed and attacked him,” I said. “We have to get back there as fast as we can.”

Will didn’t even respond to me. He started the Jeep and accelerated it down the street. I already knew what I had to do. I dialed the numbers of the pack members and alerted them immediately about what had just happened to Vincent.

I had known Vince since he was a child. Seeing him grow up into the strong werewolf that he was, I was confident that he’d get out of this alive. But still, my heart began clamoring yet again with anticipation as to what would happen and whether we’d be able to get there in time.

“If Blair so much as harms a hair on Vince’s body, I will kill him in the most merciless way possible,” Will growled.

“Morgan,” I said on a call with one of the pack members. “Vincent has been attacked near the commune. He’s been taken by the soldiers.”

Then I shot a look at Will. “Morgan’s asking what to do?”

“Tell them that they are not to go after the soldiers under any circumstance. They should batten down the hatches and protect the commune at all costs.

No one goes in. Nobody goes out. And if a soldier so much as steps near the commune, you have my permission to kill them by any means necessary. If any of you go after Vincent, the soldiers will be alerted to our plan, and they'll do something terrible to him."

"Did you get that, Morgan?" I asked.

"I did. Don't worry. We're going to do as Will said. We're keeping the women and children inside their homes. The men are going to set up a perimeter around the commune. We're waiting for you guys," Morgan said, then hung up.

"I wonder if we can get there faster if we ditch my Jeep and shift into our wolf forms," Will said.

"That's the only course of action," I said. "If we traverse the countryside in our wolf forms, we'll make it to Fiddler's Green in under an hour. If we're on the road, we're going to take two hours."

I watched as Will parked the Jeep in front of a gas station. We quickly got out of the car, made sure it was locked, then hurried behind the gas station into the thicket of trees where no one would be able to see us.

The sun was already going down behind the trees, and the sky was darkening quickly. It was the opportune moment to shift into a werewolf.

# Chapter 14

Will

As I shifted and paced down the countryside with Alexis by my side, my eyes saw red with rage, and my muscles felt as if they were pumped with iron. I stampeded past the trees, over the streams, and raced as fast as my body would allow, utilizing every bit of my innate strength to cover this great distance in as short a time as I could.

Vince had always been like a younger brother to me. He had been one of the first people at the commune to take me in and treat me as if I was a family member. After Alexis, he was the only one who had truly been a friend to me. I could not stand the thought of losing him. But deep in my heart, I knew that Vince could hold his own against those soldiers. He was a survivor.

Whether they had attacked him or kidnapped him to use as a hostage, it was now our responsibility to bring him back to safety.

Especially now that he had been kidnapped.

After all, I had some experience in that arena. I knew all too well how it felt when a werewolf was overpowered, treated like a brute animal, mistreated, tortured, and then thrown into a cell. I had endured that violence for decades. Earlier today, I had to relive that memory when I had recounted it all to the Clandestine Court. And now, it seemed that I was being forced to relive those moments yet again in a peripheral way.

*This is a trial for Vincent, I said to Alexis, tapping into my bond with her to communicate non-verbally.*

*A trial? How so? Alexis asked.*

*When an Alpha is about to take his position as the leader of the pack, fate throws a trial in his path. For me, the trial was the Second World War, and bearing through it while ensuring that my pack was safe. For Vince, it's this crisis in the form of super-soldiers. They're hell-bent on destroying the commune. You can draw an analogy between his plight and the plight that I had to suffer all those years ago, I said.*

Talking to Alexis helped steer my mind away from the harrowing thoughts that were occurring to me. Those soldiers had a track record of being deranged and overpowered. With everything flowing in their veins, it was a miracle that they had turned into some strange mutated beings. There was a reason why the old practitioners of magic and potions never dabbled in altering the composition of a human's body. The consequences were always dire. Back when I was being experimented upon, I was constantly expecting that something terrible would happen to me at any given moment because of all the chemicals that had been injected into me.

Could it be that Blair had decided to use Vincent as a lab rat? I shared that concern with Alexis.

*Blair is a madman who treats this world as a playground. He sees you as his prime adversary. Not Vincent. I doubt that he's going to experiment upon him, Alexis said.*

Then she added, *I never had any brothers or sisters. Vince was the closest person I had to one. He's been empathetic, kind, and considerate of me every*



*time when I needed him to be. If you believe in karma and that sort of thing, Vince has positive karma coming out of the wazoo. And if this is indeed his trial sent by fate, then I am certain that he will emerge victorious and unscathed.*

After that talk, we continued running along the countryside for another half hour without talking to each other, our eyes scanning the environment around us for any signs of soldiers. But it was all abandoned even when we entered Fiddler's Green.

Alexis and I skirted around town and bypassed the commune as we headed towards Vincent's last known location—the forest where he had gone tracing those soldiers.

The first sign that I picked up on was Vincent's broken phone lying by a ditch. Next to it were a lot of footsteps traced in mud. Alexis and I kept our noses to the ground, sniffing the scent coming from those footsteps and from that broken phone.

But it turned out that we didn't need to do that. Vincent had laid out our path for us, dropping hints along the way. For instance, there was a giant scratch on one of the trees to the north. A scratch that only a wolf's claw could have made. Following that trail, I came to a broken piece of belt that looked like it belonged to one of the soldiers. There was blood on that belt. I picked up the scent of the blood and followed it through the traversing path in the forest.

Alexis was right by my side, alerting me every now and then to some of the hints that Vince had dropped along the way. A soldier's armor plate here, a claw mark on the ground there.

By the time we reached the clearing ahead, we were certain that Vince had

guided us in the right direction, straight to where he was being kept.

*There's something off.* I said to Alexis as I scanned the clearing.

*What is it?* Alexis asked, peeking behind me.

There were no soldiers in this base. There was a giant cage in which Vincent—in his wolf form—was being kept. He kept colliding against the cage, trying to break free, but the cage was made from reinforced steel.

Vince had mentioned that there were around twenty soldiers that he had been tracking. There was no sign of them anywhere here.

From across the clearing, Vince saw us, and instead of snarling or howling, he simply shook his head and pointed it to the north of the clearing. Not knowing what he was saying, I quickly shifted back into my human form and went to where his cage was. Alexis came behind me, also shifting into her human form.

As we neared the cage, Vince shifted back as well.

“Will! You have to run. It’s a fucking trap. They’re not soldiers anymore!”

“What are you talking about? We’re not going anywhere without freeing you first,” I said, grabbing hold of the lock and tugging it with all my strength, causing it to come loose. As I swung open the cage’s door and pulled Vincent out, I saw that he was right.

We were surrounded from all sides by soldiers, except they weren’t soldiers anymore, just like Vincent had said.

“Fuck, man, we have to get out of here! You haven’t seen what they can do,” Vince said, holding me tightly by the arm and pulling me away from the

clearing.

“Hold your ground,” Alexis said.

“We have to run away right now. They’ve been torturing me for the past hour. I’m in no shape to fight,” Vince said and then fell to his knees.

Seeing him like that, all beaten up, bruised purple, and bleeding from places, drew me into such a berserk rage that I shifted immediately and advanced all by myself at the mutated soldiers who were closing in on the clearing.

Their bodies had contorted and morphed into giant, bulbous, grotesquely red growths that were utterly disproportionate. One arm was longer than the other, while one leg was short and stumpy. Their eyes were bulging out of their sockets. Their hands had shifted into a pathetic imitation of wolf claws. I could see from afar that their teeth had turned vampiric, all pointed and jutting out of their mouths.

I counted twenty of them all around the clearing, just like Vince had warned. I shot a look back and saw Alexis taking Vincent out of the clearing just before the soldiers—or whatever they were now—formed a circle around the clearing.

Now that their bodies had morphed and distorted out of proportion, none of their armor was properly fitting their bodies anymore, leaving undefended critical areas that could be used to my advantage. Their necks were completely bare, and so were their arms and torso.

As they advanced around me, forming a closed circle, I perceived that they could no longer speak. They were merely grunting, howling, jeering, and screaming as they thrashed their arms and stomped their feet.

For a brief moment, I felt pity for them. Once upon a time, these were men. Men who had parents, relatives, probably wives and partners, and now they had been warped by Blair into these hideous creatures. There was no return from this state.

Killing them would be a mercy.

*Get Vincent out of here while I deal with them,* I called out to Alexis.

*Are you sure you can deal with them alone?* She asked.

*Yes, I've got this.*

These mutated soldiers were no longer wielding guns or batons. Their high-tech armor was deactivated. But I was still careful. If they had been altered and disfigured to such an extent, it must have affected their brute strength.

The soldiers all howled and pounced upon me at the same time, momentarily taxing me with indecision, but then, at the last moment, I jumped higher than all of them and perched upon a tree branch, staring below at the small horde that had assembled at the base of the tree.

Above, the full moon shone, its lunar presence strengthening my resolve and bringing out my power.

As I jumped down from the tree, I calculated my moves with precision. There were five mutated soldiers right in front of me. I broke my fall by falling on top of them. I crushed one with my sheer weight, killing him instantly. One of them tried to get away from under me. I bit down on his head and tugged it free from the rest of his body, sending blood spraying everywhere.

I could only imagine what the sight of a blood-soaked, red-eyed, spectral

wolf would do to an opponent. But these were not ordinary opponents. Their minds had been erased by the mutagens that had been injected into them. They knew no fear. Senseless, they all attacked me as a horde.

I charged into them headfirst, bludgeoning them with my swift body, making them all fall as I raced through them and to the other side of the clearing, where their weapon stash was lying: machine guns, rifles, shotguns, grenades.

As I'd already overused grenades recently, and as these mutated soldiers were scattered all over the place, I had to resort to using another weapon if I wanted to eradicate them as quickly as possible.

I shifted back into my human form and grabbed hold of one of the machine guns lying in the weapon stash. I aimed it in front of me, where eighteen frenzied mutated soldiers were stampeding towards me, their mouths foaming, their eyes bloodshot and lifeless.

I pulled the trigger and braced myself for the massive recoil of this machine gun while holding it straight ahead of me. The bullets pierced the skins of the approaching soldiers, sending blood, guts, limbs, and viscera flying in every direction.

It was hardly a fair match, what with their senses being dissolved by chemicals and their armors compromised as a result of their distorted figures. By the time my magazine ended, there were no more soldiers left standing.

I threw the machine gun down and picked up a shotgun from the stash. One by one, I walked over to the bodies of the mutated soldiers and shot each of them in the head just to make sure that they were really dead.

And there I stood in the aftermath, one lone wolf amidst a pile of corpses. I threw the shotgun on the ground and looked wearily around me. This was the second time these soldiers had kidnapped an innocent person. The second time that I had come across one of their remote bases in the forest.

I decided that it was about time that I stopped playing on the defensive. There would be no more of these bases, no more of these soldiers anymore. I'd do whatever it takes.

As I crossed the clearing and came to the path that Vince and Alexis had taken, I saw them standing way up ahead, looking at something that I could not see from afar.

“Alexis! Vincent! Are you guys all right?” I asked.

“Will. You have to come and see this,” Alexis called back.

I braced myself for another disaster lying in wait ahead. But when I reached them both, I saw something that completely baffled me.

“Did either of you do this?” I asked, inspecting the dead body.

“We didn't do anything,” Vincent panted.

“Then who killed this mutated soldier?” I asked, stooping to inspect the dead body.

“You won't believe this, but he came charging at us from the clearing. He must have gotten away from the rest of the soldiers. As he was coming at us, he just fell to the ground, writhing and shivering. And then he just contorted, yelled, and fell limply to the ground. He's been dead for a whole minute,” Alexis said.

“I’ll be damned,” I said, looking at this dead body that defied all explanation.

# Chapter 15

Alexis

After what seemed to be a long time, we now had the upper hand. It wasn't just those few odd soldiers who had mutated; practically every soldier present in the vicinity of the town, commune, and forest had morphed into that distorted form, lending the werewolves an advantage—now we knew where they were. Their little bases all over Fiddler's Green were compromised thanks to the ruckus these mutants were creating.

If that wasn't good enough, then the fact that many of these soldiers were dropping dead on their own was something that played even more so in our favor. We only had a limited number of werewolves in the pack, which meant we could only send a limited number of scouting parties all over town to find these mutated soldiers. But now that many of these soldiers were dropping dead on their own, it made our work easier.

Will was not one to understand how this was going in our favor. For him, this entirely new chapter of mutated beings wandering around town, dying on their own, and posing as a menace to the common folk of Fiddler's Green was one large flashback to the Second World War.

"This is how it begins," Will kept saying whenever I broached him on the subject. "These are the first ashes of war, falling from a crestfallen sky. The horizon will soon be blood-red. And we will all taste war's bitter taste on our tongues."



“So, what does that even mean? Are we going to give up?” I asked him one time, his riddle-like statement perplexing me.

“Give up? Quite the contrary. I ran from the Second World War. Not this time. This time, I have a chance to defend my people and make my city safe. This time, it will be Blair who runs with his tail between his legs.”

Seeing him so adamant about eradicating the bad guys gave me fresh courage of my own, allowing me to truly take charge of the responsibilities delegated to me. The Grimm Abode desperately needed stronger defenses. Ever since Will and I had saved Vincent and escorted him back to the commune, I’d been busy setting up the new defenses.

Will was with me right now, helping me set up barbed wire along the front wall of the commune. Both of us were wearing military-grade gloves with which we were handling the wire.

“We should electrify the wire just to be sure,” Will said.

“You know, I was thinking the same thing. We can run electricity across all the barbed wires along the walls. But let’s do it with a backup generator that’s inside the commune. That way, if the electricity of the town is compromised, at least we will still have our defenses holding strong,” I said, fixing the last bit of the wire to the watch post. Morgan and a few other men had taken up shifts in the posts. There were four posts on each of the four sides of the commune. Each post had a machine gun fixed into it as a contingency for the worst-case scenario.

“This whole place looks like one big military complex,” Will said, taking a look at the commune. Outside the commune, we dug trenches and covered them with leaves and brambles. If any soldier was stupid enough to rush

towards the Grimm Abode, they'd find themselves in the trenches. At the bottom of the trenches were wooden pikes, sharpened like stakes.

"There's a storm on the horizon, Will," I said, pointing my finger at the black clouds gathering, thunder growling in them, and streaks of lightning flashing across them. From up here, I could see the sea. It had been very stormy of late, and in anticipation of the storm, it had become even more tumultuous. Across the slope, Fiddler's Green lay quietly, no one out and about in the open, everyone confined to the insides of their homes.

The impending storm lent us an advantage. As werewolves, we could shift whenever we wanted and go out and hunt more soldiers without having to worry about any townsfolks spotting us.

"We're going to be fine," Will said. "The storm is the least of our concerns. It's Blair we have to look out for. Especially now that his serum has failed."

"What makes you think it has failed?" I asked, hopping over to the post, where Morgan was standing, smoking a cigarette and handling the gun. He saw me and Will approach, tipped his hat to us, and then left the post to give us some privacy.

"If his serum had worked as he had intended, these soldiers would never have mutated like this," Will said. "He wanted to make some form of super soldiers. What he has, instead, are failed experiments running amok. If that's not failure, I don't know what is."

Back when I was studying in community college, I took a bio class in my third semester to get a feel for the clinical side of academia. The only thing I remembered from that class was the big vials of dead animals suspended in chemicals. They'd have labels on their jars stating "Iteration 1" or "Iteration

3.” Those iterations would go up to 10 or 11, depending on what the scientists had been trying to achieve. All those failed iterations were still on display in the laboratory so that the students would realize what mistakes the scientists had made and how not to repeat those same errors.

“Will, what if this is just one crop of bad results? What if he’s got successful iterations in his lab somewhere? Maybe these morphing soldiers are one big smokescreen that Blair’s putting up for whatever he’s actually working on,” I said. “We know Blair. And it’s very likely for him to do something like that.”

“You’re right,” Will said, now looking at me and holding me in his arms. “But that does not mean that the threat is not real. First vampires, now these soldiers. The threat has always been imminent and lurking around the corner. To make matters worse, the Clandestine Order is looking at us more critically than ever. Makes me feel like we’re walking on one of those circus tightropes. There’s no room for error, and the slightest disturbance will cause us to fall who knows how far below.”

“We’ve beaten worse odds,” I said.

“True,” Will said, patting my head affectionately, then going down the post stairs.

“You’re headed out with Vince and the men from the pack?” I asked.

“Someone has to round up the remaining soldiers. I heard from Vince that the soldiers are all gathering by the lake south of Fiddler’s Green, upsetting the natural order of things. They’re attacking animals and tainting the lake water. It might be a good chance for us to ambush them and kill them. That is if they don’t die on their own first,” Will said.

“Bye, sweetie. I love you,” I said, keeping watch at the post.

“I love you too,” Will said, blowing me a kiss.

I watched as the men drove out in Will’s Jeep. Then I waited long enough for them to go down the sloping road and head into Fiddler’s Green. Once I was sure that they were gone, I assigned my place at the post to one of the guys who had remained back at the commune and then headed to my home.

It was a plan I’d been cooking for quite some time now. Blair was at the center of everything that had been happening. If I could find him, isolate him, and somehow overpower him, it would mean the end of all this nonsense. I just needed some special help from someone in doing so.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. I opened it discretely and found Maliha standing there with her laptop bag.

“I waited for them to leave first,” Maliha said.

“You did good,” I said, pulling her inside the house. It was very critical to our operation that no one knew what Maliha and I were up to.

“I did something even better,” Maliha said, grinning at me. “You know these soldiers are just dropping dead everywhere? I went and took a closer look at one body. The whole console on it was quite functional, allowing me to access the files more easily than before.”

“Let me get this straight. You went out of your way to find a dead soldier and then hacked his console? Do you fucking realize how dangerous that is?”

Maliha blinked at me vacantly, then rolled her eyes and said, “Danger? You’re one to speak of danger. I am surrounded by werewolves. The world

that I live in is filled with vampires and mutated soldiers. How much more danger could there be? And what do I have to gain if I stay there quietly in my apartment, worried stiff for my life? I'm doing my part just as you're doing yours. I might not be a werewolf, but at least I can help the good guys in this fight."

Then Maliha revealed the console that she'd brought with her. It was plugged into her laptop. I could not understand all that technical mumbo-jumbo that was on the screen, so I looked at Maliha, hoping she'd provide an explanation.

"Blair's got state-of-the-art cybersecurity now. I guess he's learned from his mistake," Maliha said. "I cannot hack into his system as swiftly as I could before. But I'm not unsuccessful. It's just taking me a lot longer to do it than before. When I finally decrypt this console, I'll be able to provide you with an accurate location of where Blair's holed up."

"And then this madness will end once and for all," I said softly.

"What now?"

"It's this place. It's Fiddler's Green. You must have realized it by now," I said, deciding to trust Maliha with what was lying heavy in my heart. "This whole place is diseased. It draws chaos from all over."

"I never thought about it like that," Maliha said. "But then again, up until a while ago, I did not know that werewolves and vampires existed, so what the hell do I know about anything?"

"We're battening down the hatches, bracing for impact, and preparing for a fight. Say we defeat Blair. There's going to be someone after that and after

that too. It's like the perfect hell loop."

"No."

"Excuse me?" I looked at Maliha. I was surprised as to how surely she had said no.

"This entire thing has an air of finality to it. I may not know what's been happening in this town. But look at everything that's happening now. This feels like the end of things. I feel it in my bones. When Blair dies, this will be the end of it. And since you're my best friend, I'm going to say something to you. Something that you've been wanting to say to me but are afraid of. Yes. When you defeat Blair, you and Will are going to leave this place and start your own lives. I don't believe in superstition. I believe in intuition. And my intuition tells me that everything will be fine with you."

I just wanted to hug my best friend at that moment. Her words comforted me in just the way that my heart needed. There was no way that she could know the outcome of our upcoming fight with Blair. But she had reassured me, consoled me, and in doing so, had done her duty as my friend.

It was more than anything that I'd ever done for her.

"Thank you, Maliha," I said, hugging her tightly.

"Hey. No need to thank me. You saved my life. As far as I'm concerned, I'm forever in your debt," Maliha said.

While Maliha hacked away on her laptop, I looked out the window and into the commune. It had been a week since we'd rescued Vince and restored him back to health, a week since the soldiers had started morphing and mutating. Other than that, things were pretty normal, giving Fiddler's Green that façade

of regularity.

It only meant that something seriously fucked up was about to happen soon, and I was not talking about the storm.

# Chapter 16

Will

Eliminating the soldiers from the vicinity of the town was laborious work. As dull as it was, it was quite essential too. We could not risk anyone seeing these soldiers out and about, mutilating themselves, dying alone.

After clearing the lake area, I delegated the task of eliminating the remaining soldiers to the rest of the pack, clearing my schedule for something I'd planned earlier. With the way things had been, Alexis and I hadn't had a chance to spend some quality time together with each other in the past week. The only thing that we'd done before that was in New York. It was high time for me to arrange something romantic for her.

"Knock, knock," I said, tapping on the back of her head while she was in the kitchen making breakfast.

"Who's there?" Alexis asked, chuckling.

"You."

"You who?"

"You who are going on a date with me today," I said, breaking into a smile as she turned to face me, her eyes lit up with happiness. She leaped on me, hugging me tightly, then showered my face with kisses.



“Oh my God, I’ve been craving for some you-and-me time for so long!” Alexis said, hugging me even more tightly.

“Well, it just so happens that I have the right place in mind,” I said. I’d booked a very cozy cottage in Vermont, just an hour’s drive away from Fiddler’s Green. It wasn’t so far away that we would have any trouble getting back to the commune if anything went wrong. It wasn’t so near that we’d feel like it was a staycation instead of a proper vacation.

“But Will, it’s like, whenever we’re on one of our romantic getaways, trouble seems to find its way to Fiddler’s Green,” Alexis said.

“Right you are,” I said. “But since the last time we talked about it, I’ve gotten around to the fact that we will leave Fiddler’s Green soon. You and I will be married, and we’ll be halfway across the country after that. If the pack is able to look after themselves, then they can look after themselves now too. Besides, I’m leaving things in Vince’s care. He’s recovered and is quite out and about these days. The last time he and I were out hunting those soldiers, he took nearly half a dozen by himself.”

Alexis put the breakfast on the table and headed into the bedroom. “If we’re going now, I better start packing. You can get started on the breakfast. Hurry up with the omelet. It’s best if eaten hot.”

I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her out of the room. “Uh-uh. You’re not going anywhere, Miss. As it happens, I already packed for the both of us. Our stuff’s in the Jeep. We only have to breakfast together, and then we’ll be off!”

“You really are the perfect boyfriend,” Alexis said, kissing me on my chin.

“Correction. The perfect fiancé.”

“Soon-to-be perfect husband,” Alexis said, passing me a smile and sitting at the table.

“And you know why we’re going on this vacation?” I asked, pouring myself some coffee.

“I have a faint idea, but I’d like to hear it from you,” Alexis said, putting some cheese and omelet in her sandwich and taking a big bite.

“It’s our anniversary. Today marks the day you first found me in the forest.”

“Cheers to that! You know, I already knew that. I was just testing to see if you remembered.”

“Of course, I remembered. It’s the day my life changed for the better forever,” I said, clinking my coffee cup with hers.

We hastily finished our breakfast, eager to leave Fiddler’s Green for Vermont.

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The cottage was everything that I had hoped it would be. Resting against the serene backdrop of the evergreen forest, the cottage was at the edge of a lake. The lake was very different from all the others that I’d seen in recent months. It was clear and deep. I could see the bottom where all the koi were swimming above the rocks. It almost tempted me for a mid-noon swim.

“Holy shit, look at the size of that kayak!” Alexis gasped, pointing at the big kayak moored at the pier. It was formidable in size indeed, easily able to fit

three people.

“The site map shows a river on the other side of the lake. We can take the kayak there and do some white-water rafting if you’re in the mood,” I said, putting our luggage in the cottage.

The cottage itself was quite quaint and cozy, built in a triangular Swedish architecture with big windows, lots of space inside, and three floors that each had their own theme. The first floor was a living room combined with an open kitchen. In the middle of the room was a fireplace with a rug in front of it. Something told me that Alexis and I would spend a lot of time by that fireplace.

“Will! Look at the bedroom!”

I followed Alexis up the ladder and saw what she was talking about. Only one wall was made of wood. The other three were window panels that stretched from one end of the room to the other, giving a spectacular view of the entire forest and lake.

So far, this place had not been disappointing, and so, with building anticipation, I headed to the third floor. Alexis was right behind me.

Here, the entire roof was made of glass, giving a view of the canopy-covered sky. Sunlight beamed through the sunroof, showering this room with warmth and color.

“So this is like an exclusive sunroom,” I said, whistling slowly as I walked about and saw the view from the very top. From here, the shimmering lake looked magical. I could even see beyond the lake, where the river flowed past the hills.

“There’s something about this place that makes me want to fuck your brains out right here and now,” Alexis said, taking her top off, revealing her luscious breasts heaving in her black lace bra.

I could see what she meant. The moment her top came off, I became possessed by my beastly nature and immediately sunk my fingers into her supple thighs. I pinned her against the wall and sucked deeply on her neck, leaving a big hickey there. Alexis moaned as she dug her nails into my back.

All our clothes started coming off as our foreplay accelerated from just kissing to full-on groping and liking. I was on the floor, lying on top of Alexis. Both of us were completely naked and covered in sunlight.

I licked her pink nipples, sending her into an ecstatic trance that made her arch her back. Then I took her nipple into my mouth and sucked on it as I kneaded her breast. With my one free hand, I started tickling her torso and tracing my finger down to her clit.

It was no surprise to me that she was already wet down there.

I let go of her nipple and instead focused on the more succulent parts of her. She gently pushed my head down. I slid my body below, now resting my head between her thighs, looking directly at her tulip-like vulva, blossoming, pink, and moist.

Unable to hold myself back, I kissed her clit, then started licking it voraciously. I did not mind her loud moans, as I was sure no one else minded them either. In the wilderness, we were as alone as one could be. She could moan as loud as she wanted.

Not holding back, I now inserted two fingers into her pussy as I continued

licking her clit and her vulva. Inside, her vagina throbbed as my fingers found purchase on her g-spot, tugging it, pressing it, and cradling it.

“Ah, oh my God, Will!” Alexis moaned, clasping her thighs around my head and pulling on my hair. I relished the little tinge of pain as she pulled my hair passionately.

It wasn't until she had squirted with pleasure and gasped loudly upon reaching her first climax that I stopped licking and fingering her. Now she was all mine to do with as I pleased. I nudged her to come closer while she was still shaking from her orgasm.

With her head near my thighs, I lowered myself onto her and put my cock into her mouth, letting her soak the tip with her spit, rub the frenulum along the inside of her cheek, and take its entire length down her throat. She did this so diligently that I had to hold myself back from coming immediately.

To pace myself, I laid down on my back and let her suck my penis while sitting up. She grabbed the shaft with her hands and drooled on the tip with her lips, making everything wet. The inside of her mouth was a welcome place to be, and I got all the pleasure I could from the sensation of her sucking me, licking my cock, and stroking it with her hands.

When at last I could bear it no longer, I pulled her, lifting her entire body in my arms, and put her on top of my cock, sliding it into her tight and warm pussy. She let out a loud moan as the entire length of my dick thrust into her. Her face was already wet with sweat, and her body had beads of it accumulating along her curves.

While she rode me, I reached up and touched her naked breasts, squeezing them just the way she liked, rubbing my fingers on her nipples rhythmically.

Alexis rode up and down on my cock, letting me get the most pleasure from her straddling, and then reached down and kissed me on the mouth, sending her tongue to clash with my tongue, locking her lips with my lips.

Now, the feral carnality in me wanted more. I lifted myself from the floor and let her ride me face to face till I needed to be the one in control.

Then I pulled her off me and laid her down on her stomach. Her perfect, round, meaty ass was up in the air, her thighs apart, her pussy glistening with wetness. I climbed on top of her from behind, prone-boning her as I thrust my cock into her, sliding past her butt cheeks and entering her vagina from behind.

Alexis moaned loudly and grasped the carpet in both hands as she lay there with me on top.

“Oh, Will! Harder!”

The sight of her naked back all arched, her firm hips jiggling as I fucked her, and her ponytail bobbing from side to side drove me into a frenzy, causing me to thrust harder. My penis was the most erect it had ever been, allowing me to feel her in so much depth as I’d never felt before. As my rock-hard cock rubbed inside her, I felt her textured, tight, wet, and hot pussy throbbing to keep up with my rhythm.

It was everything—the peaceful place where we were making love, the sight of my sexy, nude mate, and the way that I’d fucked her so passionately—that culminated in me coming inside her with such vigor that my entire body shook as I unloaded my seed into her.

Alexis’s body quivered as she shared this mutual orgasm, her body

convoluting with the waves of sexual pleasure rushing through her. I fell on top of her, still throbbing and coming inside her, feeling as if there would never be an end to this maddening pleasure.

# Chapter 17

Alexis

If that impromptu and wild sex was an indication of how our week was going to be, it was certainly a strong one. That was just the first time we had sex that day.

By the time Will and I'd showered and freshened up, the sight of him standing there all naked and muscular with just a towel around his pelvis made me horny all over again, and instead of preparing lunch for both of us, I took off his towel in the bedroom and gave him a deepthroat blowjob with his back against the window.

I couldn't stop myself as his cock filled my mouth. The more I sucked, the wetter it got, and the deeper I took it in my throat, the harder it felt in my mouth. I placed one hand on his balls, gently squeezing them and pulling them, and with my other hand, pulled him by the butt closer to me, so now that his entire penis was inside my mouth.

And that's when I felt him come inside me, this time in my mouth. I steadied myself and moaned as he gushed into my throat.

"We might want to pace ourselves," Will said after I'd re-emerged from the bathroom, having brushed and gargled a second time that day. "It's just Friday. We're here for Saturday and Sunday too."



“Yeah, so what? We’ve had all this week-long sexuality pent up deep inside us,” I said. “I wouldn’t mind going at it again.”

“Let’s have some dinner first, then a swim, and then get back to our sexual proclivities.”

“Sexual proclivities. You’re such an old-time gentleman,” I said, slapping him playfully on his naked back. “How about I make you something classic? Some medium rare steak and a fine scotch to go with it?”

“You so get me,” Will said, staring at the scenery from the window. “And then we’ll burn those carbs in the lake. I have been wanting to go for a swim ever since I laid my eyes on it.”

“Speaking of laying eyes on things, how is it that you always get the best lake houses, cottages, and chalets? It’s like you have a gift for this sort of thing. You know, if we’re serious about leaving this life behind, you might want to start thinking about a legitimate career. And what better career than having your own tourism company where you guide people to the best places in the States?”

Will’s eyes were shining bright when he turned around to face me. There was so much hope on his face, so much light, that it made it impossible for me to look him in the eyes. It was like seeing the face of a man born anew.

“Can someone really do that? Is that an actual career path?” Will asked, his voice soft with anticipation.

“Will. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People get paid for all sorts of weird stuff. Being a tour operator is still a very safe career option compared to, you know, deejaying or being a yoga instructor.”

“Until now, I had never realized that this was my dream all along. This is what I really want. I can rent boats, planes, and cottages and create these elaborate tour plans for people. There are tens of thousands of places that I know about in America where people can go and enjoy the sights. It hadn’t actually occurred to me that I could make it work as a career.”

“The world runs on gig economy these days. Gone are the days of nine-to-five jobs and stereotypical jobs like being a doctor, engineer, or lawyer. You can earn money however you want as long as you are good at it. And as someone who knows you, I can say with confidence that you’re good at arranging these special romantic getaways,” I said, kissing him on the lips.

Then I descended the ladder and headed to the kitchen, eager to make my man a nice meal for all the effort that he had put into this getaway.

Will followed me down, now observing me candidly from the other side of the room.

“Tell me more about this whole thing. If I become a tour operator, what will you do?”

I had hoped that he’d ask me this. I had thought about it for a long time. Years, actually. Now, for the first time, I was sharing this intimate and secret part of me with Will.

“I’d be an interior designer. There’s nothing I love more than good interior décor. Remember how I keep showing you those pictures on Instagram and Pinterest?”

“I don’t know the names of the applications, but I do remember you showing me pictures on your phone,” Will said.

“Right. So, people pay decent money to an interior designer for sprucing up their homes,” I said. “If we settle into a fancy city like LA or San Francisco, I can earn six figures doing something like that.”

“It will be a perfect life,” Will said dreamily, staring into the distance, a smile on his face, scotch in his hands. “Me, operating tours in California, and you decorating people’s houses. We’ll have a nice house of our own in the suburbs, somewhere near Palo Alto or Pasadena, or Calabasas. Those are the perfect towns to live in. Safest in all of America. And we’re still young. I mean, you still are.”

“Hey, as long as I’m with you, I don’t care if I’m in Calabasas or Calcutta.”

Will laughed out loud, startling me.

“What happened?”

“It just occurred to me that I could someday expand my touring business to international tours and take people to China, India, Thailand, and Japan. Wouldn’t that be the best?”

“That would be the best,” I said, looking at his handsome body lounging on that sofa, sunlight glistening on his abs, his pecs bulging as he lifted his scotch glass to his lips.

I loved that man immensely.

He knew what he had to do to make me feel normal again. I hadn’t felt this great since the time he proposed to me.

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The lake's water was cold but a welcoming cold. Going in there felt like I was letting go of all the tiredness that had accumulated in my body over the past week. It was refreshing, being out in this deep, clear water, swimming completely unencumbered by things like swimsuits. I was naked in the water, and so was Will.

We were floating on our backs, looking at the sun peeking at us from behind the clouds.

"I bet there's a storm blowing through Fiddler's Green right now," I said, looking at the calming scenery all around me.

"Why do you think I chose this weekend of all the weekends for this getaway?" Will asked and then burst out laughing. It was hilarious enough that I joined him too.

We laughed and swam, doing lengths around the lake, deep diving to the bottom, and just letting our bodies float on the surface.

It wasn't until the sun had gone down did we feel the necessity to go back inside the cottage. As evening fell, the lake water became unbearably cold, making me wonder if it froze every night.

Once inside, we dried ourselves in our towels, then put on our comfortable loungewear. I made hot chocolates for both of us. We spent the evening looking at the moon's reflection on the surface of the lake, drinking our steaming drinks, and talking about the most random things.

"Tell me this doesn't feel like heaven to you," Will said, running his fingers through my hair.

"This is better than any heaven that I could have imagined. I'm here with my

mate, looking at the winding forest, the shining lake, and all around us, there's nothing but silence," I said, resting my head on his shoulder.

"I can't stop thinking about that steak you made for lunch. Makes me wonder what I'm going to have for dinner," Will said.

"Me," I said, parting my legs open to reveal that I was not wearing any panties.

Will looked enticingly at me and then, without any word, dove between my legs, sending pleasure cascading up my body. There it was, that unspoken, undeniable chemistry that had kept us so close to each other despite all the hardships that life had thrown our way.

I could not think any longer. Not with all the things that he was doing to me down there. I removed my shirt, letting my naked body roll in front of the fireplace. As I lay on the rug, Will's wet lips and his coarse tongue settled on my pussy, licking my clit slowly and deliberately, making sure that I was getting all the sexual pleasure my body could get.

The fire roared by my side, the fireplace sending huge shadows into the otherwise dark room. I lay there with Will's head between my legs, his fingers prodding inside my vagina, pleasing me deeply.

I wanted him to be rough, and I needed more pleasure from him. The kind that he'd not hold back.

I raised my pelvis, thrusting my pussy deeper into his face, making him lick harder, kiss it deeper, and suck on my clit with force.

It was no surprise that with his masterful technique, I came in a few minutes. I lay there, catching my breath, knowing that the best was yet to come, that

he was going to climb on top of me and rock my world.

Will did just as I'd foreseen. He took off his clothes and came on top of me, pinning my hands by my side, his face so near my face that I could feel each breath of his on my lips. My gasps escaped in the form of loud moans as he fucked me hard, pounding away at my pussy with his hard cock. It was as if he was rubbing off pleasure on my pussy's walls, sending me into fits of sexual frenzy.

I shook under his weight and his thrusts, but I was enjoying it like hell. I liked it when he was dominant with me, taking control of my entire body and driving me wild with his cock.

I grabbed onto his shoulders for support and waited for him to come.

"Ah, Will!" I moaned as he thrust deeply one last time and then felt the satisfying splurge of his semen inside me. That sensation of him orgasming inside me, throbbing, convulsing, was so strong that it made me orgasm alongside him.

It was so joyfully overwhelming that I felt like my entire body had been turned into one big pleasure organ, and I was feeling the sexual rush course all over my body like raw electricity.

"Oh, wow," I said. "I love you so much; you don't even know."

"I love you too, Lexie. You're the best thing that ever happened to me," Will said.

And then, without any warning, he fell asleep. I cuddled him close to my body, feeling bad that I didn't offer him any real dinner. I made a mental note to serve him the best breakfast he'd ever had tomorrow morning.

Without much effort, the tendrils of sleep dragged me away to the land of deep slumber. We slept peacefully, side by side, along the roaring fire of the fireplace, against the backdrop of the cool green moonlight lake.

Will was right. This was heaven.

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I kept my promise, making sure that he'd have the best breakfast ever. I woke up an hour before he did and rushed to the kitchen. Bacon, eggs, rye bread, sausages, beans, cornflakes, and a nice cup of coffee—I outdid myself and made breakfast so enticing that I couldn't help but take a few bites out of it.

Before I could wake Will to serve him his breakfast, my phone suddenly rang. I looked at the screen and saw that it was Maliha.

“You're gonna wanna hear this,” she said when I attended her call.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I've finally triangulated Blair's location, and I can't wait to show you where he's holed up.”

# Chapter 18

Will

“What would you do if you knew where Blair was hiding?” Alexis asked. After two and a half days of lazing around the cottage, making love, eating heartily, swimming in the lake, and kayaking in the river, it was finally time for us to go back to reality. We were driving back to Fiddler’s Green in my Jeep, and now that our vacation was over, we were both allowed to discuss Blair. We’d made a pact earlier not to discuss anything like that during our trip to the cottage.

“If I knew where Blair was hiding, I’d wait till he’d play his hand. I know for certain that he’s got a hand to play. It’s not like he’s been doing these experiments for no reason. There’s something else. Something bigger. He wouldn’t just mutate his soldiers. He’s trying to change them just like his father tried. There’s a sickness that runs in that family. A sickness that sees no reason and cannot be tamed,” I said. “But why do you ask?”

“No particular reason,” Alexis said, looking out the window and averting her gaze. “I was just thinking out loud.”

“If you have something to tell me, now would be the time,” I said, trying to coax the truth out of her.

“I don’t have anything to share right now. I was with you the entire time. I was just hoping that we’d get a lead or something like that,” Alexis said, with



a slight stern undertone in her voice that I'd learned was a signal to leave the topic alone. It looked like reality was catching up to us faster than we'd anticipated.

We drove for another half an hour quietly. I kept my eyes on the road, and Alexis looked out the window. Nothing eventful happened while we were still in Vermont. When we crossed state lines and headed into Fiddler's Green territory, that's when something bizarre happened.

It was still early in the morning when we left the cottage, giving it five stars on the Airbnb app and making sure that we'd made the place spotless for the next visitors. And now, on this Monday morning, it was barely nine o'clock when I saw a series of shadows running alongside us in the forest. I recognized them immediately.

They were werewolves.

"What's our pack doing out at this time of the day?" I asked Alexis.

"Will. Drive faster. Those are not werewolves of our pack!" Alexis said alarmingly. "I've never seen them before in my life."

"We're not stopping?" I asked. It sounded like the better option to stop and fight the werewolves if they meant to attack us. It was certainly better than leading them back to Fiddler's Green.

"We're not stopping. I've counted nine of them. You think we can take on nine werewolves by ourselves?"

"Lexie, we've taken on hordes of vampires. Killed so many super soldiers. Fighting nine werewolves is not a challenge," I said, still driving at high speed. The werewolves had not given up the chase. They were now running

closer to the road. Alexis was right. There were nine of them.

“But we’ve never really fought against werewolves,” Alexis said.

She had a fair point.

But it turned out that all our discussion was useless, for in that next second, all the werewolves suddenly jumped on the road. Five of them rammed the Jeep from one side while the other four rammed it from the other side, causing me to lose control of the wheel. The Jeep spun around and came to a halt at the side of the road. If it had gone to the side a foot more, it would have toppled over into the forest.

I got out and immediately shifted, realizing it was too late to run from them. Alexis came out and shifted behind me.

As I leaped into the air to get the upper hand on the wolves, so did they all, and instead of me jumping on top of them, we clashed into the air. My claws dug into their fur, their claws sank into my skin, and we all fell to the ground, our bodies entangled. I had just taken on four wolves by myself, leaving Alexis to fend for herself against the other five.

There was something very different about these wolves that I had never seen in any of my pack members. I had never seen it in myself, either. These were feral wolves, their eyes blazing red, froth foaming from their mouths, and their claws drenched in blood.

I got up and immediately tackled the werewolves who were standing around me, sending them flying everywhere. They were werewolves, for sure, but I was the only one among them who had unlocked the wolf within. I was bigger than them, stronger than them, and could take on all of them. I could

not say the same for Alexis, who, I noticed, was having a hard time keeping up with the five werewolves who were attacking her.

I rushed to her side, biting down the head of one of the werewolves around her. He whimpered and receded from the fight, tending to his wounds. The other four werewolves retreated and waited for the entire pack to regroup. We stood there on the precipice of the forest, just a few feet from the road, me and Alexis on one side and the nine werewolves on the other side.

*They're too damn powerful! It's like they're feral or something,* Alexis said.

*Don't worry. We've got this,* I consoled her.

I rushed at the werewolves, baring my teeth and stretching my claws, hoping to tackle them and slit their throats, bite off their heads, but just as I reached them, something strange—something that I'd never thought would happen—happened.

The werewolves all fell to the floor, convulsing, writhing, their mouths dripping with foam. I had never seen any werewolf do that before in my life. Seeing those wolves in pain made me feel sorry for them even though they had just attacked us and had meant to kill us. No one should go through the pain they went through.

Their snouts were bleeding, and their eyes were leaking black ooze. As they continued to convulse, they began shifting into their human forms. All of them were wearing their soldier uniforms. They were all Blair's supersoldiers.

I shifted back too and tried to get near to them in hopes that someone would speak up and tell me what had happened. But before I could do that, they all

shook one last time and died almost simultaneously, their bodies turning blue, their eyes sliding up their sockets, the foam and blood on their mouths drying up.

“What in the holy fuck just happened?” Alexis said, holding her head in her hands.

“The inevitable,” I said, looking sadly at Alexis. Seeing those soldiers die made me feel sorry for the lives that they had lived, the lives that led up to such gruesome deaths. And it was in some part my fault. If I hadn’t been caught by Edward Beckett, he never would have gotten my blood to use for his experiments. If he hadn’t done that, his son would never have tried to use his father’s research to make human-werewolf hybrids like these.

“It’s Blair’s doing,” I said, pointing at the dead bodies. “Remember how I was talking about Blair building up to something big? Well, that’s it. Now we know. He’s been meaning to make an army of werewolves who’d respond to his every command. And so far, he’s been failing at every step. It drives me crazy to think that someone like him would go to such extreme lengths to ensure his deranged father’s legacy!”

“How do you know that it’s your blood Blair used?” Alexis asked.

“What other explanation is there? Edward kept vials and vials of my blood in his laboratory. Surely, when Blair got his hands on his father’s estate, he must have gotten all my blood samples. That’s how he made the serum to change these soldiers,” I said. “But Edward’s research was a dead-end. No human can morph into a werewolf with that blood magic that Edward was trying to do and what Blair is trying to do.”

“We should have killed him when we had the chance,” Alexis said.

As much as I wanted to deny it, she was right. If we had killed him that night when we had breached his tower, none of this would have happened. But that night, it was fated that we failed.

“We have to go back to the commune and warn everyone!” I said. “They have to know that these soldiers can turn into werewolves at any time.”

“Let’s go then,” Alexis said.

We rushed back to my Jeep and drove as fast as we could back to Fiddler’s Green. Alexis kept her eye out to see if any more werewolves were lurking in the area. I kept my eyes on the road while thinking about the repercussions of Blair’s actions.

This was a loose cannon that he had created. It would hurt not only everyone in Fiddler’s Green, the Grimm pack, but Blair too. Surely he could see that, or had his madness gotten the better of him, rendering him blind to the consequences of his crazy actions?

“Hey, at least they’re dying on their own,” Alexis said. “We didn’t have to fight them for long.”

“They were suffering. They were my enemies, sure, but they were suffering in so much pain that it was inhumane.”

As we drove across Fiddler’s Green, we noticed that there was no sign that the feral werewolves had been in town. After another fifteen minutes of silent driving, we were back at the commune.

Vince was waiting for us at the gate.

“Will! There’s something I have to show you!” Vince exclaimed.

“If it is what I think it is, we already know,” Alexis said.

“You guys were attacked by werewolves?” Vince asked, his eyes widening with horror.

“Yes, but before we could fight them properly, they died on their own,” I said. “Now show me what you’ve got.”

Vince led us to the stables. Inside, there were six corpses of brutalized supersoldiers, their faces covered in blood, their fingers torn, and their skins turned blue.

“These werewolves leaped over the barbed wire and tried to attack us,” Vince said. “We shifted to fight them, but before we could do that, they just died and shifted back into their human forms.”

“Fucking Blair!” I yelled, kicking an empty bucket, sending it flying into the air. “That’s it. I’m going to find that son of a bitch and put a stop to his whole operation.”

“What do you want the pack to do in the meantime?” Vince asked.

“Divide and conquer. Find out wherever these fucking werewolves are and round them up. If they die on their own, that’s well and good. If not, kill them and bury their bodies. But leave these six corpses here. I have something in mind for them,” I said.

“Will.” Alexis tugged at my sleeve and pulled me aside, leading me out of the stables. “First of all, you need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down right now!” I said, noticing that my anger was starting to resurface. “This is madness.”

“Yes, it is, but I have something to share with you,” Alexis said, taking a deep breath.

“What is it?” I asked. “Do you know where Blair is? If so, you have to tell me right now.”

# Chapter 19

Alexis

I was going to tell him about Blair's location, but upon seeing that frenzied look on his face—the same look he used to have after escaping from Edward's manor—I thought against it. If I shared that intel with him, he'd try to fight Blair all on his own.

He was my mate, and I could not risk losing him again. Once was bad enough.

“What is it?” Will asked again, impatiently looking at me.

“The Clandestine Order,” I said. That was going to be my other suggestion. “We have these bodies to show them. We can tell them that Blair's got people turning into werewolves. They're going to want to intervene. After all, this is a matter that concerns supernatural beings. These soldiers who died, they're effectively werewolves. That makes it a concern of the Clandestine Order. We have to tell them.”

“And go through their bullshit bureaucracy? Think about what you're saying, Alexis!” Will said. His tone had not gone down ever since he'd discovered that the feral werewolves had attacked the Grimm Abode. He was resorting back to that anger that I found repulsive.

“Yes. We have to do it. If they refuse, then we can go find Blair and deal



with this problem ourselves. But first, we have to get word to the Clandestine Order,” I said firmly.

“Fine,” Will said, calming down a bit. He headed to his home. As I followed him, I realized that the pattern he had mentioned earlier was right. Whenever we left Fiddler’s Green for some vacation time, something terrible happened in our absence. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was fate’s way of telling us that we belonged perpetually in Fiddler’s Green. Could fate be so cruel as to condemn me to a place I yearned to escape?

“Do you know a way to get in touch with the Clandestine Order?” I asked once we were inside the house.

“Yes. I have Rogelio’s phone number,” Will said, taking out his phone.

“That snarky emissary?” I asked.

“Yeah. Do you want to talk to him? I’m feeling all hotheaded right now. I’m not sure if it would be very wise if I talked to him. I’d end up screaming at him or something like that,” Will said, handing me the phone.

“Fine. You just rest. Go into the bedroom and lie down. I’ll make you something to eat. Don’t worry, Will. We’re all here with you.”

He went into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. I wanted to find out what was going on in his head and even contemplated using our bond to prod around in his mind, but that felt like an invasion of his privacy. Instead, I dialed Rogelio’s number.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Wilhelm Grimm,” Rogelio said, picking up immediately after the first ring.

“It isn’t, as a matter of fact,” I said. “I’m his mate, Alexis Richards.”

“That’s strange. Why are you contacting me on his phone?”

“Because we have something to show you. Something that concerns the Clandestine Order. Will you come by?” I asked.

“Miss Richards, I am not one to make house calls like a delivery boy. I am a very busy person employed by the Clandestine Order, and as such, have several responsibilities,” Rogelio said.

“Yeah, yeah, I get how important you are, man. Just come down here? Otherwise, your bosses will be pissed that you let something this big fly under your radar,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Werewolves. We were attacked by more than a dozen werewolves. And we have their bodies to show for it. I’d appreciate it if you came down and analyzed this situation on your own. Because if we take the matter into our hands, you and your precious bosses will get your panties in a bunch,” I said.

“Mind how you talk about the Clandestine Order, Miss Richards. You are bordering on blasphemy,” Rogelio said.

“Are you coming or what?”

There was a long pause on the phone, after which Rogelio finally said, “I’ll be there in a few hours.”

As I waited for Rogelio to arrive, I thought it best to leave Will alone for some time. I understood what he was going through. In his way, he was blaming himself right now for all this. He thought that if he hadn’t allowed

himself to be captured by Edward Beckett, none of this would have happened. He needed to rationalize his thoughts for some time.

If he would calm down, I'd finally tell him that Maliha had given me Blair's location. Maybe then we could go there and confront him together.

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Rogelio arrived exactly five hours later. He came in a Rolls Royce, unlike last time. As he got out of his car, he took his sweet time looking around and being ceremonious.

Will was in a hurry to take him to the stables.

"Come. Follow me," Will said, leading him to the stables.

"What? And no manners? Will I not be even offered something to drink?" Rogelio said, scoffing loudly to show his disdain.

"You can drink all the wine you want after I've shown you what I need to show you," Will said sternly.

"My, my, what a temper on this one," Rogelio said, looking at me. Today, he was wearing a beige assortment of clothes. He had even matched his cane with his coat and boots. Now more than ever, he looked like a character out of some high-fantasy anime.

"Let's not concern ourselves with Will's temper right now. We have much more important things to discuss," I said, scoffing back at him.

When at last, we were at the stables, Will waved his hand and pointed at the pile of corpses.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” Rogelio asked, taking off his spectacles.

“These were once men. Plain old men. Of course, the Clandestine Order made it clear during the hearing that they don’t meddle in the affairs of men. But here’s where things get interesting,” Will said, talking ardently. “Blair Beckett infused them with a serum that turns them into werewolves. These werewolves attacked us out of the blue on two fronts. Nine of them attacked me and Alexis. The others that you see right now, they attacked the commune. Now does this problem fall under the jurisdiction of the Clandestine Order?”

Rogelio went to the bodies and bent down, inspecting them in great detail. No one spoke at that time. Then, he cleaned his hands with a handkerchief and came back out of the stables.

“Well?” Will asked.

“I am afraid that this matter does not concern the Clandestine Order,” Rogelio said.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Will practically roared, and he was right in doing so. Even I was feeling angry.

“These men who have died might have been werewolves, but there’s no proof of that. Besides, it’s Blair you have qualms with. Blair is still a human, and as we said before, we do not meddle in the affairs of humans,” Rogelio said.

Then he looked at me, scowling, and said, “If this was why you called me, then I am afraid your mission was moot. I am not going to bother the Clandestine Order with this trivial business. And next time you decide to call

me, don't."

With that, Rogelio got into his Rolls Royce and drove out of the commune.

"That son of a bitch!" Will growled, curling his fingers into fists.

"Where are you going?" I asked, running behind him.

"There are bound to be other feral werewolves in the area. If the Clandestine Order has decided not to help us, we're the only hope this town has. I'm taking the men, and we're going to scour the area for any werewolves. We're going to kill them. It's time to take this matter into our hands," Will said. It felt as if he was about to say something more to me, but the look of rage on his face prevented him from saying so.

"I love you," I said. "Take care of yourself," I spoke those unsaid words for him.

"I love you too. And for all it's worth, I am sorry that I've been so short with everyone lately. This entire thing is fucking with my head," Will said, giving me a short hug and kissing my forehead.

"It's okay. This entire situation is quite fucked up," I said. "I don't blame you for losing your cool."

His eyes lingered for a second as if he was trying to get me to say something. I was not going to tell him Blair's location right now. Will would do something rash.

"Goodbye, Alexis," Will said, heading out of the commune with the men. As they walked away, I could not help but notice that they looked like an army regiment walking across a battlefield. Brothers in arms, earned in blood.

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It had been eight hours since Will and the rest of the men had left the commune. It was nighttime now. Everyone around the commune had gone to sleep. All the lights were out in the houses. I was the only one awake, with my head spiraling. Fifteen times I'd called Will's number, but he had not picked up once. When I'd dialed Vince's number, I'd gotten a line busy response.

The sixteenth time when I dialed Will's number, I decided to leave a message.

"Hey, Will, I've been waiting eight hours for you and the guys to show up. The not knowing part is killing me. I'm wondering what you guys are doing out there. I'm worried about your safety. And it's because I'm worried for you that I've decided to go and confront Blair. Maybe I can talk it out with him. Don't worry about me. Just get back to the commune safely. Hopefully, by then, I'll be back. Please don't be mad at me. Love, Alexis."

With that done, I headed out of the commune under cover of darkness, looking up Blair's location that Maliha had sent me on my phone.

At this point, I was desperate. Desperate to put an end to things. Blair might not be expecting to see me walk through the doors of his secret hideout. He'd give me a chance to talk to him. Maybe there was some way that I'd diplomatically sort things out with him, have him call off his werewolves and soldiers.

What surprised me about Blair's hideout's location was how ridiculously close it was to Fiddler's Green. It was fifteen miles south of the town beyond

the forest. None of us had suspected that his base of operations would be there because that area was just one big research facility that the government had abandoned sometime in the 1980s.

When I came to think of it, it was the perfect hideout. He had been here all along, tucked away in plain sight.

As I headed down there on foot, I could not help but feel afraid of all the possibilities that could occur. Blair might not be tempted to talk to me. He could send his soldiers to kill me before I'd even get a chance to confront him. Or worse—he'd kidnap me and torture me just like his father had done with Will.

If Will had picked up any of my sixteen calls, I'd have asked him to come with me. Together, we would have held talks with Blair and discussed how this madness was spiraling out of control. I'd even waited for him all those hours.

It looked like I had to do it by myself.

The best-case scenario that could come out of this bizarre plan of mine was if Blair listened to me and called off his werewolves and soldiers. But there was less than one percent possibility of that happening.

As I treaded past the forest, the abandoned research facility came into view. From the outside, it was just as abandoned and unlit as ever. But using my wolf vision, I could see that there was movement going on in the furtive darkness behind those boarded-up windows.

There was no doubt in my mind that Blair was in there.

# Chapter 20

Will

After ten hours of scouring the area and rounding up all the feral werewolves, I finally came home with the rest of the pack members in the dead of night.

“That’s strange,” Vince said as he took his phone out of his pocket. “We were so caught up in defeating and killing those werewolves I didn’t even get a chance to see that Alexis has called me like a bunch of times.”

“She called you and not me?” I asked. Every bone and muscle in my body ached from the ten hours of constant exertion I’d been through. Tracking down all those feral werewolves and then fighting them until they died was not an easy task, even with all the reinforcements that I’d taken with me. I tried to fish my phone out of my pocket but realized that I’d left it at home.

I immediately raced to the house, dreading the worst. I had some idea that Alexis had been holding some information back, but I had no idea what it was. When I found that Alexis had left the house in the middle of the night, I immediately tried to find my phone. It was there in the bedroom, put on silent. I’d done that earlier today when Rogelio had arrived.

Fuck.

Sixteen missed calls and a voice message?

I played the voice message, hoping to hear some rationality coming from her.



Maybe she'd gone out of town for the night to unwind or something like that. But when I heard what she had said, my blood boiled with rage, and my mind went numb with worry.

She had decided to go and confront Blair all by herself. This meant that she knew where he was hiding and had decided to keep that from me.

As my phone fell from my grip, I looked at my reflection in the bedroom mirror. It showed a gaunt man looking harrowingly back at the mirror. It was not the calm and contained Will I'd become in recent months. I looked every bit the werewolf who had just escaped from Edward's manor—a haunted man.

It had taken me this long to recognize and register that I had been losing my grip on my anger. Perhaps that's why she had kept this critical information from me. Regardless, if she had gone to face Blair all by herself, it only meant one thing.

Alexis's life was in danger.

I immediately raced out of the house and came across Vincent, standing in the commune's square, talking with the rest of the men as some drank beer and others smoked their cigarettes.

"Vince. Listen to me," I said, holding him by the shoulders. "Alexis is in danger. I am going to save her. I need you to look after the commune for me while I'm gone. Can you do that?"

"Are you sure you don't want us to come with you?" Vince asked, his face reciprocating the same worry that was on mine. "If she's in danger, we all owe it to her to help her."

“As many werewolves as we’ve killed, there might be more lurking around. Tonight, I need you to be the leader of the pack in my stead. And as for the rest of the pack, they should stay within the commune and defend it from any werewolf that tries to attack. Got it?”

“Got it. And good luck with rescuing Alexis,” Vince said.

“She’s a brave wolf. She doesn’t need any rescuing,” I said. It was more of a way to reassure myself than to reassure Vince.

I got in my Jeep and dialed Maliha’s number. This whole operation stank of her. She must have somehow found Blair’s location and shared it with Alexis.

“Will boy, it’s been such a long time since we’ve talked!” Maliha, ever so enthusiastic, said cheerfully.

“Did you ever tell Alexis Blair’s location?” I asked, trying to hold back the rage in my voice.

“Ummm...yes. But I thought she shared that intel with you. I mean, you guys share everything, don’t you?” Maliha asked.

“Not this. She did not tell me this. And I’m afraid she’s about to do something very rash. You have to tell me where she’s going,” I said.

“She’s in danger?”

“Yes!”

“Fine. Fine. Don’t scream at me. I’ll send you a message of the coordinates that I sent her,” Maliha said, hanging up the phone.

I waited a minute for her to send the coordinates, and then when I got them, I dialed them in my Jeep's GPS. The location that the GPS showed was somewhere in the south of Fiddler's Green. A half-hour long drive ought to take me there, or so my GPS said.

Turning on the engine, I looked back at the commune one last time, hoping I'd made the right decision in handing things over to Vince. After all, he was just as tired as I was, having fought all those feral werewolves and soldiers.

"One problem at a time, Will!" I said to myself, then drove out of the commune at breakneck speed. Alexis should not have done this. Even by her standards, this was extremely reckless. She should have waited for me. It wasn't as if I'd ditched her. She had not given me any cause to be angry at her in such a long time that now when there was a legit cause, I did not know how to process the rage I was feeling. How could she be so reckless?

I swerved the car along the road and turned to the southward road, heading deeper into the forest. Could it be that Blair had been hiding here so close all this time? How had no one ever noticed this?

As I drove past the forest, an abandoned research site came into my view. I'd never seen this facility before in my entire life. In truth, none of the werewolves ever ventured south of Fiddler's Green. Strictly speaking, this area was not Maine, nor was it the state of New York. This was Connecticut. Fiddler's Green had the odd luck of being nestled between so many different states that the lines between them were all blurred.

We never had any business in Connecticut. Until now, it seemed.

The coordinates in the GPS showed that the series of abandoned buildings ahead of me were the location where I had to go. It was where Blair was

hiding. I got out of my car after parking it along the road. If Blair was in there, I had to be very careful and sneakily make my way in there instead of raising the alarm.

It was so quiet everywhere. There was not a single person out and about. All the windows of the buildings in that research facility were boarded up, with not a single source of light in there. But I could spot shadows moving in the dark behind those windows.

Whatever this place was, it was not abandoned.

I tapped into my bond with Alexis, hoping to see where she was or what she was doing, but I could only sense darkness all around her, as if she was either knocked out or walking about in a lightless place.

There was a road snaking through the forest. On one side of this road, there was a big billboard that looked like it had seen better days. On top of it was written “Morales Virology Research Institute, Connecticut.”

Hmm. A virology research facility that had been closed for some time. It made sense that Blair would set up shop here. If there was lab equipment in there, he could have used it. Besides, all those big buildings surely had to have an underground component to them—a perfect place to hide all the experiments he was doing and all the soldiers that he was housing.

I had to give it to him; this was very ingenious of him, hiding in plain sight like that.

*Alexis, are you out there?* I had barely sent out that message when something spontaneous happened.

The utter darkness of the road was gone in a second. Now, dozens of lights

shone on me as I stood there at the entrance of the research facility. In the next moment, ranks upon ranks of soldiers started coming from every direction, wielding big rifles that were aimed at me, all of them circling me.

“Halt! You shall move no further!” Their Captain barked at me, holding his hand up.

“I’m not here to fight,” I said, raising my hands. My declaration did not deter them from aiming their guns at me. Dozens of red laser dots were on my body, moving around. I knew that there was no chance I was going to fight so many soldiers by myself.

I was not counting on what happened next.

First, the Captain fell to his knees, his rifle falling from his hands. As he tried to get up, he suddenly shifted into a feral wolf. He had barely finished transforming when all the other dozens of soldiers also succumbed to the same fate. Now, instead of being surrounded by soldiers, I was surrounded by feral werewolves, all of whom were closing their ranks around me, their mouths snarling, their claws gnarled.

I shifted just in time to swerve and avoid the sudden onslaught of wolves that had broken upon me like a levee.

Even I knew that it was not possible to fight all of them. But I did not have to fight them in order to defeat them. If my earlier experience with these feral werewolves had any credibility, all these wolves would die within the next few minutes. I just had to run long enough to outrun them and wait for them to die.

But that was easier said than done. Even as I raced at the top of my speed, the

feral werewolf horde caught up with me, slashing away at my body from behind, injuring me in several spots at once.

I was bleeding out, and my body was weakening quickly with the loss of blood and the infliction of all these wounds. The feral werewolves were relentless, and they showed no signs of stopping or slowing down.

Until five minutes later, when I was covered in bruises and my blood, all the werewolves stopped chasing me, and I turned around to see that ghastly sight of dozens upon dozens of werewolves writhing there on the floor, turning back into their human forms, their mouths foaming, their eyes and ears bleeding.

Such a terrible fate to fall upon so many. Could Blair see the insanity that he had wrought?

I waited till the last of the wolves was dead and then shifted back into my human form. As I crossed the corpse-riddled path, I noticed that my injuries were not healing as quickly as they used to. The gashes in my legs and the slashes on my back were stinging, blood continuing to pour out of them.

I inched slowly back to the winding road and stood back where I'd started, only this time with piles of corpses all around me.

While waiting to catch my breath and for my injuries to heal, I noticed that the lights were shutting off one by one, and the door in front of me was sliding open. Could it be that Blair had finally conceded?

But Blair was not standing on the other side of that door. For that matter, neither was Alexis. As the last of my wounds got covered with healing scabs, I walked into the abandoned research facility, hoping to make Blair see some

sense.

# Chapter 21

Alexis

Finding Blair in the vast acreage that spanned many buildings was not going to be an easy task. I did not have all night. In the back of my mind, I worried about Will and how he would have taken the news that I'd gone to seek out Blair.

There came harrowing sounds from outside of the facility, sounds that told a very familiar story. The story of violence, bloodshed, and wanton death. It could only mean that Will had finally tracked me down and would shortly make his way inside.

With the number of soldiers that were patrolling the buildings, I could use Will's alternative to diplomacy right now.

The vents. That was my only other recourse. A facility such as this had to have very extensive ventilation. Blair might not have maintained these buildings to camouflage them better, but from what I'd seen so far, I knew that he had kept several aspects of them purposeful. He may be a madman, but there was a method to his madness.

Those chutes at the top of the roofs had ribbons attached to the railings. The ribbons were moving against the wind, signaling the functionality of those vents.



More screams erupted from outside the facility, turning my suspicion into surety. Will was out there. I had to make my way into the facility before he'd find me. If he were to see me here, he would try to convince me to go back with him. And to have come all this way without confronting Blair? I could not let that happen.

I snuck out from behind the thicket of trees and hopped up on one of the smaller buildings nearby, all the while avoiding the soldiers' lines of sight. I wondered how it was possible that I'd gained access to the facility too easily. Could it be that Blair was secretly observing from hidden cameras, making a game out of it, wondering how long it'd take me to get to him? I knew how sociopathic he was, and I wouldn't put it past him to do something exactly like this.

Once I'd made my way to the nearest vent, I took off its metal railing. It wasn't going to be possible to just slip into it with the fan still spinning at its top speed. Jamming the fan would create such a loud noise that it'd attract every soldier's attention.

If I were to do this, I'd have just a few seconds during which I'd jam the fan, slip into the vent, and then escape everyone's notice.

I took a deep breath, picked up a thick branch of a tree from the roof, looked around me one more time to see where each soldier was, and then jammed the branch into the fan, stopping it while the branch held. It created a loud bang, just as I had suspected. Before anyone could come to the top of the roof, I dove into the vent and slipped from out of sight. Just as I had made my way in, I pulled at the tree branch inside. The fan resumed spinning, covering my tracks, hopefully.

Now, inside these old vents, I utilized my sense of direction and began crawling toward the main building. Every now and then, I peeked from the open ducts to see what kind of operation Blair was running here.

The evidence of Blair's illicit activities was on display in every room that I looked into. The fuming beakers with neon-colored fluids and the scientists hunched over, tinkering with these dangerous chemicals, were proof enough that he was cooking up mutagens that the soldiers were being injected with.

Speaking of the soldiers, several of the rooms of this facility were converted into a makeshift mess, where, from the looks of it, they slept, ate, and spent their downtime.

I lost count of the rooms that I could see from the vents. My speed had considerably picked up as I was descending a steep slope. I did not know where I was being led, just that it was somewhere deep and underground.

I came to a sudden stop with a lot of inertia, crashing into a dead-end.

Before I had a moment to get my bearings, the vent gave way from below me, and I fell through, crashing on my back in a room full of soldiers. Here, there were plenty of screens on the walls, all of them showing the camera feeds from several dozen cameras around the facility. Some of the cameras were even showing footage from inside the vents.

"Fuck," I muttered, getting up to my feet as tens of rifles were aimed at me.

"Fuck sums it up so perfectly, doesn't it?"

There it was, that familiar voice that made gooseflesh appear on my skin. A chill ran down my spine as the soldiers stood aside, letting Blair, all donned up in heavy armor, pass through and come stand in front of me.

“Blair,” I said, nodding.

“Alexis,” he nodded back, smiling maliciously at me. “I don’t think that this is a coincidence, is it?”

“No. It isn’t.”

“Because it would be sloppy, to say the least, if this was your and your mate’s attempt at an ambush.”

“Will’s not here,” I said defiantly. “I just came here alone. To talk to you.”

“Oh really?” Blair scoffed, pointing at one of the monitors that showed Will sneaking around on the roofs of the facility.

“In my defense, I had no idea he’d follow me,” I said, rubbing dirt off my hands and my face.

“Since you’re defenseless and you haven’t attacked any of my men so far, I am assuming that you have really come here to talk and nothing else? Not even a round of fisticuffs, for old times’ sake? We both know how much you like to shift into your wolf form and go berserk.”

I was more concerned about Will and what trap Blair had sprung for him.

“No fight. Just talk,” I said, keeping my eye on the screen that showed Will leaping from roof to roof.

“Don’t you worry about him,” Blair said. “He already killed an entire squadron on his way here. I am sure he can hold his own.”

“Please, keep him out of it. I just want to talk to you about all of this craziness,” I said, trying to make him see reason. I needed to make sure that

I'd exhausted the route of rationality before Will, the werewolves, and I retaliated.

"Craziness? What craziness are you talking about? I have tried time and again to kill Will. You very well know the reason why I'm so motivated for that to happen," Blair said, sneering at me.

All his soldiers had surrounded him, their rifles cocked at me, the red lasers from their guns aimed at my torso. My hands were raised to show that I meant to harm, but inside my head, I was trying to figure out what tactic would serve best to take down all of those guards in a single move while also incapacitating Blair. If I could do that, I could solve the Blair dilemma forever. It would be akin to cutting the head of a dragon.

"I know that look, that way your eyes wander. I remember it from that fateful night we threw you off the roof after killing your mate," Blair said, making a motion with his arm that caused all his soldiers to lower their weapons. "And I know you, Alexis. I know that if you really put your head to it, you will do something that might jeopardize my mission here."

"As I said, Blair, I'm not here to fight. I am here to avert one. If you do not back off, the werewolves won't back off, either. We're talking about all-out war. Are you really so reckless that you'd raze an entire city to the ground just to kill one man?"

I did not know how it happened, but at the exact moment when I'd stopped speaking, a giant pane from the roof tore off, and Will fell through, landing on his feet.

"Alexis!" Will said, noticing that I was surrounded by soldiers. "What on earth are you doing here?"

I could not respond right away, not after seeing all the injuries that were slowly healing on Will's body. He was in no shape to fight.

"Isn't this a sweet reunion?" Blair laughed maniacally. "Makes me reminisce about old times. How it used to be when my friends, Maurice and Ralph, were still alive. You killed them, Will. You think of me as the villain in this story. From where I stand, I see you as the person who deprived me of my father. You're the man who brought down my friends' business, killing them while you were at it. And if you had your way just now, you'd kill me."

"As I should, you madman!" Will screamed.

The rifles once again went up, their aim fixed on Will's head.

"You see that?" Blair snapped. "This is power. The power that money can buy. You best believe it that my father did not leave me empty-handed. His wealth is mine to use as I wish. And I have decided to use it for the singular purpose of wiping out the fucking Grimms. You are a scourge on this land. You, Will Grimm, most of all! Before this ends, I will avenge my father's death."

"Your reservations are with him alone. Why are you subjecting so many innocent people to your volatile serums? All your soldiers die, unable to stand the poisoning. Do you have no sympathy for them?" I asked, my hands raised, one towards Will to stop him from advancing and the other towards the soldiers to stop them from firing. I was standing in the middle, trying my best to defuse this situation.

"My soldiers know the price when they sign up. They're just pawns in a larger game," Blair said. "You may have discovered my secret lair, but that won't hinder my plan. You see, these soldiers that keep dying, they're

iterations of an experiment that I've been conducting for many months now. And I will succeed eventually. It does not matter how many more iterations I have to make. With my substantial resources, I have bought the very lives of these men. Look."

Blair grabbed one of the soldiers by the collar and pushed him ahead. The soldier stood there, just looking at all of us.

"Shoot yourself," Blair said.

The soldier took his pistol out, aimed it at his head, and pulled the trigger, splattering blood on the wall.

"That's the power that I command," Blair said. "I will unleash all of these soldiers like the biblical plague. And then, when every last one of you is dead, I will rest easy, knowing my work is finished."

"You're crazy!" I screamed.

"Are you just now getting that?" Blair laughed again, turning his back to us and heading out the door. "Till we meet again, you star-crossed lovers. Oh, consider this your first and last warning. The next time you trespass will be the last."

I looked at Will, who was in no position to fight, then at the soldiers. For a moment, it seemed that all hell would break loose. But then, the soldiers lowered their guns and receded out of the room in a formation, leaving us both standing there, the air heavy with silence and tension.

"What were you thinking?" Will glared at me, his eyes fierce and aglow.

"Not right now. Not here. Let's get out of here. You shouldn't have come

after me. Look at yourself; you're injured!" I said, putting his arm around my shoulders. I helped him out of the room, trying to keep out of sight of the soldiers.

"This was completely reckless, Alexis!" Will snapped.

I had no energy to argue with him, not while I was holding his weight on my shoulders. As much as I knew he was angry at me, and as much as he was injured, I was secretly glad that he had come.

It went to show how much he cared.

# Chapter 22

Will

Blair had let us go. Against all odds, Alexis and I made it out of the facility without any trouble. That got me thinking. Why would someone like Blair, someone who had every reason to kill the two people who had been making his life a living hell, let them go when they had walked into his headquarters like lambs to the slaughter?

I knew the answer in an instant, but I was far too enraged at Alexis's stupid decision to go and confront Blair to think more about it. However, with it in my mind, it kept me from unleashing my anger on her.

Blair was weak. That was all there was to it. He might have put up a brave front in front of us earlier, but he was trapped in a place he didn't want to be in. There was no other way he would have let us go. With his experiments failing, his soldiers dying, and his resources depleting, Blair was preparing for something big, adhering to the "go big or go home" credo.

All those soldiers patrolling his headquarters, and all that display of secrecy and firearms, it was just a façade. The real Blair underneath all that was grasping at straws.

"Will? How long are you going to be quiet?" Alexis asked from behind. Ever since we'd walked out of the facility, I'd been giving her the silent treatment, walking five paces in front of her. I knew that if I spoke, I would unleash all



the anger that I'd been holding back. It had come back after all this time, that unresolved red ball of rage burning in my chest.

It made me recall all the times Alexis had been reckless before. There was that one time when she had walked into Blair's office for a job interview, and he had kidnapped her. Then, after I had 'died,' she had ditched Fiddler's Green and sought sanctuary in another city while our enemies pursued her. She would have died that day, too, if I hadn't attacked the assassin feigning as her lover. And, of course, there was that time when she let herself be captured by Maurice. If it wasn't for our bond, I'd have never found her back then, either.

Maybe the resentment made me think like this, but I was beginning to see a pattern of recklessness that Alexis was prone to follow. I couldn't hold back anymore. I had to say something, or else the veins in my forehead would burst.

"What were you thinking?" My voice was considerably calm, given how I was truly feeling. It was only a matter of time, though. The injuries I had sustained were not healing as fast as I had anticipated, leading me to think there was something more to the soldiers than met the eye. Maybe, Blair had tampered with their physiologies in a way that I was not immune to physical injuries as I once was. It could be that he had gotten his hands on his father's research. He could have used my blood to make these soldiers effective against me.

"I was trying to be diplomatic, as I said, Will," Alexis said, sighing. She did not get to sigh and show signs of exasperation after what she had just done. She was in the wrong.

“Diplomatic? Are you dense?” The pain from the injuries, combined with the anger that had been bubbling underneath the surface, finally caused me to give in to my hectoring nature, the one that I had kept at bay for months.

“Excuse me?” Alexis’s face was mortified with shock, her eyes strained, and her forehead furrowed. “What did you say?”

“Oh, so you’re hard of hearing now too? Is that why you misunderstood me when I explicitly told you earlier to stay put in the commune? Are you so reckless that you would deliberately go out of your way to jeopardize your life? Do you have such little regard for your safety? For my feelings? I thought you had grown up, but clearly, I was mistaken. Underneath everything, you’re a little girl who does not know better!”

“Will,” Alexis’s voice was breaking off. “Why are you saying all of this to me?”

“Because the last time I checked, you had gone off to find Blair’s secret headquarters and had the fucking audacity to barge in there without reinforcements, without a game plan, and without common fucking sense!”

The gashes that those soldiers had torn into my skin were burning now. My whole body felt like it was set on fire. I could feel that it wasn’t just the injuries that were making me feel this way; it was all the rage that was finally unleashed like Pandora’s Box, finding channels in my body to agitate. I really needed to calm down before I did something irreconcilable.

“You are not being yourself,” Alexis said quietly. She took a few steps back, standing even further apart from me than she already was.

“Are you fucking serious? Blair has been our number-one enemy for the

longest time. Do I need to remind you that he almost killed me once? All the atrocities that he's committed? What made you think that going to him and talking it out was a reasonable option?"

"Because I am afraid, Will! I do not like admitting it, but I am afraid of what's going to happen to the commune, to the town, and to you if this whole thing doesn't end anytime soon. People will die. There's a war coming. I only did what I did so that I could avert it. Wouldn't you do the same if you had the chance?"

"The time for averting it is long past, Alexis!" I snapped at her. "If something terrible had happened in there, and if we hadn't gotten out as miraculously as we did, who would have been to blame for that? And you disobeyed my orders. Do not forget that I might be your mate, but I am your Alpha above all else!"

"Some Alpha!" Alexis snapped back and stormed off.

I didn't have it in me to go after her. She needed to sit with her failure for a while and know how much she had screwed up. Because of her, our entire stance was compromised. Blair might have let us go, but now he knew that the pack wasn't as strong as he'd initially thought.

I couldn't help but think that, somehow, everything had gone according to Blair's plan. It took a bit of deduction on my part, but what I perceived was this: Blair must have created a new batch of serum to inject into his soldiers. This particular serum was imbued with my blood, rendering me un-immune to it. That's why these injuries probably were taking a long time to heal. He had wanted a visual demonstration of that. That's why he'd let so many of his soldiers die. To him, this was nothing more than one expensive science

experiment.

I looked around the forest and saw no signs of Alexis. My Jeep was parked up the road where I had left it. I needed to get back home and consult with the pack's healer to confirm my suspicions about these injuries.

As I drove back to the commune, I could not help but feel remorse for the way I had let my old nature dominate me. It had not been my intent to berate Alexis like that, and yet I'd done exactly that. Could this factor also be attributed to how the soldiers had affected me in the fight?

It would be a shame if, after all this time, I ended up back at square one. All that hard work, all that character building, everything that I'd done for the commune, for the city, and for my mate turned to dust.

I could not let that happen.

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"Yep. These injuries are going to leave a scar, for sure," the healer said.

"Where's the other doctor?"

"Oh, him? He's gone to pursue his post-doctorate in Memphis. Besides, we pack healers never hold the position for too long. It's like a curse with us. I've only been here a week, and who knows how long I'll be here, huh?"

"Well, you're a lot nicer than the other doctor," I said.

"Eh, that's because I finished medical school in Minnesota. The people are so polite there; it rubs off on ya!" the healer said, taking a closer look at my injuries. "And fortunately for you, I have an interest in hematology. We can

get down to the root of this problem in just a few minutes.”

“Dr. Munroe, I am beginning to like you. You’re efficient,” I said.

“Well, I’ll tell you the truth, Will. I’ve always liked you.”

“But we’ve never met before.”

“Sure. We’ve never met before. I was a little kid, and my dad, Morgan, told me stories about the brave werewolf who saved the entire Grimm pack by moving us to America. You were my hero. Hell, with all the shit unfolding around us, you’re still my hero.”

“You know what? Dr. Munroe, if you can find out what’s wrong with me, you’ll be my hero,” I said.

“Right you are,” Dr. Munroe said. He pricked my finger and squeezed it, causing a massive blood droplet to form at the tip. He then took a swab and rubbed the blood off, applying it on a glass plate that he put under a microscope.

For the next five minutes, he didn’t say anything, which made me more suspenseful. But after a long pause, he looked up from the microscope and shook his head.

“Will, there’s grave news,” Dr. Munroe said, putting aside his stethoscope and looking at me morosely.

“I’ve already been in a grave once before, doctor. I’m not afraid of dying. Tell me what it is,” I said, clenching my fists.

“These soldiers that you fought...were they different from the rest?”

“Yes. They were a lot more aggressive, and all their moves were synchronized, making it very challenging for me to take on all of them at once. Did I mention that they sort of died at the same time?”

“That may be because of the mutagens in their body. But from what I’ve inferred from your blood sample, these soldiers have affected your DNA. This sort of anomaly is only possible in one case, and that is if these soldiers were imbued with your blood, rendering you weak against it,” Dr. Munroe said. “So those injuries will take a lot longer to heal.”

I knew it. Dr. Munroe had confirmed what I’d already suspected. Blair had taken his father’s research and had made these soldiers with the specific purpose of bringing me down.

“What can be done?” I asked.

“For now, rest. Rest is all you can do. You have to let these injuries heal the old-fashioned way. In time, I will bring my surgeon friend from Bangor and have him see the scars. It’s going to be some basic epithelial surgery that can fix those scars up in no time.”

“No. Don’t do anything about the scars,” I said. “A wolf bears the scars he receives. It is the way of the warrior.”

“Suit yourself, but for now, don’t go looking for any more fights.”

“Could there be a correlation between these injuries and my anger flaring?”

“Let’s just say that your old DNA was mixed up in these soldiers to make them stronger against you in a battle. When they attacked you, it woke up dormant parts of you that you had been controlling for some time now,” the doctor said.

“And how do I get those parts to be dormant again?” I asked.

“I am afraid,” the doctor said, shaking his head once more. “I do not have an answer for that.”

That only left one more thing for me to do.

I needed to seek Alexis and apologize for how I had lost my cool with her.

# Chapter 23

Alexis

I didn't go back to Will's house. Instead, I went back to mine, choosing to sulk in my old room. It felt like I'd stepped back in time. As bitter as this feeling was, it made me reminisce about the time when I'd just met Will for the first time. It had been an onerous challenge to come to terms with him back then. After he had learned to tame himself down, there came a time when I had entirely forgotten that Will had been capable of anger.

Until tonight.

Tonight was a reminder that Will had been holding back his anger all this time.

Knowing that did not lessen the pain I was feeling. I'd thought that after all this time, after everything that had happened between us, Will would respect me enough not to lose his cool with me.

There was a knock at the door. I already knew who it was going to be. I had no plans to open the door. Being alone felt like the better option. It wasn't just Will who had been rattled by recent events. I was quite shaken as well. After all, I'd gone and faced Blair on my own. It was akin to walking into the open maws of death itself.

"Alexis, please open up," Will said from the other side of the door. I



remembered that Will had never asked for the keys to my home. We had never sought it fit to live in both houses. We were engaged, after all. If I didn't go and open the door for him, he'd be stuck out there all night.

"Go away, Will," I said, not really wanting to talk to him right now. I needed some time to process everything that had happened.

"I have to talk to you. It's important," Will said.

I groaned and got to my feet, dragging myself from my room to the main door. I unlocked it and opened it to find him standing there, his face looking strained and pained.

"Jesus Christ, what happened to you? Why are you so pale?" I asked. In the blueish light of the moon, Will looked like a sick man. I could see veins popping under his skin. His eyes had huge bags underneath. He winced when he moved.

"I'll get to that in a bit," Will said, holding onto the doorpost for support. "But first, I want to apologize. It was not right for me to snap at you the way I did. For that, I am sorry. I will not make any excuses for what happened, but I want you to know that all that anger came from a place of love. I love you, Lexie, and I don't want anything bad to happen to you. When I learned that you'd gone to Blair by yourself, all reason abandoned me, and I was left with one tragic image in my mind. You, dead, lying at Blair's feet. I am not afraid of dying, but the thought of you dying before your time, when you're so young and have your whole life in front of you, scares me as it should. A mate is nothing without his fated partner."

"Will," I said, keeping myself strong against the barrage of emotions that were bursting from inside. "I am sorry, too. I should have trusted you. But

you have to know; I did what I did because I could see no other option. Maybe we could have communicated better about it.”

“In any case, I am sorry for letting go of my rage,” Will said.

The way he stood there, all vulnerable, in the doorway, his eyes bearing sincerity, his face morose, I had no other choice but to forgive him. Tonight was just a one-off in a long series of nights that had been fruitful, full of love, and filled with compassion. It was nothing that I could not forgive.

“Will,” I whispered, reaching out and holding him in my arms. As I closed my hands around his back, Will fell on me, barely able to hold his weight. “Oh, dear Lord, what’s happening to you?”

I helped him inside the house as he winced and groaned, holding his midriff against the pain he was feeling.

“I’ve just come from the doctor. The new guy, he’s quite an upgrade from the last one,” Will said, then shared with me what the doctor had told him. By the end of his retelling, I had the most horrified expression on my face. To make matters worse, he took off his shirt and showed me the bruises and gashes on his body. They were not very deep, but the very fact that they were there and hadn’t healed yet did not bode well for Will.

“What does this mean?” I asked, feeling scared and guilty. This had only happened because I had gone to seek out Blair. If I had stayed put like Will had told me to, he wouldn’t have come after me, he wouldn’t have fought those soldiers, and he wouldn’t have been inflicted with these injuries. This was all my fault.

“This means that it might be time for me to consider retirement from this

Alpha business,” Will said. “But like every cop in every ‘80s movie, I’ll retire only after I’ve finished my last case. In my case, it’s Blair.”

“Will, let me help you,” I said. “Lie down. I have some balm in my cabinets that will close those wounds at the very least.”

Will lay down on the sofa, all his wounds red and festering. He winced when he adjusted himself. I immediately darted to the cabinet where I kept my first aid supplies. I took out the balm, uncapped it, and went back to Will, gently applying it to his bruised skin.

He winced more as the balm stung him but quickly steadied himself. As I finished applying it to the rest of his body, Will braced himself for any pain from those injuries.

The balm was fast acting, and the relief that he received from it made him fall asleep on my sofa. Seeing him like that, sleeping so innocently, so deeply, made me forgive and forget that he had misbehaved with me earlier tonight. Here, in the commune, people looked after each other. Will took care of me constantly. But who was there to take care of him? Underneath the anger at his earlier statement, I retroactively understood that the caring component of his personality had made him lash out at me.

He was right. I needed to be more careful, not just for my sake but for the sake of my mate and the future we had planned together.

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It was late, and everybody in the commune who was not on active patrol duty was asleep. Vince was sitting outside his house, keeping a watchful eye on

the gates of the commune with a gun in his hand. I walked over to him, watching him polish his rifle in the light of the moon.

“That gun’s way too big for you,” I said.

“Lexie, what are you doing up?” Vince asked. “I heard from the pack what happened. You went out to meet Blair?”

“Vince, I really don’t have the energy to get into that right now. But there is something I need your help with,” I said.

I told him of what had happened to Will as we both walked over briskly to the healer’s clinic. When I was finished, my chest felt lighter, as if a great burden had been lifted off. Vince was my confidante, and as such, I relied upon his wisdom when my own intellect failed me.

“You needn’t worry about Will. He’s not the same person who appeared all lost and haggard from Edward Beckett’s manor. Will’s resilient. If bullets and poisonous serums couldn’t kill him, then some basic as fuck injuries are not going to be the cause of his demise. I have known death. I have seen it with my eyes. I saw it take my father and my grandfather. I know you know death in your own way as well. Your parents died before your eyes. From what we know of death, the one thing that can be said with certainty is people like Will are powerful enough to look death in the eye.”

“You speak like an old man. When did you ever get so wise?” I asked, feeling even lighter now that he had addressed my unsaid concern.

“I was always this wise,” Vince laughed.

“Well, we’ll still find something to cure him, okay?”

“We will, Lexie.”

Once inside the healer’s clinic, I met Dr. Monroe for the first time in my life. Although he was a member of the pack, he had been absent from Fiddler’s Green for most of his life on account of studying at medical school.

“You must be Will’s partner,” Dr. Monroe said. “Is he doing better?”

“He’s asleep. I applied some herbal balm on his wounds to make them heal faster, doctor, but we’re going to have to come up with something new, a more potent remedy, if we want him to recover fully,” I said.

Dr. Monroe took off his glasses, then looked at me first and then at Vince. There was a joyfulness in his eyes that made him seem friendly.

“Will is by far the strongest werewolf I have ever come across, Alexis,” he said. “He will recover in time. Those injuries are special. His body will need a while to adjust to this new paradigm shift. White blood cells, antigens, antibodies, all those healing components are already present within him.”

“But surely there must be something we can do,” I said. I liked having contingency plans in case things went south. It was one of the downsides of being a classic over-preparer.

“There is nothing in all these books as well as in medical research all over the world, that covers the topic of genetic mutation-based supernatural injuries. It’s not an exact science. Hell, it’s not even a science at all. Blair’s meddling with forces beyond anyone’s understanding. You want an antidote? Get me one of those soldiers alive so I can take samples from them. That’s the best I can promise yet.”

At least that was something tangible, something achievable.

“You’ve got it,” I said.

“Are you sure, Lexie?” Vince asked.

“Yes. And I know what you’re afraid of. Don’t worry. I will trust Will this time and tell him before doing anything,” I said.

# Chapter 24

Will

The bandages on my body felt stiff, dried with the blood and puss that had dripped from my slowly healing wounds. Dr. Monroe had insisted I wear them for another day to let the wounds close. In the meantime, I could wait and watch. Surprisingly, there was no pain in those wounds. Alexis's balm had worked wonders.

Her presence beside me was far more therapeutic and healing than any bandages that I was wearing. She stood wordlessly by me at the gate's watchtower. Both of us were looking at the city.

It reminded me of the pre-war silence back in Germany. The calm before the storm, as it were. The city was unusually quiet, its roads starkly deserted, as if every person somehow knew in their heart that some calamity was on the horizon.

Knowing Blair's vantage point, at the very least, granted us a rough idea of where he would attack from.

"If he's going to come from the south, that big field beyond the graveyard is where he's going to gather his soldiers," Alexis pointed at the ground in the south.

"Would it be enough to hold all his soldiers?" I asked. After seeing what I

had seen, it wasn't a reckless guess to say that he had thousands of soldiers at his disposal.

"Somehow, we will have to contain the fight to the south. Otherwise, his soldiers will make their way to the town. I don't even want to imagine what happens in that case," Alexis whispered.

I could imagine what would happen to it if Blair's forces were unleashed upon those unsuspecting citizens. The town square would crumble. Blair's old tower would fall and cover downtown in its rubble. The suburbs would be filled with the sounds of screaming people trying to run away from those mutated soldiers. The fabric of reality would tear, and only madness would prevail.

The wounds that had recovered over the last few days had formed stubborn scars that made their presence known every time I moved. My previous liveness was compromised, but the doctor said it'd only remain compromised for a few more days.

The trouble was, I did not have a few more days.

But even as I stayed put atop the commune, watching everything from afar, the pack had been dispatched all over town, seeing to it that all the stray soldiers were wiped out.

"Will. The doctor, Vince, and I had an idea. Do you want to hear it? I want to share it with you this time around instead of, you know, going behind your back," Alexis said. We had been standing here idly for a long time, neither of us talking. While I had been brooding, Alexis, it seemed, had been building up the courage to talk to me about whatever was on her mind.



“Tell me. I promise I’ll hear it out,” I said, trying to compensate for the rudeness that I’d exhibited a few days ago.

“We need one soldier,” Alexis said.

“But we already have a barn full of dead bodies,” I said, turning to face her. She was looking quite eager and excited. I, on the other hand, was plain confused.

“We need an alive one. Someone whose blood and body we can use to study the kind of serum Blair injected in him and all the other soldiers. Think of it as research. It will help us understand what Blair’s been doing. With that information in our arsenal, we can do several things. Off the top of my head, we can come up with an antidote that renders you immune to these soldiers. Secondly, we can use what we know about those soldiers and their altered chemical makeup to create something or do something that ends this madness without going to war,” Alexis said.

I had to give it to her; it was a very well-thought-out plan, and she had covered her bases, making it impossible for me to say no. It surprised me why this suggestion hadn’t occurred to me before. It was not like there was a lack of soldiers in the area. The more we seemed to kill, the more appeared out of the woodwork.

“Fine. I am with you on this,” I said, this time really meaning it instead of just being accommodating to compensate for my prior behavior. She had come up with a good, followable, and mature plan. This was the version of Alexis I liked best. Someone who used her mind rationally.

“That day, when you went off to find Blair, I couldn’t help but think what I’d do without you if I lost you. You don’t know how much I have grown to love

you and cherish you in these past months,” I said, holding her hands and putting them on my chest so she’d hear my heartbeat and feel my earnestness.

“When you came home, all injured and apologetic, I thought the same thing. I cannot live a life without you, either. It’s the most difficult thing for me to imagine,” Alexis said, coming closer to me, so close that our bodies met and our lips were kissing the distance close.

Then, before reaching up to kiss me, her mouth lingered near my ear, and she whispered, “I love you more than life itself.”

It was a subtle kiss, a soft, tentative brushing of the lips as we held each other. My lips craved the softness of her cheeks, the wetness of her lips, and the warmth of her mouth. There was something powerful about reconciliatory kisses like this.

It was a sweet moment that ended all too soon when a group of werewolves suddenly returned from their hunt. Vince was leading them.

“What word from the town?” I asked, hurriedly stepping back from Alexis so that they wouldn’t see that we were having a romantic moment to ourselves.

“Will. Those goddamn soldiers have reclaimed Beckett Pharma’s tower. Apparently, they dug a whole tunnel from his new headquarters. They’re swarming out of that building like locusts. We managed to close that hole, but there are still soldiers within that building, doing crazy shit,” Morgan said.

“Is that true?” I asked Vince.

“Morgan’s right. Those bastards are trying to enter the town secretly. We can’t have that happen!” Vincent said.

“What do you say, my love?” I asked Alexis.

“Whatever we do, we do it together,” Alexis said.

I knew that I was in no shape to fight right now. Taking Alexis with me would only compromise both of us, as one would spend time covering the other. At that critical moment, a thought occurred to me.

It was inevitable that I was going to retire from this life soon. Vincent would be the alpha after me. He would have to delegate, oversee, and take care of the commune.

“Vincent,” I said, calling him from above.

“Yeah, boss?”

“I leave this one up to you. You’re going to lead the pack and do what needs to be done about this,” I said.

Several members of the hunting party gasped in surprise. Alexis looked at me with disbelief.

“Are you sure, Will?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. Then, looking back at the hunting party, I said something that had been lying heavy in my mind for some time. “We stand on the brink of war. It might not be as impressive in scale as the Second World War, but make no mistake, it is a war by every definition of the word. The last time the Grimms faced a war, we fled. However, I have understood after a long time that running is not in the cards for us anymore. We make our stand in this town. We will drive away those who seek to disparage us!”

It wasn’t quite a big crowd, but still, the hunting party resounded with

applause, cheers, and hoots instilled with passion and courage. I meant every word of what I had said.

“Go, then. Regroup. Recuperate. Reinforce. When you are ready, go back and conquer that tower!” I said. Then I stayed there, watching them head back into the commune to do as I had said.

“Why aren’t we going with them?” Alexis asked.

“The last time I went into that tower, I was alone. It was just you and me. That’s why we failed. What good am I as the alpha if I cannot harness the raw force of the pack? Trust me. When those forty, fifty pack members go in that tower, they will kill every soldier in their path.”

“Is this one of the steps?” Alexis asked.

“Steps?”

“You know, steps to retirement? You’re trying to see if Vince is ready or not?”

I smiled and nodded.

“But we do have a plan of our own, don’t we? Capture a soldier alive and bring him back here?” I asked. “I’m just prioritizing what’s important to me. Right now, I’d rather spend time with you and do what you think is right.”

Alexis gleamed with glee, her face breaking into a broad smile.

“You know, when you agree with me, it turns me on so much,” she said, tugging at my wrist and pulling me toward my home.

“I have all these bandages,” I said, pointing to my body.

“What I’ve got planned for you does not require you to take off your bandages,” she said, winking at me.

It intrigued me enough to follow her to our home.

Once we were inside, Alexis pulled the curtains, shrouding us in secrecy. Then, she walked over to me slowly, her eyes alive with desire, her body becoming a vessel of pleasure.

“All you’ve got to do is sit back and enjoy the show,” she said, pushing me down on the sofa.

“The show?” I asked, amused.

“No words from the audience!” Alexis said, putting her foot on my thigh. Then, while slowly arching her back, she took off her top, revealing her naked midriff, her slender waist, and her swaying breasts. In another moment, the bra was gone. Now, her boobs hung there on her chest, her peach-colored nipples looking enticing. I wanted to move forward, wrap my hand around them, and take those nipples in my mouth, but Alexis had her foot on my thigh, preventing me from moving.

She danced a little as she came forward and descended on her knees. I closed my eyes in anticipation of what was to come. I could feel her pulling away my pants as she positioned herself between my thighs.

Then I felt her mouth close around my cock. As she sucked it, licked it from down under, and swallowed its length in her mouth, my penis became harder, struggling to remain fit within the tiny cavity of her mouth.

I did not dare move.

Alexis slowly bobbed her head up and down, her wet lips enveloping the length of my dick. I could feel the tip ramming against her throat, but it felt so good, that moistness, that tightness deep within her mouth, and the way her tongue rolled on my frenulum.

I opened my eyes as the sensation intensified, only to find her sitting there between my thighs, her breasts heaving, my entire cock deep in her throat, and her hands cradling my balls.

I watched as she retracted her head, a trail of precum and spit connecting her now-distant mouth with my dick. She wiped her face with the back of her hand, and her skin flushed red.

I remained quiet and in awe of what was happening as she took off her pants, then her panties, and climbed on top of me, her hands gripping the sofa for support, her sexy, slender, naked body against me. She gently took my penis inside, sliding on top of it till it was deep inside her.

Alexis moaned as she rode me, her beautiful form thrusting up and down in the air as she straddled my cock, latched onto my body, and brushed her breasts against my face.

I buried my face in her bosom, kneading her perky tits in my hands, licking the areola, and sucking on her nipples as she rode me roughly, her moans escalating in tone and pitch as both of us neared orgasm.

And then, unable to hold myself back any longer, I came into her pussy, shooting my load deep into her as my dick throbbed and pulsed in the wake of this powerful climax.

“Ah, my God!” Alexis moaned, her thighs quivering as she collapsed on top

of me, catching her breath. “I love you, Will.”

“I love you too, Alexis,” I panted.

Exhausted by this spontaneous lovemaking session, I fell asleep right there on the couch, and it wasn't until late in the night that I woke up to the noise of people talking in raised voices outside my house.

Alexis was nowhere around. I put my clothes back on and headed out the door to see that the hunting party had returned. Many of them were covered in blood, though, from the looks of it, it did not seem like their blood.

# Chapter 25

Alexis

Vince was breathing hoarsely, covered head to toe in blood. The rest of the pack members that had gone on the hunting party with him were in similar condition.

“Oh, God, what happened?” I asked. I had been asleep beside Will just a few minutes ago. It wasn’t until the hunting party had returned and raised a ruckus outside that I woke up to see what all the noise was about.

“We killed ‘em. More than two hundred soldiers had sought shelter inside that building. They meant to create a remote base of operations there. We never gave them a fighting chance. All the wolves ambushed them, killing them before they even had a chance to fight. And those that remained, they died right in front of our eyes, on their own. It was like they were poisoned or something,” Vince said.

Will had come up behind me a few moments earlier. He had been listening intently to what Vince had to say.

“And what about our casualties? Did any werewolf die?” Will asked, stepping forward.

“No one died. No one got injured. We even managed to close the tunnel without using any explosives. I can assure you, no one’s ever going to use



that tunnel again. It's jammed," Vince said.

"Why are all of you covered in so much blood?" Will asked.

"Yeah. Y'all look like you've been in a Tarantino movie," I said.

"Those soldiers, the ones that died on their own, exploded this time around, spraying blood everywhere. It was the most disturbing thing I've ever seen," Morgan said. "I might be getting too old for this."

"They exploded?" Will asked incredulously.

"Yeah, but not as if they were wearing suicide bomber vests or anything like that. It was as if their entire body somehow just gave up at once and refused to hold itself together," Vince said.

"That must be the latest iteration of Blair's experiments. They were dying before, but now they're fucking exploding," Will said slowly. "Regardless, all of you did a great job. Hopefully, for now, the town can sleep in peace, knowing that there aren't any soldiers in the vicinity. Good work, men."

Once the hunting party had dispersed, I turned my attention to Will. He seemed to be doing better as far as his injuries were concerned. He was no longer standing in a stiff posture as he had been doing earlier today.

"What's the plan, then?" I asked.

"I was actually hoping to rely on your instincts this time," Will said, rotating his shoulder joint. "By the way, I do feel better. It's like...the sex...the sleep...I don't know what it was exactly, but my body doesn't hurt as much anymore."

"Will. The hunting party did say that they left no traces of soldiers, but my

gut says that there are bound to be a few stragglers left. We have to check the tower out. And if we can, we should grab one alive soldier.”

“Vincent will come with us,” Will said.

“For real? He’s dead tired.”

“He’s going to be the next Alpha. Tiredness should be the least of his concerns. Back when I had captained the ship from Germany to America, I had been awake for days on end. That’s what an alpha does. That’s what I expect of him,” Will said. There was just a little hint of sternness in his voice that conveyed how serious he was.

“In that case, let’s regroup in an hour. I have one more person I need to call,” I said. This whole operation was going to be impossible without Maliha. It was her bio-hacking skills we needed right now. And as much as I valued her life, this had to be done with her present in the same room. She had to get the samples from the soldier when he was alive.

“Maliha?” Will asked.

“You’re damn right,” I grinned.

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“Well, isn’t this one odd bunch of people? Three werewolves and one normal-sized human. I am in great company. Oh, am I talking a lot? I kind of do that when I’m scared out of my wits!” Maliha had been incessantly talking ever since we’d picked her up. Vince had been quiet, ruminating over the events of the day while recuperating his strength. Will, on the other hand, was just as excited as Maliha. The two of them were on the same wavelength.

Me? I was feeling tired, just like Vincent.

“Maliha. How is your life going since you discovered this whole dimension of supernatural creatures exists?” Will asked, enthusiastically driving his Jeep down the deserted town road. Beckett Pharma’s abandoned tower was getting nearer. My anticipation was only growing stronger. Even though Vincent and the hunting party claimed they had wiped out everyone in that building, something within me said there were survivors. We just needed one.

“Will, now that I know you’re a werewolf, I’m honest to God scared of you,” Maliha said. “But since you haven’t eaten me yet or harmed me, I know you’re one of the good guys. Isn’t that right? I mean, you never did invite me to the engagement party, but you are my best friend’s fiancé.”

“I am sorry about that,” Will said. “We will surely invite you to the wedding now that you’re in the inner circle.”

“Ooh, inner circle, I like it,” Maliha said.

“Guys, focus,” I said, cutting their conversation short. We were finally at the abandoned tower. The hunting party had done a good job of keeping things discrete. There was no sign of violence outside of the building. There was no telling what it looked like inside.

As our group got out of the Jeep and headed into the building, we turned our flashlights on and shone them in the dark and haunted corridors of the building, looking for any signs of life. In some rooms, there were piles of corpses that the hunting party had left in their wake.

“We’ll be cleaning up this mess in the morning,” Vince said, addressing Will.

“It doesn’t matter,” Will said. “This building is abandoned, and it gives off a

very spectral vibe. I don't think anyone's going to come inside any time soon. Though, it would be the responsible thing to do. Make sure you dump the bodies somewhere no one can discover them."

"Roger that, boss," Vincent said.

"Vince, you know, the way that Will has been delegating a lot of his responsibility to you, he's doing it to ensure that you're ready for the role of being the Alpha," I said quietly.

"Oh. Is that so?" Vince said, looking surprised.

"Don't tell me you didn't know," I said.

"Some part of me knew. I just didn't know it was that official. Is that why Will has been riding me so hard lately?"

"You bet," I said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Shh!" Will whispered from above. There was movement in the corridor ahead. It was a guttural sound, followed by screeching and dragging. It did not look like whoever was ahead was alive.

"What the fuck is that?" Maliha gasped, pointing her flashlight at the silhouette at the far end of the corridor.

It was alive, moving, and grunting. I raced ahead of the group to see what it was. It was a soldier, barely holding onto life, dragging his broken body behind him.

"How in the fuck is he still alive?" Vincent called out from behind.

"It's not uncommon," Will said, grabbing that half-dead, half-alive soldier

from the collar. “Hurry, Vince.”

Vince went over to the soldier and pried his jaw open with his fingers. The soldier tried to struggle, but Vince prevailed and only stopped when he had taken the cyanide capsule tooth out of the soldier’s mouth, preventing him from committing suicide.

“What’s not uncommon?” Maliha squealed. “This entire place, this fucking body, it’s giving me the heebie-jeebies!”

“Focus!” I whispered. “He’s still alive. We have to get his blood and tissue samples. Can you do it?”

I watched as Maliha opened her backpack and took her sampling kit out. She inserted a syringe into the squirming body of the soldier and extracted blood. Then, she took a scalpel and tore off bruised flesh from his skin. The soldier writhed in pain and screamed at the top of his voice.

“Are we done?” Will asked.

I looked at Maliha, who nodded. It was as if Will was waiting for the signal. As soon as Maliha was done, Will stomped his foot on the soldier’s head and crushed it into a pulp of blood, brain, and bones.

“Fuck!” Maliha yelled in disgust.

“What? It had to be done. He was of no use to us. Besides, he was in pain. I only gave him mercy,” Will said. “Ah, and to answer your question, when soldiers kill other soldiers in war, it’s not uncommon for one or two defeated soldiers to barely survive. He may have feigned death earlier in hopes that he’d live. But unlucky for him, we were thorough.”

“I’m sorry, Will. I should have paid more attention,” Vince said.

“Don’t beat yourself up. He would have died anyways,” Will said, placing his hand on Vince’s shoulder.

On the other hand, I was entirely focused on what Maliha was doing. Her fingers were hovering and tapping on her laptop as she plugged in the sampler and ran her tests. Everything depended upon her right now.

We stayed put in that abandoned building, seeking shelter in one of the rooms while Maliha tapped away on her keyboard. The air stank of dead bodies and stale blood. The moonlight shone through the broken windows, creating a haunting scene reminiscent of every horror movie I’d ever seen.

“I don’t like this,” Maliha said after almost an hour. She looked up from her laptop, staring at the three of us. “Guys, this soldier...there’s more to him than just the bodily mutations. He’s got this neural link in his system that connects him to every other soldier. Nano-particles. Quantum computing. It’s nothing like I’ve ever seen before!”

“What does it mean?” Will asked.

“Okay, so it’s like a hive mind. These soldiers are controlled by one source. They have no soul of their own. It’s like they’re zombies. They don’t feel pain or remorse or any of the feelings we feel. They are controlled through a neural device. I’m guessing that’s Blair’s doing?”

“Holy fuck,” Vincent whispered, his fingers running through his hair.

I was at a loss for words. I had known that Blair was up to something menacing, but I had no idea that it would be this devastating.

“Hive mind?” Will asked.

“Yes. Someone is controlling all the soldiers through wireless signals that are caught by the neural antennas in each of these soldiers. Look. There are traces of Nano-devices within their bloodstream,” Maliha said, showing me the screen.

“An army of mindless, mass-controlled, mutated soldiers,” Will said, his hand covering his mouth.

“Will,” I said, suddenly getting up upon hearing the rumbling sound booming from right beneath us. “We’re not alone.”

It was too late when we all noticed it.

The floor burst with an explosion, and a hundred soldiers poured through from every direction, their red, maddened eyes visible from behind the visors of their helmets. They held guns in their hands, but from the sounds that they were making, I knew that these soldiers were no more than pawns controlled by Blair.

Barely a second after they had invaded the building, the soldiers leaped upon us in perfect coordination, proving Maliha’s theory about them being controlled through a hive mind.

I immediately shifted into my wolf form and saw from the corners of my eyes as Will and Vincent did the same. We formed a semi-circle in front of Maliha, defending her from the incoming onslaught of rabid, mindless mercenaries.

# Chapter 26

Will

“Is this how I die?” Maliha yelled at the top of her voice.

As I was in my wolf form, I did not respond to her. I had to give it to her; the girl had speed. She was racing as fast as she could, leaving the horde of soldiers far behind her. Vincent and Alexis were taking on the soldiers, slowing them down. I was escorting Maliha out of the building. Given my recent injuries, I was staying away from the fight. The last thing I needed was more injuries.

I shot a look behind me and saw Vincent engaged with no less than half a dozen soldiers by himself. Alexis was beside him, dealing with another half dozen soldiers. But that number was insignificant against the horde that was breaking through the hole and filling up the corridors. If they stayed there, they would die.

*Get out of there right now. I have a plan.* I called out to Alexis. It wasn't until she had quit fighting that Vince followed suit, and the two made for the doorway that Maliha and I had just used. In their wolf forms, they were considerably faster than the soldiers.

*What happened?* Alexis asked.

*Look around,* I said.



Maliha's theory about the hive mind seemed more and more true by the minute. For one, there were straggling soldiers coming towards the building from all sides of the town. And to think that I was satisfied that we had wiped them all off from the town. Clearly, there were more soldiers around, and now more were coming out of that goddamn hole. There was only one way around it.

I shifted back into my human form.

"Sweet Jesus! I cannot get over how you just shift to and fro into a wolf," Maliha yelled.

"You do realize we have a horde of mutated soldiers on our asses, right? Between the two, which defies belief more?" I asked, fiddling around for the button in my pocket. I had tucked it away safely, hoping I would never have to use it. It seemed that there was no way around it now. Alexis was not the only one who had been keeping secrets. As far as secrets were concerned, this was a doozy.

Now, Vincent and Alexis were shifting back into their human forms too.

"Will. We're going to die if we stand here idly," Vincent said.

"Yeah. What's the plan?" Alexis grunted as she dragged a big piece of broken wood and placed it in front of the doorway. Vincent helped her and placed another big piece by the ajar door, blocking the exit.

"Look around. All those soldiers are coming in to answer the call of the hive mind. We can never kill all of them by ourselves. We have to blow this fucking building up," I said.

Maliha gasped and said, "How?"

Even though I had kept this part a secret from Alexis, I had gotten the original inspiration from her. Ever since I had suffered the defeat atop this horrible tower, the same tower Alexis had fallen from, I had wanted to demolish it. But until now, I had no reason to do so. I had been planting TNT along its length for the past few months, somewhat subconsciously knowing that this eyesore would have to go sometime, and wouldn't it be the best if it went in a blaze of glory?

"I don't have a lot of time to tell you what I did. Just know that I did something that I was never going to actually go through with. But now it kind of seems the only option," I said to Alexis.

"Do what you have to do!" Alexis said, holding the barricade in place with Vincent's help.

"On the count of five, everyone run to the other side of the road," I said, beginning the countdown.

Time seemed to slow down in those five seconds, allowing me to see everything in super-slow motion. The stragglers had made their way into the building, becoming one with the hive mind. The horde was unified and isolated within the building, making this the perfect time to blow Beckett Pharma's tower to smithereens.

I was the last to make it to the other side. I turned around just in time to push the button and see the explosion for myself. Ever since I returned to the normal world, ordinary things have captivated my interest. Elevators. Escalators. The moon landing. Controlled demolitions. Videogames. Artificial Intelligence. While I could not understand all of those things, the latent engineer in me could grasp the concept of controlled demolitions. It

was done so by strategically planting the bombs along the length of the building so that the building collapsed onto itself and not anywhere else.

The building exploded along its length, the explosives on each floor setting off as part of the chain reaction that would ensure that the building collapsed downwards instead of sideways. I could hear the screams of the hive-mind soldiers coming from inside. It was too late for them. They had tried to escape, but the barricade had kept them in place—hundreds of them, all dead and buried under the rubble of the building.

“I suggest that we all make our way back homes. This sort of thing doesn’t just fly under the radar. The cops will show up. The town will be shocked. Let’s disappear,” I said.

“Will. What the hell was that?” Alexis asked.

“That was my contingency plan,” I said. “I would appreciate it if we left it at that.”

“Lover’s tiff, huh?” Maliha said to Vincent, nudging him on the shoulder.

“That wasn’t a contingency plan, Will. That was crazy!” Vincent exclaimed.

“He’s right. That was crazy,” Maliha said.

“How come you never told me about this?” Alexis asked.

“Because you’d think I was crazy,” I said. “I mean, if you came to learn that I’d secretly been planting bombs in that building, you’d have worried about my mental health, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, your craziness just saved all our lives, so...I’m thankful that you had that impulse,” Alexis said, running her fingers through her hair. “Jesus. I’m

just shocked, that's all."

"I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier," I said.

"I'm just glad we're all safe," Alexis said.

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We were back at the commune. Even from this far, the smoke issuing from the burning building was visible. The townsfolk aside, the pack members were all out of their houses and looking at the giant spectacle unfolding in front of their eyes.

Vincent, Alexis, Maliha, and I went into my home, where Maliha revealed her thoughts.

"Hive minds are weak. It may seem like they're strong from afar, but when you break down their hierarchy, it will be clear to all that they cannot behave individually. They are controlled by one source through one wavelength. You want to stop them from acting like a hive mind? Jam the wavelength they're operating on. Of course, there's a risk to it," Maliha said.

"Is any risk too big when it comes to taking down a deranged army of mindless soldiers?" Vincent asked.

"How can they be deranged if they're also mindless? Only a mind can get deranged," Maliha said, cracking up.

"Is this really the time for wisecracking?" Vincent asked impatiently.

Alexis and I were standing on the other side of the room while these two talked.

“Are you sure we’re fine? I mean, you have every right to be mad,” I said slowly.

“Will. I am not mad at you. What you did saved our lives. I can’t stay mad at you for that, can I? It’s in your instinct to be protective. Someday, we’re going to have a child together. And you’ll be awesome at protecting them, too,” she said.

“Child? Alexis? Are you pregnant?”

“What? Jeez, no. I so am not. It was just a figure of speech.”

“Guys! Let’s get back to the point here,” Maliha said, coming back to the center of the room. “The downside to creating a device that can jam signals and block the wavelength that controls these soldiers is that the device can kill all those soldiers. There’s a one in a hundred chance of that happening, but still. I’ve done the math. I know what I’m talking about.”

“With a single press of a button, you could potentially kill all those soldiers, leaving Blair without an army?” Alexis whispered.

“Yes. But that’s genocide,” Vincent said with a grave face.

“Will?” Alexis looked at me.

I had no answer. Not at once.

Tonight, when I had pushed the button, I had gotten a small taste of what it would feel like to kill so many soldiers at the same time. Now, Maliha was talking about raising the bar. With a single press of a button, thousands of soldiers would die. Not hundreds. Thousands.

“No. We’re not doing that,” I said. The regret building up in my chest was

too enormous, even though I knew that those soldiers I had killed had no way of being saved. Their minds had been turned to mush. Their bodies were like ticking time bombs. But even then, killing them all in that explosion had made me consider the barbarity of what we were doing. Blair might not care, but I did.

“Will. It’s *the* solution to all our problems,” Alexis said.

“But so much death on our hands,” I said.

“Will’s right,” Maliha said. “There’s no telling how many soldiers die. It’s not a war anymore when there’s just one side remaining.”

“Yes. That’s a victory,” Vincent said. “Are we really going to let victory slip out of our hands like this, Will?”

“Maliha, if you make that device, I want to make sure that it only jams the signal. It should not kill those soldiers. Their deaths have to be on Blair’s hands, not ours. I will not risk creating a device that can kill them all, even if that means an easy victory,” I said.

It was a little too much to think about, overwhelming me. Vincent and Alexis were right in their own way. It was a victory. But at what cost?

# Chapter 27

Alexis

“I better go after him,” I said, attending to the awkward silence left in the wake of Will leaving the room.

“You do that, mmhmm,” Maliha said.

“You know, Maliha, your tenacity today surprised me. I didn’t think you had it in you,” I said as I left the room in search of Will.

“I am learning so much about myself that I did not know,” Maliha said. “I am stronger than I think.”

“You sure are, girl,” I said, now outside the house, looking for Will. He was not in the commune square, even though everyone else was. They were still looking at the explosion’s aftermath on the horizon. The building was still burning, chunks falling off in flames, and the remnants of the structure that once towered above the clouds were now just a few feet off the ground.

In its own way, it made me feel satisfied. That place was where I had suffered my most humiliating defeat. And now that place was no more. Good fucking riddance.

Will was standing at the commune’s entrance, looking at the burning building, his hands in his pockets. There was a weight on him, I could tell.

“The town is safe, thanks to you,” I said, joining him at the entrance.

“It surely does not feel that way,” Will said bitterly. “I killed the soldiers.”

“Yes. And how is that any different from all the soldiers that all the werewolves killed in the past days? It’s the same. You did right. Do not feel depressed about it. There was no way you could save a mindless horde of hive-mind soldiers. Have you never seen a zombie movie?”

“I don’t like them. They’re about dead creatures eating alive creatures. It’s diminutive,” Will said.

“Yes. But in every zombie movie, the good guys win—life blossoms. Death is defeated. Tonight, you did the same. You saved thousands of innocent lives tonight. Why can’t you see that?”

“Because I did something stupid. I planted TNT all over that building without telling anyone. What was I thinking?”

“You’re the alpha. You have led us this far. There is no need to lose faith in yourself right now. I am so proud of you,” I said, hugging him from behind. Will held my hands in his hands, squeezing them to let me know he was being comforted. I felt his soft hair brushing against my face, closing my eyes against the comfort that came from his touch.

“I love you, Alexis,” Will said. “And despite that, I seem to throw you in dangerous situations. Take tonight. You should not have been there.”

“Will. Where is all this self-doubt coming from?” I let go of Will from behind and walked around, standing in front of him. I could see the reflection of the flaming building in his eyes.



“So much death and destruction,” Will whispered. “Am I the angel of death? Death follows me wherever I go. Am I cursed?”

“You are not cursed, and you’re not the angel of death. You are my mate. You are Wilhelm Grimm, the bravest man I know,” I said, unable to see him so distressed. I clasped my hands on his face and brought his face closer to mine, kissing him passionately.

Will put his arms around me, hugging me as he kissed me. I could feel his heartbeat slowing down the more we kissed, the longer we hugged.

Once we stopped, I looked into his eyes, no more seeing the burning building but just my reflection. “Come with me, my love. I have an amazing idea.”

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Midnight at the docks hit differently. The cold blue moonlight lit up the surface of the water, making it shimmer. The boats all bobbed gently up and down with the low tide. Slowly, they made gentle sounds as they bumped into each other. The water hit the docks, creating a calming rhythm for anyone present to appreciate it.

Right now, it was just me and Will at the docks.

“What are we doing here, babe?” Will asked tiredly.

“What we should have done long ago,” I said, taking Will to where his boat was tied up. “We’re going on a mini-cruise—you and me. No planning. No preparation. Just you, me, and the open sea.”

“As much as I love the sentiment, you do realize that shit hits the fan

whenever we leave this place,” Will said, touching his boat fondly, running his hand over the wood, and feeling the polish under his palms. I could see that he really wanted to be on that boat.

“What else can happen? We literally just killed all the soldiers that were in the town. I am sure nothing bad will happen for one night. Besides, think of it like baby steps. Trust Vince and the pack to tend to the town. We deserve a night off. Think of your fiancée.”

When I said fiancée, Will turned around and looked at me lovingly, warmly smiling at me as he came over and kissed me, wrapping his arms around me once again, making me feel safe. In my heart, I hoped I made him feel just as safe.

“Let’s sail away,” I said.

“You know what...let’s.”

Will hopped aboard the boat. Then he reached out to me, helping me step on board. I had never really gotten my sea legs, and those first five minutes of standing atop an unstable boat always made it very difficult for me to balance myself. In the end, I resigned myself to a seat and watched Will as he deftly took the boat out of the docks and sailed it out to the open sea.

“There is an air of finality to this thing we’re doing,” Will said.

“Will, you’re being paranoid for no apparent reason. There’s no finality to this. We’re going to go sailing many, many times after this, just as we’re going to spend hours with each other when all this is over. You and me. No one else. No pack,” I said, now getting used to the speed of the boat. I helped myself to my feet and went over to Will, who was steering the wheel.

“We will come back to visit the pack from time to time to see how they’re doing,” Will said, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“Of course!” I said, placing my arm on his waist. “We’re not cutting ties from them. We’re just going to pursue our own lives. It’s about time we did that, Will.”

“I could not agree more,” Will said. “Is that why you have been so calm?”

“Yes. Because I am looking past all our present troubles, I envision a future where you and I are happy, together, married, with children. It is perfect. Every dream of mine comes true in that vision.”

“It’s making me calm, too,” Will said.

My hand was no longer on his waist, and his was no longer on my shoulders.

I stood so close to him, feeling his warmth against my body. The cold ocean wind could do us no harm as long as we held on to each other. We were far away, out in the sea, away from all eyes and ears, away from all worries and fears.

I looked at his face and found him gazing at me, his eyes kind and affectionate, my eyes yearning and full of desire. I kissed him, taking his lips in my mouth, rolling my tongue on them, sucking them softly. He grabbed me by my waist and lifted me in his arms. My legs automatically wrapped themselves around his waist. Steadily, he took me downstairs, never once letting me go, never stopping to take a break between kisses.

Once we were below, Will lit a lamp, throwing a warm orange glow on the polished interior. The inside of the boat was just like we had left it last. I went over to him again, not wanting to lose even a moment. I needed to touch

him all over. Feel his body against mine.

Will took off my shirt and then my bra. I did the same with his shirt. This time, I kissed him with my tongue, sliding it deep into his mouth, feeling his tongue clash with mine. My mouth was wet, and so was my pussy. I wanted him to make love to me. Scratch that. I wanted him to fuck me wildly.

I was on my knees, his throbbing cock struggling to get out of his jeans. Will yanked his pants down, revealing his massive penis, jutting at an angle so close to my face. I could smell his musk coming off of it. With one hand, I grabbed his shaft and stroked it from below. With my other hand, I cradled his balls. Then, I licked the tip of his dick, glistening it with spit before taking it in my mouth. His hard cock felt so big and thick in my mouth, filling up my throat. I gently began sucking on the tip as my tongue rolled below, stimulating his frenulum.

Something told me that this time around, I could be bolder and take more of his cock within my mouth. All the way down my throat. I was ready. More importantly, I was horny.

Inch by inch, I slid it into my mouth, feeling it go into my throat. Even slower, I bobbed my head back and forth, letting him feel the pleasure coming from my mouth. I touched myself as I sucked his penis, slowly running my finger over my clit, feeling ecstasy bubble between my legs. Pleasure as I had never felt before.

Will moaned as I slid his cock out of my mouth.

Now it was his turn.

He lifted me effortlessly, bringing my legs up to his face. I hurriedly clamped

my thighs around his cheeks so that I wouldn't fall. He pinned me against the wall as his tongue found the wet crevice of my pussy.

He licked deliberately, gradually, introducing powerful waves of pleasure to my clit, my vulva, and deep in my vagina. I could feel his tongue prodding past my vulva, entering the warm tightness of my pussy. I moaned in pleasure as he dug his fingers into my thighs and kissed my clit.

He had charged me with a surge of sexual energy, edging me to the brink of an orgasm. As I got back to my feet, I knew that this time around, we were not going to do anything ordinary. To be fair, none of our love-making sessions had ever been ordinary.

Will put my stomach first on the table, his dick prodding me from behind. He grabbed my hair and pulled gently enough to lift my head as he entered me from behind. I could feel his cock throbbing against the walls of my pussy as he slid deeper.

I lay there, my feet on the ground, my ass up, my arms splayed on the table, moaning louder and louder as Will fucked me from behind, stretching my pussy, thrusting his cock fast and rhythmically.

It was the sensation of him dominating me, him being on top of me, his cock deep within me, that made me cum with such powerful force that my legs shook as I orgasmed. I closed my eyes and stifled a loud moan as I felt him gush his load inside me. I could feel it dripping off his cock. My vagina pulsated with unending pleasure as he came inside me, prolonging the orgasm I was already having.

“Oh, Will!” I moaned louder. “Oh, Will. Baby, I'm cumming.”

It was this ecstatic declaration that made him thrust deeply into me one last time, bringing my climax to a plateau.

Afterward, we lay at the top of the deck, looking at the stars, our arms wrapped around each other, recounting the adventures we'd had and the times we had been through, both tough and good.

And then, we were silent, both of us just looking at each other with our eyes filled with love, our bodies exhausted from effort, and our hearts brimming with joy.

We lay like that for an hour, not speaking, just looking, until my phone suddenly rang, bringing us back to ground reality. It was Vincent.

“Could he have picked a worse time?” Will chuckled.

“Talk to me,” I said, picking up the call.

“Where are you guys? Maliha's gone all crazy, and she's done something. I need you both here back at the commune. Quick!”

“Uh-oh,” I said, looking up at Will, who was getting dressed.

“What happened?”

“Apparently, Maliha has done something. We need to get back to the commune.”

“What did I tell you about pattern recognition? Something bad happens when we leave the town.”

“Babe, it didn't sound like something bad,” I said, putting my hand on his chest. “Are you feeling better?”

“I do. Thank you.”

“I love you,” I said, kissing him on the lips one more time.

“I love you too,” he said, kissing my cheek.

After we both got dressed, Will sailed us back to the docks, both of us eager and a little bit worried to find out what Maliha had done.

# Chapter 28

Will

Even though I had told Alexis that I was feeling all right, that sensation of finality had not gone away. It came back even harder when we went ashore and returned to the commune. During the drive back to the commune, I took one last look at the smoldering building. The fire had been contained by the firefighters, and the area had been cordoned off with caution tape.

Something unfathomable deep within me spoke to me yet again. It told me that things as I knew them were about to come to an end. I had been brave all my life. The bravest I had been was when I was kidnapped and tortured for decades. I had not lost an ounce of hope, even in that darkness. My courage had not abandoned me now. This was a different feeling—a feeling of coming to terms with some covert prophecy.

In the old days, our ancestors used to adhere to the prophecy of Ragnarok. The death of the gods, the end of the world, and the birth of a new universe from that cataclysm. That same feeling resounded within me.

After all, everything must end. Even this life of mine, prolonged as it was, had to come to an end.

I was deeply appreciative of Alexis for two things. One, she had taken me out to the sea to distract me from my thoughts. Two, she gave me some space to get my head in order as we went back to the commune.



As we went into my home, I saw the clutter of wires, motherboards, circuitry, and strange terminals all over my coffee table.

“What is this?” I asked, looking at Vincent, who was grinning guiltily.

“I know you said that you didn’t want anything to do with the device, but Maliha and I got to talking, and we came up with something,” Vincent said.

For the first time ever, I was cautious. Not scared, but a little worried. Vincent was the man I was going to leave in charge. If he was not capable of making good decisions, then who was I going to leave in charge?

“What have you done?” I asked, my anger trying to break free from its cage. “Did you disobey my order?”

“Will! We did nothing of the sort,” Maliha interjected. “While you two were gone, Vincent and I tinkered around with the idea of creating a wavelength jammer, and you know, he’s quite gifted with computers. Not as much as me, but still quite gifted. We came up with a solution that you won’t hate. I promise.”

I shot a look at Alexis, who shook her head and said, “This was not my idea.”

“Fine. Tell me what you have,” I said finally, deciding to hear them out.

“This device,” Maliha said, placing a machine in my hands. “Creates a wavelength jammer that does not distort the original frequency. It creates a blockade that essentially freezes the motor functions of those who are controlled by the hive mind. Think of it like a dam. A dam stops water. This machine stops the wavelength. No soldiers will die. They’ll just be frozen in place, not knowing what to do,” she said.

“And how certain are you of this?”

“Let’s just say that I am willing to bet my entire reputation on this,” Maliha said. “I ran one test. The machine works. If you insist, you and I can head out and search for more soldiers and test this device on them just to be extra sure.”

“What else does this device do?” Alexis asked, taking the machine from me and looking at it with wonder.

“If you crank this dial, it will effectively kill those soldiers by sending destructive interference signals. If you keep the crank low, it will only freeze them. But no matter what you do, it will stop all parent signals coming from the source. No more soldier hordes. No more attacks from Blair’s army.”

I sighed. As risky as this was, it was our best bet. This town could not handle more explosions. There was no more desire for warfare left in me either. If this was the solution that would let me take on Blair one-on-one, then I had to agree to it.

“How long until the device is finished?”

“We need to fix it at the top of the radio tower in the commune to increase its range,” Vincent said. “But...just to be sure, you’re giving us the green light to go ahead?”

“Yes. You may install the device. I have given it much thought, and I think that I can trust you both to run things in my absence,” I said.

“Why do you keep saying that? Are you going somewhere?” Vincent asked worriedly. “Are you sick? Has something happened to him, Lexie?”

“I...it’s for Will to say. Not me,” Alexis said.

“Listen, Vince...I think, after all these ends, I might leave—”

I did not get to finish my sentence. At that moment, a series of explosions shook the ground and triggered tinnitus in my ears. Hurriedly, we all headed out of the house and saw a great fire burning to the south of the commune.

“Blair!” I yelled. His facility was in the south of the town. This was his doing, no doubt.

“Will, come here!” Morgan called from the watchtower. All the pack was assembled at the gates. I climbed atop the watchtower and saw Blair’s army teeming out of the south, neatly in a formation. Thousands of soldiers just stood there, waiting for orders from their leader. I could make out Blair standing at the head of the army, his body covered in armor.

“So it has finally come to this,” I said. “The final battle of my time.”

“Will. We’re not going to fight them, are we?” Alexis asked. “There are too many of them!”

“Our only hope right now is Maliha and Vincent’s device. Immediately tell them to get to the top of the cell tower and install the device. This cannot wait. War is upon us, and we must all fight for our lives,” I said.

As Alexis ran for the house, she turned around and stopped for a second, saying, “You were right about something bad happening every time we leave this place. I wonder what will happen when we leave it permanently.”

“Alexis, there’s no time!” I said. “Go. Escort the two to the tower!”

“What about us?” Morgan asked.

I turned around, facing the entire pack that was gathered around the gate.

“It has been an honor being your Alpha. You have taught me so much. I have learned to cherish life by living among such fine people as yourselves. I have asked too much of you, time and time again. But tonight, I must ask you one more thing. Down there, an army of mutated soldiers waits for us, led by a man who means to wipe us all out. Tonight, we are not just a pack of wolves living in the Grimm Abode. Tonight, we are defenders. We will stand tall and stand together to fight Blair, even if it means that all of us face our demise. Will you all fight with me in one last glorious battle of our lives!?”

There were no cheers. The occasion did not demand cheers. There were battle cries. Wolves howled with their faces to the moon. The men yelled with their fists in the sky. The woman shrieked like the shield maidens and Valkyries of old. Seeing my pack stand around me bolstered my spirits. With these people by my side, my odds against Blair were not bad.

Even though it was on me why Blair was here, had I not blown up his building and killed hundreds of his soldiers, he would have continued to wait in the shadows. But this war started when I drew first blood. It would end with one of us left standing.

“Morgan! You take twenty of your good men with you and secure the perimeter of Fiddler’s Green. Under no circumstances should any soldier move past your defenses. The city folk must remain safe. When the battle starts, you can rejoin us after you have done your duty!”

“Aye, Will!” Morgan said and began picking the members of his platoon.

“Vincent! Why are you still here with Maliha? Head to the tower. Install the device. Turn it on as soon as you can, then join me on the battlefield!”

“As you say, Captain,” Vincent said, saluting me, then heading to the tower with Maliha.

“Alexis, you’re by my side. You will remain so until the battle ends.”

“And I will remain by your side until I die,” Alexis said, placing her hand on my heart.

“The rest of you, follow me. This is the last march of the Grimm wolves. March to make your ancestors proud. March for war. March for victory!”

Together, all of the pack members shifted into their wolf forms and followed me and Alexis down the slope of the hill, heading towards the battlefield where Blair and all his men stood waiting.

I hoped that Maliha and Vincent would fit the device and make it work just in time. Even though I had taken all the pack with me to war, I knew that all of us combined could not take out all those soldiers. There were simply too many of them.

After fifteen minutes, we stopped our stampede and came to a halt in the field south of Fiddler’s Green. It was a big field that was rendered a little too small by the sheer size of Blair’s army.

Blair stood at the center of the field, smoking a cigar, looking smug and victorious.

“You know, if you cocksuckers hadn’t blown up my tower, I wouldn’t have even budged tonight,” Blair said. “But push comes to fucking shove, and here I am. Congratulations. I may be the last man standing on the team that originally ruled this town, but I am goddamn certain that I will kill you all and reclaim this place in the name of my father and my friends, Maurice and

Ralph!”

I could not let this asshole yap away. I shifted into my human form, taking giant strides toward the center of the field to meet Blair.

“Your father was a perverted old man. Your friends were the corrupt cunts who festered at the bottom of their species’ pyramid. Look at my face when I talk to you and know that I was the one who killed all three. Just like I will kill you tonight,” I said, my eyes red with rage, molten magma coursing through my veins, all my pent-up rage unlocked in the wake of this madness.

# Chapter 29

Alexis

“Big words from a bruised old wolf!” Blair cackled, clapping his hands sarcastically. Then he waved his arms around and pointed at the army standing behind him. “See these fiends behind me? They will rip you and your precious broodmare to shreds!”

“Not if we shred them first,” I said, coming to the center of the field and standing by Will’s side.

“You’re so precious, aren’t you? You’ve come a long way from being a mewling quim,” Blair sneered, looking at me with hate-filled eyes. “I will personally see to it that I desecrate your corpse when I’m done with you.”

“Keep her name out of your fucking mouth,” Will said, grabbing Blair’s collar and pushing him back. In a split second, thousands of guns cocked and aimed at Will.

“Those soldiers are waiting for my orders. And you may have guessed, I control them with my mind. How fucking amazing is that? Touch me again, and your entire pack goes extinct this very second.”

I placed my hand on Will’s shoulder and pulled him back. War was upon us, but it did not have to escalate at this very moment. We had to wait until Maliha and Vincent had done their bit.

“That’s right. Control your man,” Blair scoffed, adjusting his collar.

“I am not controlling him. He could kill you in a heartbeat, and I wouldn’t even stop him,” I scoffed back. In my head, I was doing basic arithmetic. There were around two hundred and fifty of us, excluding those who had gone to set a perimeter around the town. Blair, on the other hand, had an army of thousands. If each werewolf killed fifty soldiers, we might stand a chance. But we were not equipped with weapons. Blair’s soldiers were.

“So...are you sure you do not want to negotiate?” Blair casually asked, taking a step back. “I can be very reasonable, you know. This can all end if you just hand me your Alpha. I will have my revenge, and then I and my men will leave forever. There doesn’t have to be a bloodbath.”

“You’re a liar. You come here with this army. You already have a bloodbath on your mind. I do not trust a word out of your mouth,” I said. “And you can forget it if you think that any of us would simply turn Will over. Clearly, you do not know anything about the loyalty of wolves!”

“What loyalty? You are just a bunch of dogs,” Blair said. “And I am the canine control department.”

“That was genuinely lame, Blair. You can do better,” Will said, chuckling dryly.

“Yeah, that was a terrible analogy,” I said, laughing at his face.

Blair’s face turned red, his nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed as he clenched his fist. He growled, “You want better? I’ll give you better. This fucking psychopath murdered my father, yet he’s been allowed to roam free without any penance or punishment. You think of me as the villain, but ask



me this, who is the villain here? Me or him? He killed my father, and ever since then, Wilhelm Grimm has left behind a trail of dead bodies, including his brother! And you think of him as some hero? He's a bastard. He thinks he is above justice. If there was justice in the world, where is justice for my father?"

"Do not speak to me of your father! If there was justice in this world, where was the justice for what your father kept doing to me for more than seventy years? No creature alive can bear such pain for so long as he inflicted on me with such sadism. What about the trail of dead bodies left in your wake? What about all the soldiers you mutated, all those lives wasted?"

"You got your justice when you killed my father. I do not come here for justice, Wilhelm Grimm," Blair spouted. "I come here for revenge."

"And I come here to defend my land, my people, and this city! For long, this city has lived under the shadow of unspeakable horrors. Tonight, it all ends. Tomorrow, a free sun shall shine upon Fiddler's Green. You best believe it!" Will shouted, causing the werewolves to howl in affirmation.

"And how are you going to see that sunshine, Will? You haven't even recovered properly from your old injuries. What about all the new injuries that I will inflict upon you? Oh, yes, I know about your weakness. I crafted that weakness in my laboratory. I made the serum that would make you vulnerable against my men. And that's not all I made," Blair said, laughing maniacally as his hand reached into his pocket.

He took out a syringe containing a neon-green liquid.

"What the fuck is that?" I whispered to Will.

“That, Alexis Richards, is the serum my father set out to make. He could never make it. I fulfilled his dream. This serum, derived from Will’s blood and DNA, allows me to become invincible, immortal, and unstoppable. Tonight, I will unleash hell upon all of you with this.”

“If you inject that serum into your body, Blair, there is no coming back from this. No one will be able to save you. There will be no normalcy in your life. We may be enemies, but I will implore you to see reason. That is no serum. That is madness in a syringe,” Will said.

“Shut your yapping. You just don’t want to be defeated. You know that this is your doom. This is my father coming back to haunt you from the grave. When I kill you, it will be in his name!”

Will looked at me just as I looked at him, both of us communicating non-verbally. Neither of us had prepared for this. We had thought that Blair’s attempts at making a serum would only result in failure. Could it be that he had succeeded against all odds?

*If we don’t make it tonight, just know that I love you forever and always,* Will whispered telepathically in my mind.

*We’re going to make it. I love you to the moon, and back,* I said.

We grabbed each other’s hands as we looked at Blair.

“Aww, that’s fucking cute. But sentimentality won’t save you now. Nothing can save you. Say your prayers, and then grab some popcorn for the show. It’s going to be your last,” Blair said. “Tonight, the legacy of my father lives on.”

Suddenly, without any warning, he injected the serum into his neck,

emptying the contents of the syringe into his bloodstream. The neon green disappeared from the syringe, entering Blair's body. For a second, all of Blair's veins glowed neon green, and then nothing happened.

"That's it? That was your big super serum?" Will asked. Even then, he had braced himself for the unexpected.

"Wait..." Blair's skin was turning green as if he was getting sick and was ready to puke. Then, he did puke, collapsing on all fours, shooting blood out of his mouth and nostrils. He looked up helplessly, blood dripping from his ears and his eyes.

I could swear he was mouthing the words, "Help me."

Blair lay on the ground, coughing, wheezing, spouting out more blood, and hugging his chest in a fetal position.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"Stay back," Will said, holding his arm out, preventing me from going any closer.

I was more concerned with what would happen to the soldiers. Were they still under Blair's mind control now that Blair was dying? They just stood there, their weapons in their hands, like a mindless mob. No one came forward to check on Blair as he lay there, convulsing and vomiting.

Before I had a chance to recollect myself, something swerved in my direction. I could make out that it was in the shape of an arm, just not any kind of arm that I had ever seen before. It was long, broad, muscular, hairy, and disproportionate.

“Alexis, watch out!” Will shouted, grabbing me by the shoulders and throwing me back as hard as he could. I hit my head against a tree, losing my vision for a few seconds. It baffled me as to why Will had thrown me that hard.

When I opened my eyes again and once my vision regained its clarity, I saw Blair convoluting on the floor, flailing his limbs around. Only Will stood against him as he morphed and distorted into some sickly creature. Green puss and ooze were coming out of him in addition to the copious amount of blood that his body was covered in. Pieces of his armor lay tattered on the ground.

First, his hands stretched out into the form of claws, but not like any claws that I had seen before. These were monstrous claws, four times the size of a werewolf’s claws. Then, his legs began growing in size, tearing off the armor that he was wearing, revealing hairy flesh that turned red as he grew.

Blair’s face no longer looked like a human face. Long ears jutted out from the back of his head. His eyes had big black slivers in them. As he opened his long mouth and ushered a scream, I could see that his teeth had grown to the size of spear tips. He was easily fifteen feet tall and half as wide, a berserk creature devoid of reason and proportion.

He might have made a serum, but that serum had mutated him just as it had mutated all his soldiers. Now Blair was crazy, just like the rest of them.

When Will shifted into his wolf form again, I shifted as well, joining the battlefield again. But as I came near Blair, I realized that he was way too tall for any of my blows to strike. His arms and legs, on the other hand, were long enough to strike us from afar.

*We have to move back! Regroup with the rest of the pack!* I desperately called out to Will.

I watched as Will considered his options. He could stand there and fight, but that would be suicide. Will shot a look at me, then understood the gravity of the situation, choosing to retreat to the rest of the pack.

We ran back to our pack's formation, bracing ourselves for the incoming mutant were-animal that Blair had become. Some of him resembled a werewolf, but for the most part, he looked like a creature unleashed from the depths of hell.

At that moment, it appeared that every single odd was against us. The soldiers who had been up till now standing idly, aiming their guns at us, were now rushing towards us—thousands of soldiers stampeding towards the werewolves, led by Blair.

What gave me courage as I braced for impact was how each and every single werewolf stayed put where they were, readying themselves for the fight that was charging at them. Will was at the head of the formation.

He looked at us, then at the moon, and then unleashed a long howl that signaled the start of the fight.

All of the werewolves rushed after him as he raced toward the center of the field, both armies on the brink of impact.

I could already see the effect of Blair's newly rendered insanity on the soldiers. They were not behaving rationally because Blair could not maintain control over them as a rational man. He was controlling them as the monster he was now. Instead of shooting at us, the soldiers rushed past one another,

eager to fight with their hands.

As both sides neared the center of the field, I wondered what was taking Vincent and Maliha so long.

# Chapter 30

Will

I could see myself in the monster that Blair had become. There was no denying that he had used a serum devised from my blood and genetic makeup. The fur on his body was the same shade as mine. His claws resembled in shape to my claws, although they were considerably larger in size.

We were just a few inches apart on the battlefield, finally about to clash with each other. I had no plan of action at this moment. I did not know how my entire pack was going to take on that army. All I knew was I had to keep charging and meet Blair in battle. If I could somehow kill him, that would stop everything.

But then, luck shone on me in the most fateful turn of events.

Right as the soldiers were about to clash with the werewolves, a big sonic boom resounded in the sky, sending shockwaves in every direction. I could see the trees rustling against the brute force of the wave.

Blair had stopped dead in his tracks. He was grabbing his head and howling in pain. Behind him, all his soldiers had frozen in place, unable to move. They were still breathing and snarling, but they were unable to move any of their limbs.

*The device!* Alexis cheered.

*It worked,* I confirmed.

But our victory was short-lived. Blair was back to normal again, wiping the blood from his snout with the back of his paw. He growled at me and began circling me. Even though I could not communicate with him, I could feel the harsh energy coming off his body, an entirely red vibe that spelled blood and slaughter.

My pack stopped behind me, unsure of what to do as the army that they were supposed to battle with had suddenly frozen. Vincent and Maliha had come through for us at the last moment.

Together, we could kill Blair in an instant if we all tried, but that would not be fair to the man whose entire army was immobilized. Besides, this whole thing had started with me and him. It had to end with me and him.

The werewolves understood this. They began forming a circle around us, as was common when two Alphas fought. As bizarre as it was to admit it, since Blair had been morphed into his mutated wolf form by the blood of an Alpha, he, too, was an Alpha. When two Alphas fought, the other wolves watched. It was the law of the supernatural.

Blair had been rendered a bit weak by the wavelength jammer signal that Vincent and Maliha had sent, but he was far from being docile. In fact, he was more agitated than before, having just witnessed the loss of his entire army.

Blair circled me, gnarling and gnashing his teeth, stomping his claws on the ground. His eyes, which were previously slit-like, had turned red and wide.



Red was the color of rage. Wide was the stance of attack. With this information, I ducked at the last moment and prevented Blair from hitting me.

Instead, Blair went reeling behind me, hitting a tree. He struck it so hard that the tree fell. Blair, on the other hand, was completely unaffected. He got back up, brushed himself, and began charging toward me again.

This time, I was without any fear and without any inhibition. Victory seemed so close. The soldiers had been taken care of. Only Blair remained, lost in his mind and reasoning.

I charged my paw and brought it up in a powerful slash, hitting Blair under his chin just as he came close to me, throwing him on his back. The wolves howled around me. This was the law of the jungle—survival of the fittest. Blair was big, sure, but he was not strong. He lacked resolve. A man who had resolve would have fought me straight on without using any serums or army. Blair lacked the spine, just like his father and his friends.

My resolve was growing with each second. Blair leaped upon me, hoping to crush me under his weight. Instead of swerving to avoid him, I reached up with both claws and lifted myself off the ground, meeting Blair mid-air, digging my claws into his skin, drawing blood.

Blair howled and, in a moment of desperation, dug his teeth into my neck.

I let go of him mid-air and barely landed on all fours. His bite had stung me very viciously. I could feel his venom entering my body, weakening me. That was all it had taken from his side, one bite, to level the playing field.

Blood dripped from where he had bitten me. The wound was not closing as

fast as I'd expected. How could it? Blair was imbued with my blood. His attacks were effective against me. Any more injuries and I could falter.

Luckily, the wound was just skin deep. I shrugged, throwing off the last of the blood drops leaking from my neck, and rejoined the fight, tapping into my dormant rage. I was not going to give him another chance to strike me.

I roared and unleashed a flurry of claws on Blair's face, tearing his snout, blinding him in one eye, ripping apart his skin, creating deep gashes in his fur, and drawing blood from every wound where I had struck.

Blair howled in pain, reeling to the back of the field. Instead of letting him escape, I jumped and pounced right on top of him, returning the favor and digging into his neck with my teeth, tasting blood.

He effortlessly threw me off. While I was down, the blood-drenched mutated monster reached and slashed along the entire length of my midriff.

Weakly, I got back up and bit at Blair's front paw, tearing its skin off. Now was not the time to hold back my attacks. Clearly, he wasn't.

One thing was certain. If he injured me again, I would not be able to keep fighting.

With that in mind, I fought more carefully, playing on the defensive. Blair rushed at me from afar, snout bleeding, limbs torn asunder. I swerved to my right and let him hit the tree trunk behind me, making him lose his balance and fall on his face.

I hurriedly slashed along his back, tearing more of his fur and skin, and then stepped back, waiting for him to charge again.

But Bair did not charge. He stayed where he was, tending to his wounds. My wounds were not healing fast, but he was. The skin had regrown on his face, and the flesh that I'd torn off his paw, back, and neck was coming back again.

The fight was back to square one, except that I was still recovering.

Blair sneered from the other end of the fighting circle.

I closed my eyes, let go of all my thoughts, and remembered how Blair's father was the cause of all my suffering. I would have peacefully lived out my life if it weren't for him. I recalled how Blair had taunted me the first time I met him while trying to save Alexis. The moment when Blair had injected his serum in me atop the building, meaning to kill me, flashed before my eyes.

He was just as much in charge of my misery as his father was.

That did it.

That unlocked all the rage that I'd been keeping in check, allowing me to shift into the wolf within, my true feral form. I grew in size, becoming broader and stronger, and my injuries, although they did not heal, sealed up and prevented more blood loss. Now, I was almost Blair's size, and the true battle could begin.

Blair tried to bite me, but I clamped his mouth shut with my mouth and tore away a part of his snout. Before he could get a chance to recoil or heal, I hit that same part of his injured snout, ripping off his flesh and revealing the bone underneath. Then I bit upon that injury again, ignoring all his attempts to fend me off.

Weakened, bleeding, and missing half his snout, Blair lay on the ground, unmoving.

It seemed like the battle was over.

As I walked over to him, I realized a little too late that Blair had been feigning. He might have been injured, but he was luring me in closer to deliver a fatal blow.

His enlarged claws dug into the skin of my chest, reaching past my muscles and touching my ribs. The pain was unbearable, but the realization that if he were to penetrate deeper, he would reach my heart was much more troubling.

I was trapped. His limbs were wrapped around me, his massive body crushing me under his weight.

Instead of trying to escape, I did the same as what Blair had done to me. I extracted my claws and dug them into his heart, feeling his rib cage brush against the tip of my claws. Two could play at this game, and if I was supposed to die in this battle, I was going to kill Blair with me before I breathed my last.

I could sense that I had hurt Blair just as severely as he had hurt me. He let go of me immediately, once again retreating to the corner of the battlefield.

The only thing that troubled me was the slow speed at which my wounds were healing. Blair was healing faster. In the time he had taken to retreat, part of his snout had regrown, and the claw holes in his chest were sealed again.

It felt like I was fighting an undefeatable enemy.

Surely, this was madness.

Blair charged at me again, stomping his paws harder than before, picking up great speed. I was barely able to get on my paws once again, still recovering from the painful injury in my chest. I wasn't going to be able to move away in time.

Then, Blair jumped, doubling his speed, his claws reaching out for my face, his mouth open to viciously bite me as he landed.

I had known defeat on three different occasions in my life before.

One was when I fled from Germany. I could not have saved my people and my land against the violence of the Nazis. For me, fleeing was the same as admitting defeat.

The second time was when I was kidnapped by Edward Beckett. There had been nothing I could do all those long decades while he tortured me.

The third was when Blair "killed" me with his serum at Beckett Pharma's tower.

Now, this seemed like the fourth.

My body, feral though it was, was drenched with all energy. I needed more time to recover than I had. Blair was just a few inches away from me, a momentous force coming unstoppably in my direction to rend me apart.

At least this time around, I was not running away. I was going to stand my ground till the moment I took my last breath.

But surprisingly, Blair never made it to the ground. His claws never touched me. His teeth never got too close around my neck.

Alexis, at the last second, leaped out from the crowd of the wolves, meeting

Blair headlong mid-air, tackling him with brute force, causing him to deviate from his offensive trajectory and fall limply to his side.

*Alexis! What are you doing?* I called out as I steadied myself and got back up.

*Forget the rules, Will. Blair's not playing by the rules. He heals himself instantaneously. It's impossible to defeat him single-handedly. We'll do it like we always do everything. Together. Come now!*

Before waiting for my response, Alexis leaped into the air again and landed on Blair's body, delivering a series of lethal slashes to his face, torso, and legs. This was all the bolstering I needed to get back into the battle and fight alongside my mate.

# Chapter 31

Alexis

Even though they were stuck in place, the presence of the soldiers on the battlefield was a jarring sight to behold, especially when they came up in the periphery of my vision as I fought Blair. The danger that they would break free of their hold at any second hung over my head by a thread. I hoped that Maliha and Vincent's device would stay put long enough for me and Will to defeat Blair. After that, we could tend to the soldiers.

But Blair was not relenting either. As sudden as the attacks that I had delivered upon him were, he had healed himself and stood there menacingly, looking like he was going to pounce on me and rip me to shreds.

Fortunately, before he could do that, Will had gotten back into the fight. He was staggering, a fact that worried me deeply, and there was congealed blood on his fur. Despite that, he advanced on Blair from behind, catching him off guard. I beheld a strange sight. Will had climbed on top of Blair from behind and was slashing away at his back with a vengeful fury. But no matter how many tears Will made in Blair's flesh, his flesh regenerated, making all attacks moot.

Before I could reach an end result with certainty, I had to check something for myself. Looking around the battlefield, I saw a long log with its torn-off end looking sharp. This tree had been one of the few that had fallen recently in the wake of the battle, in the midst of the thrashing and clashing taking

place between Blair and Will.

Knowing Will, I knew that he had it in him to stay up for the rest of the fight, but from the number of wounds visible on his body, I could see that achieving victory was going to be a bleak possibility all by himself.

He needed help.

I leaped forward as Blair yanked Will off his back, not giving Blair a moment's notice. I rushed into him, dragging him with speed all the way to the back of the battlefield, where the tree's engorged stump lay waiting for him. Blair resisted, digging his claws into me as I pushed him, but I did not give in. From behind me, Will came running and joined me in pushing Blair to the back. Now, Blair was off-balance, falling backward, unable to hold his weight on his hindquarters.

At the last second, he fell over, and the sharp stump of the tree pierced him from behind. It was only possible thanks to the momentum that Will and I had built. Blair's skin erupted with blood and bruises as the tree stump tore through him, impaling him in several places on his torso.

His howls of pain were demonic. He yelped like a shot dog, thrashing to free himself from the snares of the tree, but the more he resisted, the further the tree's stump went inside of him, cutting clean through from one side and jutting out the other.

It looked like he was about to die. He had stopped struggling, his neck had gone limp, and blood was spouting out of the gashes where he had been impaled.

*He's not dead yet. It does not look like he's ever going to die. Unless... I did*



not know what Will was thinking of; all I could feel was the sheer pain emanating from his body in frantic signals. He was hurt, and his wounds were not recovering. Will had not only lost a lot of blood, he had lost his entire stamina. It was evident from the way he was struggling to breathe.

Will climbed the tree slowly, closing the distance between him and Blair. Upon seeing him, Blair immediately became animated again, thrashing and howling, knowing that he was stuck and could not do anything against the onslaught that awaited him.

But I could see from behind that Blair's struggle had loosened the tree. Soon, he would slide off the stump, heal himself, and all of this would have been for nothing.

Will did not care. He walked over to where Blair was stuck and looked at his long-standing foe for a brief second. Then, Will looked back at me, nodded his head briefly, and then he gazed upon the pack that stood in the back. After that, he cast his face up to the moon and howled deeply. It was as if he was connected to the atmosphere. With his victorious howl, the clouds cleared from the sky, and the moon showed its face, beaming its light upon the battlefield.

But within that brief period, Blair had come loose from the tree. I tried to advance, to warn Will, but it was too late. Blair was free now, and I could see that his wounds were already closing, the blood ceasing its ceaseless flow. In another minute, Blair would heal himself, and we'd be back to square one.

However, Will had something else on his mind. He did not let the fact that Blair had freed himself deter him. Instead, in the last second, Will opened his mouth wide and bit down on Blair's head, tearing it off his neck.

A fountain of warm and thick blood gushed from Blair's neck. His body fell limp on the ground, writhing away as his life force left him.

I looked at Will and saw him spitting out Blair's head, throwing it to the side.

As he climbed off the tree, Will turned back into his human form. He could barely walk, what with all the injuries on his body. He staggered, holding his hands over his ribs, and looked upon Blair's dead and headless body.

"I'd like to see him come back from that," Will said, chuckling painfully.

I shifted back and ran up to him as he collapsed on his knees, spitting blood from his mouth. As he fell, I caught him, preventing him from crashing hard on the ground.

"You're going to be okay, Will," I whispered. "It's all over now. You defeated Blair."

"We defeated Blair," Will said slowly, wiping away the blood from his face. "It wasn't possible without you."

"We need to get you back to the commune. You're bleeding!" I said frantically, looking back at the wolves.

"It's okay. I figured, what with it being my last fight and all, I had to give it everything," Will said, closing his eyes. I put my hand on his heart, checking to see if his heartbeat was still there. It was faint and palpating, erratically beating in spurts, then slowing down all of a sudden.

"You're not dying on me, Will. Not after everything we've been through!"

"No. There has been enough death as it is. I want to live, Alexis. But first, I want to rest. I think I'll rest for a long time now," Will said, closing his eyes

and resting his face in the palm of my hand.

“Morgan! John! Anyone?” I called out.

“I’ve got him, Lexie.” It was Vince who came to my side. I looked up at him and saw that he was accompanied by Maliha. “We’ll take him to the clinic. Maliha will look after him, won’t she? You can wrap things up here.”

“Make sure he’s stable,” I said, watching Vince and Maliha hoist him up. “Actually, I should come with you.”

“No,” Vince said. There was a bit of stern authoritativeness in his voice that surprised me. “This thing...this war...is far from over. The wolves need someone to lead them right now. These soldiers, the dead bodies, it has to be cleared. And Blair’s headquarters too. There’s no one in a better position to lead these people than you. When it’s all over, we can all take care of Will.”

He was right. The soldiers who stood frozen on the battlefield had to be taken care of. This fight was not over yet. I nodded at him and watched him take away Will.

*Don’t worry about me. I’m not dying yet,* Will’s voice suddenly resounded in my head.

*I love you,* I responded.

*And I love you too,* he said.

Now that I knew that he was okay, I turned my attention to the battlefield. First, I confirmed to see if Blair was indeed dead. His headless body was not writhing anymore, and the wounds that he had succumbed to had not healed, proving that he was not going to come back from this.

But just as I had ascertained it, something strange started happening. All the soldiers who stood frozen on the battlefield started quivering, shaking, and grunting, still rooted to their spots.

I braced myself for combat, but it did not look like these soldiers were coming back to life. Quite the opposite; one by one, they started falling down, their ears, eyes, and mouths bleeding, and there they stayed, unflinching, unmoving.

“What the fuck is happening?” I shouted.

“It looks like they’re dying,” one of the pack members said. “But why? We didn’t do anything.”

I dialed Maliha’s number and waited for her to pick up.

“Maliha, what is happening with the soldiers?”

“Uh...The device...we never got to run a complete test on it. I think it’s malfunctioning. And it’s already installed on the radio tower, so there’s nothing I can do other than shut it down. But that would force the soldiers back into wakefulness. What do you want me to do?”

“Right now, I just want you to be by Will’s side. Leave the rest to me,” I said.

“You realize that the device is overcharging the signals, killing these soldiers, right?” Maliha said hesitatingly.

“I know,” I said, hanging up the phone.

“What do you think we should do?” Morgan asked, coming up from behind.

I turned around and saw that by now, the rest of the soldiers had all fallen to

the ground as well, some of them dying, most of them dead.

“We take them back to the headquarters. If any police or official catches sight of so many dead soldiers, it’s going to raise questions. We can’t have them lying here like this,” I said. “Take them to Blair’s headquarters in batches. Tonight, that’s the only thing we’re doing.”

“What happens when we take them there?” Morgan asked. “Are we going to bury them?”

“No, you leave that up to me,” I said.

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This herculean task took nine hours to complete. All the pack members pulled their weight, some in werewolf form, others in human form. Through their teamwork, they had come up with a convenient way to transport the bodies. Half the pack shifted into werewolves while the other half stayed human, harnessed the werewolves to sleds, and piled the sleds with the dead bodies of the soldiers.

Given that there were thousands of soldiers and only fifty or so could fit on the sleds at a time, it took the twenty-five makeshift werewolf sleds three rounds each to clear the battlefield of the soldiers.

While all this happened, I wrestled with a tough decision. I had Morgan and the others plant TNT in the headquarters. The way I saw it, there was only one end to this madness.

I stood sentry atop the water tower, watching the pack clear the area until it no longer resembled a battlefield. I personally buried Blair myself after

emptying an entire magazine of hollow point bullets in him just to make sure that he was dead for good.

And then, at daybreak, when all was said and done, with the pack standing behind me, I pushed the button on the detonator. Together, we watched as fire and explosions erupted and consumed Blair's lair, incinerating all the dead bodies that lay within, leveling the entire place to the ground, and destroying all of Blair's research.

As difficult as it was for me to believe, it was finally over.

# Chapter 32

Will

I woke up to the grueling sensation of stiffness and pain. It was not new pain, the likes of which I had woken up to countless times before. This pain, through its minute throbbing and faint presence in my body, said something else that it was on the mend and was going to go away anytime now.

Even though I could turn my head around and squint at the outline of things near me, I was still not sure that I had truly woken up. There was something euphoric about the sensations that were coursing through my body, something that suggested that I wasn't entirely sober.

The drip that was attached to my forearm confirmed my suspicion. Painkillers for a werewolf? That was new. I could barely read the words on the drip. Ketamine. Things were that bad, huh?

“Ugh!” was the first word that came out of my mouth as a result of trying to get up and failing to do so. My back was so sore that it felt like I had soldering irons wedged right next to my spinal cord. My throat was dry, and the insides of my fingernails itched terribly.

“What day is it?” I asked, realizing that my voice did not sound like mine. It sounded like a stranger's, hoarse, hollow, and thin.

The last thing that I remembered was seeing Blair's head lying at my feet.

Then, I probably fainted due to my injuries or blood loss, but there was one distinct sliver of light amidst all the darkness that had followed. A deafening explosion had woken me up briefly. I remembered it very clearly. It felt like the world was ending, but when I sat up, I found myself in the commune's clinic, with both Maliha and Vincent sitting next to me. They shook their heads somberly and told me that it was all okay.

I took their word for it and fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

"What day is it?" I asked again, this time more frantically since no one had answered me the first time, suggesting that I was alone and probably had been for a long time now.

Suddenly, a very warm and familiar voice rose from my immediate right, and I noticed that someone had been sitting there in the bedside chair all the time. I just hadn't noticed them. Just as I had failed to notice all the flowers, balloons, cards, and sweets people had left me on the bedside table. Dozens of "Get Well Soon!" cards were lined neatly there in an anal-retentive way that I had long since learned was Alexis's.

"It has been a week, my love," Alexis said, stirring from her chair. She came into my view as she circled the bed and stood beside me. She reached out and held my hand gently.

"A week? What happened to me? Did we win?"

"Rest, Will. Rest. There's nothing more important for you than rest. Do not let your heart worry about anything. We won, fair and square. Blair's dead. His headquarters are blown to kingdom come, and all his soldiers along with it," Alexis said.



From the visible confusion on my face, Alexis understood that I needed more than what I'd just been told.

“Is everyone okay? Vince, Maliha, Morgan, John, and all the rest? Is Fiddler's Green all right?”

“When I exploded that place, some of the pack members sent word to the fire department, giving them the impression that a gas leak had caused the place to blow up. Seeing as how the place was so dilapidated, the police, the Feds, they all bought that story. That place has been sealed ever since. The mayor has zero clue as to what happened,” she said, rubbing my hand.

“Water,” I whispered.

“Oh, right, how stupid of me,” she said, getting up to pour me a glass of water. “Look at me. My mate has come out of a coma, and the first thing I do is overload him with information instead of asking if he needs water.”

“You're just excited to see me alive, aren't you?” I grinned at her. She blushed as she handed me the glass.

I gulped it all down in one quick motion and handed her the glass. My throat was parched. I needed more. Now that I was beginning to notice my body's needs, I realized that not only was I ravenous, but I was also quite frail. Each joint hurt as I moved my hand.

“Everyone from the pack is okay. All of us were extremely worried about what would happen to you, but the doc kept reassuring us that you'd wake up soon. And now,” Alexis said, her eyes welling up with tears. It was such a rare sight to see her tear up that I was at a loss for what to do. “And now, you're okay. Everything bad is behind us. Oh, God!”

I reached forward and hugged her, and my eyes closed, my body feeling her body, my arms around her waist, my head against her hair. She hurriedly stifled a sob and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be. Those are tears of relief. Even the strongest of us are susceptible to joy and the many different forms it takes,” I said, wiping away one solitary tear from my eye. It was beyond my control. And since when was shedding a tear over joy a bad thing?

“What worried me most was how your injuries were not healing. All these wounds, these bruises, they weren’t sealing up. For three days, the blood kept pouring out of them. We tried everything. All the balms, all the folk wisdom, but nothing happened. It was petrifying to see you bleed out like this. But on the fourth day, you just miraculously started slowly healing yourself up. It baffled everyone, including the doctor,” Alexis said.

“Yeah, but you always wanted a guy with a lot of scars, didn’t you?” I said, going back to grinning at her. “Jesus, can someone cut me off the ketamine? I’m not usually this cheesy.”

“It’s good for you. It’s keeping the pain at bay,” Alexis said.

“I would rather feel the pain,” I said, taking off the drip and getting up. It took a few attempts, but by my fourth try, I was standing on my feet.

“Will, what are you doing?” Alexis asked.

“Is that Will?” Vincent suddenly called from the front door. Without waiting for a response, he barged through the door and came inside. Seeing me standing, he gasped, then whispered, “You’re a real rascal, you know. Gave

us a hell of a scare!”

Then he was upon me, hugging me fiercely.

“I’m so glad you’re okay!” Vince said, his voice breaking just a little.

“Likewise, brother,” I said, holding him tightly. “How fares everyone?”

“Why don’t you come outside and see for yourself? They’re all eager to see the man who led them to victory,” Vincent said, thumping me on my back.

“In time, Vince. In time. I’d rather spend a few moments with Alexis here. Grab a bite. Get my bearings right. You know, I just woke up from a coma,” I said.

“Right, right,” Vince said, chuckling and running his fingers through his hair.

“I’m just going to pop right out and let everyone know you’re awake.”

“You do that,” I said.

“You better believe it. There’s going to be a celebration,” Vince said.

“I would be surprised if there weren’t,” I said.

“Who!” Vince let out a victorious howl as he raced out of the house.

“Dinner?” Alexis asked as I sat back down on the bed.

“Is it that time already?” I looked at the clock and saw that it was six in the evening.

“It’s been a week’s worth of solitary dinners and lunches for me,” Alexis said, sitting by my side. “I never want to feel that alone in my life ever again.”

“And you won’t have to,” I said, putting my arm over her shoulder. Then I reached forward and kissed her on her cheek. She turned her face towards me, and for a while, both of us just looked each other in the eyes. The next second, we were kissing furiously, our lips clashing, our tongues in each other’s mouths.

“That can wait!” Alexis said, breaking the kiss and getting up. “You’re... back from the dead. I am going to go in the kitchen now.”

I grabbed her wrist as she turned to leave and pulled her back. She fell on my lap. I caught her at the last second, holding her in my arms, and kissed her once more, this time more deliberately, taking in her sweet scent, tasting her on my tongue, feeling her on my lips.

“Now, that was better, wasn’t it?” I said, letting her go.

Her face was blushing crimson as she left the room all flustered.

I stayed in the room for a while, staring out the window and looking at the Grimm Abode before joining Alexis in the kitchen.

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I knew one thing. These injuries would take their time to heal. It wouldn’t be for a long time that I’d be ready for another fight. Fortunately, my fighting days were behind me. I was still a werewolf, and I’d remain one till the end of my days, but I wasn’t sure if I was going to remain a fighting werewolf. There was so much more to life than that.

Such as the woman standing in front of me, holding out her hand.

“Ready?” she asked me.

“I’m ready,” I said, knowing that I was ready for more than just going out into the commune with her. I had been thinking, and not just for the last couple of weeks, but for a couple of months. It was time for both of us to move on.

As I stepped out into the night, and saw a general air of festivity around me. People were gathered around a big bonfire, holding drinks in their hands, talking to each other with their hands on each other’s shoulders, laughing, looking relieved.

Upon my arrival, they all burst forth into a loud cheer, clapping and hooting. I raised my hand slowly in the air, letting them know that their celebration was warranted and appreciated.

“Here’s one for the King!” Vincent shouted, giving me a bottle of beer and putting his arm around me. “He may not sit on a throne, but he’s royally saved us time and time again! To Will! The Grimm King!”

One more round of loud applause and cheer erupted at the end of Vincent’s toast, and people, including me, drank heartily from their bottles, mugs, and steins. Alexis stood by my side all this while emanating an aura of satisfaction and joy.

I turned to her, knowing that all eyes were on me. People wanted me to make a toast. Some wanted to know what the future had in store for us. But I was not concerned with such matters for now.

I slowly got down to my knee, holding Alexis’s hand both for support and for the sentiment I was about to extend to her.

“My love, we have been engaged for a while now, and not a day goes by that I haven’t wondered when we’ll get married and truly start our life together. I believe that the time has come. If you are ready, I am ready to marry you among these fine people,” I said.

There was a stark hushed silence in the crowd as I uttered those words. A few women gasped from behind me. I only had eyes for Alexis and was anticipating what she would say.

Her face brimmed into a beautiful smile as she nodded and said, “I’d love to marry you, Will Grimm.”

And for the umpteenth time that night, the crowd once again burst into cheer and applause. A few enterprising teens and kids from the pack decided that it’d be a good time for fireworks. They lit up the sky with their colorful display of fireworks.

I helped myself off my knee and came face to face with Alexis. She was jovial beyond words. I hugged her, holding her close to me, and felt the warmth and comfort seep into my body as I realized that, yes, it was finally time for both of us to start the next great chapter of our mutual lives.

# Chapter 33

Alexis

White had never been my color.

It felt like a canvas, something too bland that would get dirtied at the slightest show of carelessness. Back when I was a kid, and my parents were still alive, mom used to make sure that I wore dark colors—brown, black, deep blue—so that whenever I went and played in the mud, it wouldn't show as much. That habit solidified when I became an adult, thus leading to the belief that white was not and had never been my color.

As I stood there admiring my reflection in the bedroom mirror, I saw how thoroughly mistaken I had been and how much I had missed out on. This white wedding dress, ever so carefully tailored by the finest seamstresses of the pack, looked perfect on me. It was long, slender, and hugged me tightly at my waist and bosom. Paired with the veil, I looked like a princess straight out of an old Germanic fable. A few of the girls of the pack had helped me with the makeup. Some of the boys had gone down to the town and picked up a nice bouquet for me to hold. Will, who had disappeared last night, stating that seeing the bride before the wedding was bad luck, had gifted me these wonderful crystalline heels.

If only my mother and father were here. Mother would dote on me. Father would walk me down the aisle. They'd both cry tears of happiness in front of the progression as Will, and I kissed. It was the only thing that was lacking

on this otherwise perfect day.

The air inside my bedroom felt stuffy. I looked around, acknowledging that this was very well the last time I was going to call this place my bedroom. Will and I had planned that we'd move away and then we'd live together somewhere else. This meant that Will would have to leave his home, and I'd have to leave my parent's home.

Dressed in my wedding dress, wearing my heels, and holding the flowers, I walked around the house I'd grown up in, looking at the walls, the old décor my parents had put in place, and the rustic furniture. It made my heart feel heavy, knowing that this was goodbye.

There was a knock on the door. That was strange. I hadn't been expecting anyone. The venue for the wedding was within the Grimm Abode. Vince, Maliha, and a couple of the younger pack members had gotten together and had gone crazy with the wedding preparations. Flowers, arches, a whole stage, and ornate chairs covered in white, flowy ribbons decorated the aisle and the entire venue. Balloons were hanging in the backdrop. That was only what I'd seen earlier this morning when I'd snuck out of the house to catch sight of the preparations. I was completely unaware of how far the preparations had come since then.

The knock resounded again.

"Who is it?" I asked, trying to get a hold of myself. It was only the biggest day of my life. The least I could ask for was some peace and quiet before the event.

"It's Morgan."



Morgan? Now what could he be doing outside my house at this hour?

I opened the door, hurriedly adjusting the bust of my dress. I didn't know whether it was intentional on behalf of the seamstresses or just how the dress accentuated my figure, but there was quite a lot of cleavage that the open front showed. Cleavage that I wasn't comfortable showing to Morgan, who was my dad's age.

"Hey there, Alexis," Morgan said, modestly looking down, holding his hat in his hands. Presumably, like the rest of the men, he was wearing a black tuxedo. "God, you look beautiful. I remember it like it was yesterday when your father used to take you out to the park and play with you. He was my friend, you know. Your father. We went to the same school, married at the same time, and so on."

"Wow, Morgan, I didn't know that," I said, stepping aside so he could come in.

"Well, that's on me. I should have kept more in touch with you after your parents died. It was a weakness on my part, and I regret it. But I would like to make reparations if that's even possible," Morgan said, shifting his feet on the floor, looking a little embarrassed.

"What are you talking about?" I asked apprehensively.

"Alexis, I would like to walk you down the aisle if that's okay," Morgan said, his voice breaking a little.

"Oh, Morgan," I said, letting go of my dress and hugging him tightly. "I would love that."

"Great," he said, breaking the hug and wiping his eyes. "I'll be there, waiting

with the rest of the guests. Just nod in my general direction, and I'll walk you down the aisle, okay?"

"Thank you so much, Morgan. That means the world to me," I said, giving his hand a squeeze as he left.

"You're a good kid, Alexis," he said, waving at me as he left.

Just as I had closed the door, another knock rattled the doorframe. I opened it again, feeling a bit befuddled. I had forgotten that a wedding was not complete without bridesmaids. Well, bridesmaid. Singular. Who else but Maliha?

"Girl, oh my God, you look fucking divine!" Maliha squealed as she rushed in and hugged me fiercely. She was wearing a magenta dress and flowers in her hair.

"How does Will look?" I asked, unable to conceal my excitement.

"He looks like a billion dollars and then some. Honestly, woman, I've never seen him look this handsome," she said, jumping up and down. "And can you guess who's my date to the event?"

"Vince?"

"Yes! Vince! He's wearing a matching magenta tie, and, oh my God, look at this brooch he got me! Girl, this is the best day of my life, and I'm so happy for you!" Maliha's voice was so high-pitched that probably all the dogs in the vicinity could hear it.

"Okay, okay, calm down there. It's my wedding day, and I haven't had anything to eat yet," I said, my stomach grumbling.

“Well, too late, sister. I’m here to escort you to the venue,” Maliha said, latching onto my arm.

“What? Now?” Suddenly, all of this was too real for me. It was all happening too fast.

“Yes. Now!” Maliha said, yanking me out the door. “It has to happen now. They’re all waiting.”

“There’s a knot in my stomach. I can’t move,” I said, feeling my legs go faint.

“Out there, standing at the end of that aisle, is a man you love dearly. What’s there to worry about? You look stunning, he looks gorgeous, and all the pack wants to cheer you on as you start this new chapter of your lives!” Maliha said enthusiastically.

“But that’s just it. A new chapter of our lives. What will that hold? We haven’t told a lot of people this, but we’re not staying here,” I said.

“You mean you’re going on the honeymoon. Of course, you have to,” Maliha said.

“No, babe. We’re leaving for good.”

A long and awkward silence hung in the air as we just stood there, looking at each other. Maliha’s eyes had welled up with tears. She hurriedly dabbed her napkin to her eyes, then coughed to clear her throat.

“If that is so, you owe me one last awesome day, and you better make it this day. So, without further ado, let’s go out there and have some fun,” she said, her voice constantly breaking during the sentence.

“Don’t be sad, Maliha,” I said, putting my hand on her cheek.

“I cannot imagine Fiddler’s Green without you,” she said, sobbing. “Crap, now my makeup’s getting all ruined.”

“Come on, let’s go. Big deep breaths, Maliha. You got this,” I said, taking her arm and patting her hand to calm her down, which weirdly enough calmed me down enough to walk out of the house with her.

The entire commune was deserted, which made sense seeing as how everyone was attending the wedding. Even the streets had been decorated with flowers, glitter, ribbons, and balloons. I had never seen the Grimm Abode look so colorful in my entire life.

Maliha and I turned a corner at the end.

What used to be the training grounds were turned into the wedding venue, complete with a carpet to cover the entire ground, a lovely luxurious white tent with tapestries hanging from the sides, and flowers. Flowers as far as the eye could see.

We entered from the far side, with the entire reception ahead of us. Morgan was standing at the start of the aisle, looking at me approvingly.

“I’ll take it from here, Maliha,” he said, relieving her of her duty.

Then it was Morgan’s turn to take my arm.

Everyone I had ever known was seated on either side of the aisle, all of them with their faces brimming with joy and zeal. I could see Will standing there at the top, his hair cut short, his beard gone in favor of a clean-shaven look, and his suit looking immaculate. It had been one week since he had woken up

from his coma, and already he was looking like he had recovered. He smiled at me, then nudged Vince, who was standing right next to him, as a best man should.

*Here Comes the Bride* started playing in the background as I neared the stage. Will stepped down and helped me get up to the stage. All of the panic that had been trapped in my heart up until now suddenly disappeared the moment I laid eyes on his face.

“You look beautiful,” he whispered.

“Not too bad yourself, there, mister,” I whispered back.

Vince cleared his throat. I turned around and saw that he was no longer standing behind Will, as a best man should, but between the two of us, like an officiant.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Vince said in a loud voice that carried to the last aisle.

I looked inquisitively at Will, who shrugged and shook his head, revealing that he had no knowledge of this beforehand.

“Today, we are gathered here for the most auspicious event this pack has ever seen. And, of course, how could I have just let it slide that two of my best friends in the entire world were getting married? I got ordained just so that I could perform the ceremony and pronounce them man and wife,” Vince said.

I giggled, knowing that it was exactly like Vince to pull off something like this at the last second, and that too without anyone’s knowledge.

“Will and Alexis have, throughout their relationship, shown such moral fiber

that it would put us all to shame. They have been through the best of it all, just as they have been through the worst of it all. But most importantly, they have proven, throughout all their trials and tribulations, that fated mates never leave each other's side. And that's what we're here to celebrate today. They have proven, in every sense of the word, that they are each other's fated mates," Vince said. "And now, the rings."

Maliha brought out the ring that I'd given to her. It was a simple platinum band with Will's initials carved into it. Both of us had agreed that we'd keep things simple. I saw Vince hurriedly pass the ring to Will, saying, "It's hard being both the best man and the officiant, ladies and gentlemen."

"As you put on the rings, you may say your vows," Vince said.

Will extended his hand toward me. I held his hand steady with my left hand as I put on the ring on his finger with my right hand.

"Will," I said, feeling a mix of happiness, heaviness, and disbelief. "Five years ago, if someone had said that the legendary Wilhelm Grimm was going to be my fated mate, I would have told them that it was impossible. But you made the impossible happen. You showed up one day, to everyone's astonishment, and you have been a part of my life ever since through thick and thin. You have taught me how to love, respect, cherish, celebrate, and, most importantly, live. Before you, I was just surviving. With you, I am at the top of the world, enjoying each life experience. I hope that never stops. I hope we keep having new experiences together till the end of our days."

I put on the ring on his finger and then presented my own. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see everyone at the wedding looking at us both, mesmerized and enchanted.

“Alexis Richards. For more than seventy years, I was tortured, experimented upon, and promised a gruesome death. If someone had told me that I would find a mate like Alexis at the end of those seventy years, I would have happily gone through all that torture and pain. I was lost in life. Even before I met you, even before I left Germany, I considered myself lost and purposeless. It wasn’t until I met you that I found my calling, my purpose, my desire to live. Every single day that I’ve spent with you has made me evolve into a much better man, all thanks to you. I hope that I never stop improving. But most of all, I hope that I keep you happy, provide for you, and be the best mate you could ask for.”

Will slipped the ring on my finger. I looked up at him, smiling, my eyes full of love. I could see my reflection in his eyes, just as he could look at his in mine.

“They put it so beautifully, folks, that there’s nothing else left to say, but by the power granted unto me, I now pronounce you man and wife,” Vincent said. “You may now kiss the bride.”

It was as if Will had been holding himself back all this time. The minute Vincent gave the go-ahead, Will leaped forward, wrapped his arms around me tightly, and kissed me fiercely. Well, Will wasn’t the only one holding back. The second our lips met, I held onto his face and deepened the kiss, reaching for his tongue with my tongue, tasting the whiskey he’d drunk last night during the bachelor party, feeling the safest I’d ever felt in my entire life.

I was his wife now. And he was my husband.

# Chapter 34

Will

The cheering of the wedding guests, the over-the-top décor, the flying doves that were set free the moment Alexis and I kissed it was all secondary to me. What truly mattered was my wife. I liked that word. I could get used to calling her my wife. No longer just my mate or my girlfriend, Alexis Richards was now Alexis Grimm, wife of Wilhelm Grimm.

“What’s happening?” Alexis suddenly called out as the guests cleared the aisles and went outside the tent.

“It would seem like our guests are a little bit too eager to get started with the party,” I said, watching as they hurriedly stomped their feet out of the tent and towards the community center where the reception was going to take place.

“It’s almost as if they’ve never seen a wedding,” Alexis said, chuckling.

“Be real, have they really seen a wedding, like a proper wedding with bells and whistles and no threat looming over the horizon? This is the first time they’re attending an event without having to worry about a corrupt mayor, vampires, or a mutated army of soldiers. I say let them have it. Besides, aren’t we leaving tonight? We can bear them a little while longer.”

“I still can’t believe that we’re leaving,” Alexis said, holding my hand.



“Finally.”

“Let’s just pray that everything happens smoothly. We have yet to break the news to the pack as a whole.”

“So, dear husband, seeing as how I’ve never been married before, what are we supposed to do when we go to the community center? Are we going to sit there at the head of the table, or do we have to dance?”

“You’re asking me as if I’m a seasoned husband. This is my first marriage too. It would have been good if someone were here to give me pointers.”

“How about this for a pointer? Whenever you feel uncertain, just look at me, and I’ll look at you. We’ll calm each other down,” she said.

“Perfect,” I said, kissing her cheek as we finally got off the stage and headed to the community center.

It turned out that the reason the guests had disappeared mere moments after the ceremony was so that they could surprise us. They were all hiding behind the tables and chairs and banisters. As soon as Alexis and I walked in through the door, a burst of confetti fell from the sky, balloons started to descend from the roof, and everyone came out from their hideouts to say a collective “Surprise!”

I clapped and cheered them on, uncertain as to what the surprise was about.

And then it dawned on me. A couple of caterers brought in a large vanilla cake with tiny figurines of me and Alexis at the top, and at the bottom it said, “Happy Wedding + Surprise Birthday Party!”

“Birthday party?” I looked at Alexis in confusion.

She was throwing her head back and laughing loudly, holding onto her stomach with both hands.

“It’s my birthday?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“It’s your birthday?”

She shook her head again, still trying to keep herself from laughing.

I was quite confused now. Whose birthday was it, then?

“Don’t you remember, Will?” Alexis asked, sobering herself up to alleviate my confusion. “Today’s the day you reappeared from the forest. That was like your rebirth into this world. Today marks the first anniversary of it. And, as for why I’m laughing, well, according to your new birthday, you’re exactly one year old!”

She couldn’t keep a straight face for long. Alexis burst into laughter yet again and was joined by Vincent and Maliha, who both appeared out of the blue by her side.

“Sorry to leave you hanging there. We just thought it’d be a nice segue to this reception,” Vincent said.

“So...let me get this straight. The joke’s that Alexis married a one-year-old?” I asked, realizing it a little too late, and then burst into laughter myself.

Fortunately, that set the tone for the rest of the reception. Maliha parted the dancing crowd and led us through to the main table. Once Alexis and I were seated and the people had all sat down too, it was time for the reception luncheon. It was too early in the day to call it dinner, anyway.

Then, a glass chimed somewhere in the crowd. I saw it was Morgan clinking a spoon to his glass.

“Toasts,” I whispered to Alexis. “We’ve invited over a hundred people to the wedding, and now they’re all going to give toasts.”

“Just close your eyes, nod, and smile,” she whispered back. “Think about tonight. We’re going to be on a plane headed to the Bahamas.”

“Ah, yes, the Bahamas.”

But the more people gave toasts, the more I realized that they were all heartfelt. I could relate to each person in the crowd. The two most moving toasts, however, were by Maliha and Vincent. It made sense; they were the two people I had spent the most time with, other than Alexis.

Once the toasts were done, the lunch eaten, and the glasses filled with champagne, it was finally time for me to announce what I’d been waiting for all day. I rose from my seat gradually, raising my glass, capturing everyone’s attention.

“I have had the privilege of living amongst the finest people in the world, and I call each and every one of you my family,” I said. Everyone was suddenly very quiet, listening to my every word. “But now, I have a chance to start a family of my own. While many esteemed Alphas before me have balanced the duties of being the pack leader with being a family man, I have decided that given the turbulence my life has gone through, and it has been quite a lot, I will effectively retire from being an Alpha. Alexis and I are going to move to a new town and start a new life together. As for who will lead the revered Grimm pack, well, I believe that one of you has already answered that question by going above and beyond everyone’s expectations. Vincent,

whom I've come to know as a friend and a brother, has shown qualities fit for an Alpha. I would feel safe in the knowledge that I am leaving you all in his capable hands."

The silence was much more pronounced at the end of my speech. It was not an anticipatory silence; it was a somber silence filled with sadness, prompting me to say, "Do not let your hearts grow sad on this occasion. This is not goodbye, after all. My wife and I will keep coming back to visit you. You are all our family. It's just...don't you think we've earned it? After everything that we've been through?"

Morgan said, "Aye!" from the crowd. After him, another person said, "Hear, hear!" Pretty soon, all the guests were affirming through their chants and cheers. The silence was now replaced with the festivities once again, making me feel lighter.

"So, leaving, are we?" Vincent asked as he came up to the table.

"I've led a long life in a dark hole," I said. "I want to see the rest of the world as much as I can in the time that I have left. Are you mad at me?"

"Mad at you? No, brother. I am glad if anything. You deserve a shot at happiness, and if this brings you happiness, then I say go for it," Vince said, shaking my hand.

"Just don't forget about us, okay?" Maliha said to Alexis.

"There's no one like you in the entire world, Maliha," Alexis said, patting Maliha's cheek.

Now that everything was done—the lunch, the toasts, the groom's speech—everyone was back on the dance floor, grooving and moving to funky tunes,

laughing, dancing, and talking.

“May I have this dance?” I asked, standing up in front of Alexis and reaching out my hand.

“I’d love to,” she said, taking my hand and getting up.

Seeing us head over to the dance floor, the crowd cleared space for us to dance. I put my hand gently on her waist and pulled her close.

“Just like we practiced, okay?” Alexis whispered.

“Just like we practiced,” I affirmed.

As everyone watched, Alexis and I danced slowly to the rhythm of Frank Sinatra’s *The Way You Look Tonight*. She moved closer to me, her breasts touching my chest, her hair on my face. I took in her smell and closed my eyes as we moved on the dance floor, both of us knowing deep in our hearts that all was well that ended well.

And this had ended superbly.

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Perhaps it was the cool sea air of the Bahamas, or perhaps it was the honeymoon suite that the hotel had prepared for us, but I was filled with such a desire as I had never known before, seeing Alexis stand there in front of me in her red lingerie.

This was my wife, standing there against the window that showed a backdrop of the cool green ocean lit by the full moon. Her curves looked mesmerizing in that semi-dark, her breasts full, her cleavage enticing, and her panties just

leaving the teensiest bit to my imagination, driving me crazy with lust.

I stood in front of her, muscles and scars and all, completely naked, my cock jutting out rock hard. She tentatively reached out to hold it and stroked it softly as our lips met, our tongues touched, and our mouths became moistened with each other's wetness.

Her hold on my cock became a little bit stronger as she went down on her knees. I closed my eyes as her lips brushed against the tip of my penis, as her hands cradled my balls, and as her tongue licked along my shaft. There was a sense of new belonging in our lovemaking. We weren't just fulfilling some lustful desire; we were consummating our marriage. It felt holy, this primal act.

I rested my hands on top of her head, playing with her hair as she took my cock in her mouth all the way down to her throat. I could feel pleasure rising along my frenulum as she sucked it gently, slobbering it with spit, running her tongue up and down its length.

As she sucked it, I felt like I wouldn't last a long time against the barrage of sexual pleasure that I was receiving. I pulled my dick out of her mouth and held her by her arms, pulling her up and making her lie on the bed. Rose petals were scattered all over the bed and on the floor, suffusing the room with their sweet scent.

I took off her panties, relishing the sight of her wet pussy, ready for the taking. I pinned down her hands on both sides as I climbed on top of her, kissing her as her face came close, and then, slowly, I entered her for the first time as her husband.

She was quite warm down there. Sliding inside her had never felt so easy,

what with her vagina being so wet. And yet, there was that sense of snug tightness that I'd come to love when having sex with her. It was as if her pussy pulled in my cock as I thrust myself into her, wanting more of me.

I obliged, thrusting deep into her, prompting her to moan loudly. This was a signal we had both learned, a signal meaning I had to go harder.

Now, I fucked her without restraint, putting all my strength in my pelvis as I plowed her pussy. My entire penis felt like a beacon of pleasure, pulsating with such force and ecstasy as I had never experienced in sex before.

Her legs wrapped around my hips, causing me to go even deeper. Her arms closed around my neck, bringing our faces closer together. I locked lips with her, slowly sliding my tongue down into her mouth, touching the insides of her cheek, and tasting myself in her throat.

I closed my eyes as the pleasure reached its peak. We both came while we were still kissing. I could feel her pussy throbbing as I emptied my load into her.

Here, as we lay in each other's arms after an exhilarating love-making session, the only thing I could feel was relief.

"I love you," I whispered as I kissed her forehead.

"Oh, I love you too," she said, still moaning from the aftermath of her strong orgasm.

"You know what I'd really like to do?" I asked.

"Go to sleep like this?"

"It's like you're in my mind."

“You know what I want to do?” she asked.

“Check on the pack to see if they’re doing all right without us?”

“Now it’s like you’re in my mind,” Alexis giggled.

“Don’t worry. They’re all going to be fine. I trust Vince,” I said.

“Well, in that case, how about we just go with Plan A and sleep in each other’s arms?”

“And tomorrow, we can go cliff diving!”

“Easy there, mister. Those cliffs are high,” she said, patting my head. “We have to be mindful of your healing process.”

“All I know is, if I’m with you, I’m never in danger, no matter how high the cliff or how deep the water,” I said.

“And as long as I’m with you, I know you shall always protect me,” she said.

“I promise,” I said, stroking her hair, and it was just like that that we both fell asleep.



# Epilogue

Alexis

## **Three Months Later**

It wasn't the San Francisco water that was making me sick. I had ascertained it. If anything, the water here was far better than the one I was used to drinking in Fiddler's Green.

It had been three months since our wedding and the honeymoon. Three months since we'd packed all our belongings and moved across the country to Palo Alto. We couldn't decide whether we wanted to live in San Francisco or somewhere quieter around it. It was sort of a draw that we settled on Palo Alto. Will loved the suburbs, and I was fond of the greenery and the peace and quiet. We had just about enough money between the two of us to put the down payment on a small house in a gentrified neighborhood.

Both of us were happy, I believed. Apart from the nausea, that was.

Will had his job at the marina. He had shown exceptional talent to the proprietor of the marina in repairing vintage ships. According to the proprietor, he had never seen such deft work in his entire life. The work was steady, and it kept him busy five days a week. The paychecks weren't bad, either.

I felt a little bit lost when I first came here, not knowing what exactly to do,

but then I saw this amazing little bookstore in Palo Alto that had a “Help Wanted!” sign on its window. Within a month, I was not only their cashier, I was also the bookkeeper, both figuratively and literally. It had never occurred to me that my real passion was maintaining these quaint little bookstores.

Everything was going well, except for the morning sickness.

It was strange; I hadn’t gone out to a party last night. Neither of us had drunk alcohol, even though it was a Saturday night. Will was still sound asleep in the bed, not moving, not stirring.

I, on the other hand, had to rush to the bathroom immediately or risk hurling all over the carpet.

Once the contents of my stomach had exited, I sat there on the toilet, holding my body, feeling queasy, eyeing the medicine cabinet. I’d tried everything in there to subside the nausea, but nothing seemed to work.

Was it food poisoning from that calamari I had last month? Food poisoning didn’t run this long.

Unless.

Fuck.

Apprehensively, I went to the medicine cabinet and brought out the pregnancy test strips I’d casually bought one day while shopping at Walmart. Will and I hadn’t been using protection since we’d gotten married. Some subconscious part of me had prompted me to buy the pregnancy tests.

And now, that same subconscious part was speaking to me, telling me to take out the strip and pee on it to see if I was pregnant or not.

I took out one strip and went to work on it, feeling very afraid suddenly.

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Ten minutes later, I walked out of the bathroom with my legs shaking and the wet test strip in my hand. It had two black lines on it. Well, that explained the morning sickness. I'd been getting nauseous for a month now. Could I have been pregnant for a month and not known it?

Holy shit.

I went over to Will and shook his shoulder.

“Honey, wake up.”

I expected him to protest, seeing as it was just six in the morning. Will hadn't said it out loud, but I felt that his work at the marina drained him physically, especially in light of the injuries that he had sustained in his fight with Blair. Many of those injuries hadn't healed fully, causing Will to exert himself harder.

Will did not stir.

“Baby, look,” I said, now shoving his shoulder a little forcibly. I needed him. I wanted him to reassure me that things were going to be fine, that we were ready to have a baby, and that we'd take care of the baby and never leave its side. But Will did not move.

“Will, get up,” I said, pushing him so that he'd shift to his side instead of lying flat on his stomach.

But as I pushed him, I saw a huge patch of dried blood under him. It sent

shivers down my spine, seeing all that blood. What froze me in terror was how Will was not moving at all. His skin was blue, and his eyes were open.

“Oh, God,” I gasped as I threw the pregnancy test and got on the bed, checking for Will’s pulse. I could not feel it. And then, it blipped just a little. It was the feeblest pulse I’d ever seen in my life.

I took off his shirt to try to ascertain what had happened to him. We’d gone to bed very normally last night. We’d stayed up to talk about how Will might get a promotion at the marina and how I’d finally open a book-themed café in the bookstore to boost business. The last thing he had said to me was how much he loved me. And then he’d gone to sleep.

As I took off his shirt, I saw that the wounds on his chest were all fresh and bleeding. They were in the shape of claw marks. I remembered how he got there. Blair had slashed at his chest during the fight, after which I had to intercede and join the fight.

“Fuck, Will, get up. You cannot scare me like this,” I said, shaking him but getting no response from him. “Will!”

Will’s face only grew bluer with each passing second. I put my finger below his nose to see if he was breathing. It was so faint that I could not detect it.

Fishing out my phone from under the pillow, I dialed 911.

“911, what’s your emergency?” a calm operator spoke on the phone.

“Help, it’s my husband. He’s not breathing, and his pulse is barely there.”

“Ma’am, I can see that your address is 912 Arroyo Lane. Please confirm your husband’s condition to me one more time before I send the paramedics.”

“He’s bleeding from an old wound. He’s not breathing, and his pulse is dangerously low. His skin has turned blue!” I gasped.

“If the blood is fresh and if you can feel his pulse, your husband is alive, ma’am. Please administer CPR to him while I send the paramedics. Do you know how to give CPR?”

“Yes.”

“The paramedics will be there in five minutes, ma’am.”

I put the phone down as I began giving Will chest compressions. Then I breathed down his mouth and resumed giving him chest compressions.

“Please don’t be dead, Will. Please,” I whispered frantically, pushing my hands against his chest. “I need you.”

But he remained unmoving, his skin turning even more blue and his pulse becoming completely still.

As the paramedics came with their stretcher and took Will’s limp body out of the bedroom, all I could wonder wildly was why this was happening.

Why now?

Thank you reading Alexis and Will’s story, hope you enjoyed!