

FOREVER MATE SERIES



HER FATED MATE

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Her Fated Mate

Rejected Mate Second Chance
Paranormal Werewolf Vampire
Romance

Forever Mate Series

(Book 1)

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Chapter 1: Alexis

arrowing darkness wove through the forest, shrouding everything in shadow. Where was moonlight when you needed it most? According to the lore of old, the moonlight was a werewolf's best ally. And yet, here, in the cursed depths of Fiddler's Forest, the moonlight was merely a myth, never managing to make its way past the thick, suffocating canopy of ancient trees.

In what little luminescence there was, every branch, twig, and protruding root resembled the malignant fingers of an old crone. Between the dreadful imagery and the unnatural cold in the atmosphere, this much was clear to me: This forest bred fear. It thrived on terror.

I could easily shift into a wolf and show the forest my colors. Tell it by baring fang and claw that I was not one to give into fear. But doing so would alert others of my presence. After all, I was not alone in this forest.

Even in my human form, I could make out the outlines of their bloodied leather cloaks flapping soundlessly as they moved swiftly through the trees. There was a reason the werewolves of the Grimm Abode were forbidden from stepping out of their commune after hours. There was a reason why none who had sought to escape the town ever made it out alive.

And now, the reason was staring me dead in the eyes.

"She's here! I found the cur!" It was a red-eyed, bald, pale-skinned, long-fanged vampire crouching in front of me, claws

jutting out of his fingers. He hissed at me menacingly, masking my scream in that abysmal sound issuing from his throat.

I had done so well so far. Crept from thicket to thicket, bush to bush, to make sure that no creature would be able to spot me. What chance did I have against a horde of vampires? A thought flashed through my mind—*this is how you die, Alexis Richards*—before I could free myself from the paralysis of horror.

Now that the vampires had found their quarry, they weren't so silent anymore. The air resounded with the flap of dozens of cloaks converging from everywhere in my direction. It created a mental image of thousands of bats fluttering toward me.

It had only been a second since I'd been discovered, a second that had seemingly stretched into an eternity, thanks to the adrenaline rushing through my body. I only had one course of action left, other than to give up, accept defeat, and let that Nosferatu-looking monstrosity tear out my throat.

I took a deep breath and shifted into a wolf in one swift motion. As my feral form towered over the cowering vampire, I couldn't help but feel a sense of glee upon seeing the dread dawn on that vampire's face. Immediately, I could see better and make out the shapes of the vampires who were quickly closing in on me.

No more the hunted. Now I was the hunter. It was apex predator against apex predator. But that still did not remove the fact that I was heavily outnumbered.

I used the element of surprise to my advantage and tore out the throat of the vampire who had ratted me out to his comrades. I

had granted him a quick death, better than what he and his kind deserved.

As much as I wished to stay and see him clutching his bleeding throat while writhing on the forest floor as his cursed soul left his body, I had to leave. Satisfaction would have to wait. Right now, I had to flee.

Despite my agility, the vampires closed in on me from everywhere, leaping out from the shadows and slashing at me with their clawed hands. Their nails dug into my skin, issuing blood far too many times for me to account for. They jumped from above, pounced from below, reaching out to me with their fangs, their daggers, and their—

Guns!?

A loud bang issued from behind me, and a fraction of a second later, a bullet whizzed by me, grazing my fur. This singular bang, it turned out, was merely the overture, the prelude, to what was to come. Gunfire rained from behind me as I raced behind the covers of rocks, trees, and crevices.

“Draw her out! Search every bit of the forest. She can’t have gone far! I reckon the bitch is bleeding,” a grisly voice roared.

He was right on the count of me not having gone far. As for bleeding, well, I was bruised and scratched, but it takes more than passive slashes and stray bullets to make a werewolf bleed.

This crevice I’d tucked myself in would not provide me cover for much longer. I could hear their footsteps right above me. I was surprised that I had eluded them once after being made out. Truth be told, it was more luck than skill. I had never been

this deep in the forest before. I did not know the lay of the land as they did.

Someone was coming toward me. I could not hazard a peek, as it would betray my position. I could see that they had a military-grade flashlight in their hand that they were flashing about, looking for my paw prints on the ground. From the sound of dull metal thudding against clothes, I gathered that they were carrying a firearm. If they turned around at the wrong time, they would see me hidden in this crevice, and then I would have nowhere to run.

“Here, wolfie, wolfie!” Ah. It was a male vampire. “Here, girlie. Come out and play.” Then he started making those dry lip-smacking sounds as if I was some sort of common dog.

In my desperation, I looked around the ground for something. Anything. A rock would do. I closed my jaw around a particularly large piece of tree root and ripped it off the ground. I flung it out of the crevice and watched it fly in a trajectory and land far from me.

The vampire stopped dead in his tracks, pricked his ears, and began walking toward where the root had fallen. He started prodding the place where the root had fallen with the tip of his gun.

He never turned around in time to see me creeping behind him. Before I could attack him, I had to get that long rifle out of his reach. Lucky for me, the vampire was still using it as a prodding stick to investigate the source of the disturbance. I pounced upon him, thrashing away the rifle from his grip using the momentum of my forefeet. Once he was defenseless, I clamped my muzzle shut around his throat, crushing his

windpipe, and ripped out his vocal cords, rendering him unable to make a single sound. I shot a look behind me, suspecting the worst. Their flashlights were focused on me, their guns raised in front of them, their red gazes glaring from behind the blinding sheen of their torches.

It was in this moment of being trapped between a rock and a hard place that I reconsidered why I had chosen to escape Fiddler's Green. Had I stayed put in that sordid town, I would have been miserable, but at least I would have been safe. One only needed to ascertain how miserable my existence was that it prompted me to put my life on the line in an attempt to escape that town.

That awful town was named after old maritime folklore about a heaven for sailors. It couldn't be further from heaven. At least not for me. I did not know what the other wolves thought, but then again, none of them were orphans like I was. None of them had to raise themselves on their own as I did. None of them saw abject poverty as I had. Oh, and this one takes the cake: None of them were treated like outcasts by the pack as I had been all these years.

It's not just pain and sadness that have a threshold. My misery had a threshold that it had crossed long ago, making it impossible for me to live there. Between staying at Fiddler's Green and dying here in this forest at the hands of vampires, just a mile shy from freedom, I'd have rather sacrificed my life for freedom than be subjected to the nightmarish existence that awaited me in that town.

"Nowhere to run now, is there?" A vampire sneered as he broke rank and walked up to me, aiming his rifle at my face.

I growled at him and stepped back till my tail touched a tree trunk. There were trees all around me, and wherever there weren't trees, there were armed vampires advancing on me from all sides.

The vampires ran the town, despite it looking every bit the idyllic paradise it was named after. This wasn't news. This wasn't even some conspiracy that I was solely burdened with. All the wolves of the Grimm pack knew that the vampires used Fiddler's Green for its strategic seaside position as a port for their smuggling business. And yet, no one did anything about it. And worst of all was our pack's alpha, Maurice, who feigned ignorance and pretended everything was peachy keen.

The frustration at this last realization was just the incentive I needed to figure out a way out of this trap. It would be a risky maneuver. My focus was fixed on the vampire approaching me, his finger dallying around the trigger dangerously. I lowered my body in preparation for a pounce and howled at him as he got just close enough to me.

This worked, as he was startled and did exactly what I wanted him to do. His finger pulled the trigger, unleashing a flurry of bullets. At that exact moment, I leaped to his side and bit on the gun's blistering hot barrel, yanking it away from me and in the direction of the vampires behind me.

A mad tirade of bullets whizzed through the air, hitting several of the vampires, creating a cacophonous domino effect where the bullet-grazed vampires began shooting their rifles as well. And now, the whole area was lit with haphazard muzzle flashes. In this chaos, I sought shelter from the bullets by climbing on the tree behind me, leaving the vampires to deal

with the mess of their own creation. I could not help but admire my work as I leaped atop the tree. None of them were lethally injured, but they weren't in shape enough to pursue me anymore. At least for now. They were holding their wounded bodies, looking about dazedly, confused as to where I had disappeared.

"It's one freaking wolf!" One of them screamed from below. "How hard is it to catch one wolf?"

Except it wasn't just one freaking wolf. It was a wolf that you bloodsuckers had driven to the point of scorn and desperation.

Atop the tree, my head piercing the canopy of leaves, I could now feel the moonlight serenading my face—sweet, gentle moonlight with its rejuvenating powers. My sore body could already feel the lunar glow tending to my wounds. But I had not peeked my head above the canopy to seek the moon out. I needed to know the direction in which I was to head to escape this cursed forest. From below, there was no way of knowing that.

Here, atop the tree, I could see that I had traveled a few miles away from the town. Its faint neon lights and sodium vapor lamps shone in the distance like faraway fireflies. I had never seen the town and its adjoining areas from such a vantage point. From here, I could make out the sea, the wharf, and Fiddler's Cove. In the far distance, I could make out the outline of Greyback Mountain. Were it not that my life was in danger, I might have enjoyed this sublime scenery. From here, it made sense that someone would name this place Fiddler's Green. I calculated my position relative to the forest and

charted a direction. I would have to head another mile in the opposite direction to be free of the forest.

With my new bearings in mind, I crept below the canopy and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark.

Thankfully, the vampires that I had evaded weren't there anymore. As far as I saw, there was no sign of them. It was too risky to make my way down there and risk getting seen. From ancient oak to ancient fir, I leaped from tree to tree as I traversed the remaining length of the forest. But there came the point when the trees turned convoluted, their branches curling far too snidely for me to perch atop them.

I hopped back on the ground, and once I had scouted my immediate surroundings, I shifted back into human form. My wounds might not have felt painful when I was a wolf, but now that I was back to being me, I could feel each slash that had cut across my skin, each deep bruise swelling purple on my body, and the throbbing issuing from my bones.

I crept along the snaking path, keeping true to my direction. With the vampires no longer in the vicinity, the forest resumed its nocturnal humming. Crickets chirping, owls hooting, leaves shivering. An unnatural fog permeated through every trunk, bush, and rock. The mossy earth was so slippery and wet that the dampness was drenching my sneakers.

That last mile seemed to stretch and stretch into a never-ending labyrinth. I did not mind the distance. I was just glad that I had evaded those who hunted me. It wasn't just on this night that they were so bold and brash as to be out roaming the forest; they did this every night, ensuring that their smuggling passage out of Fiddler's Green was secure. That was the

reason why I hadn't opted for the only road heading out of the town. At this time of the night, the only vehicles that traveled that road were trucks carrying smuggled blood, drugs, and God knows what else.

It was only after I had lost count of the minutes and was pretty sure they had turned into hours that I could finally see the signs of a clearing ahead of me. No more trees in that direction. Had I really waded through the entire forest? Was this the end of the road for me? A start of a new life somewhere else? In my excitement, I began running towards the clearing. I had never felt this happy before, or if it had, it was in some distant past that I could no longer recall.

In hindsight, I should not have run. In my excitement, I completely overlooked the fact that the vampires had lain traps for exactly such an occasion. When the exit was merely a few inches away from me, my foot got caught in a bear trap. It clanged shut around my ankle, digging deep into skin, muscle, and tissue, drawing blood.

I yelped aloud in pain and collapsed on my face. As I hurriedly tried to free myself from the trap, I helplessly realized that hot blood was tricking down my foot. The immense pain was blackening my vision, making me go into a state of shock.

This is not how you die, I told myself and strained the last bit of my strength to free myself from the snare. I tried to get up on my feet to estimate how badly I'd been hurt. I could stand and walk, but every movement sent sharp signals of pain running up my leg.

"There she is! I heard her scream!" A ghoulish voice yelled from not far behind. In my agony, I looked around and saw a

horde of vampires with torches and guns stampeding through the forest. It strongly called to mind the image of a medieval mob chasing a heretic.

“Follow her blood, boys,” The same voice gnarled. “She’s bleeding like a stuck pig!”

I hobbled along the path, using trees as support, but it was a doomed cause. No matter how fast I’d hop, they would catch up to me. I could shift into my wolf form, but it would only provide the vampires with a bigger target to shoot at. Not to mention that one of my legs would be bleeding and engorged.

I decided to shift. At least when I’d die this way, I would do so while fighting. I would go out in my feral form.

Maybe there’s an afterlife for werewolves who die in battle, such as the one Vikings had for their warriors—a werewolf Valhalla of sorts. Maybe I’d end up dining with the great wolf lords in banquet halls of divine splendor.

This was just my blood loss talking, making me feel lightheaded, numbing the sensations from my extremities. They say if you die of blood loss, you don’t feel the pain of death’s final draw. Maybe I wouldn’t feel it when the vampires riddled my body with bullets and tore away at my skin with their fangs.

As I was about to shift for my final confrontation, the undergrowth of wildflowers started rustling frenziedly. I shot a confused look to my right, where the commotion was coming from, and saw a gaunt figure emerge from the thicket.

It could not be.

The man I was looking at had died more than seventy years ago. I had only ever heard of him in tales and seen him in some blurry, black-and-white pictures. He resembled a skeleton more than he did a person, dark shadows hanging under his eyes, his eyes looking haunted and menaced. He was dressed in tattered rags, and whatever part of his body was visible was covered in bruises. His unkempt beard and long hair were matted with dirt.

It was none other than Will Grimm, the original alpha of the Grimm pack, said to have died long ago. How in the blazes was he still alive? Was this just a hallucination?

First, he shot a look at me, then at the approaching mob of vampires. He walked up to me, his lips quivering.

“Ariana...” He whispered hoarsely.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that I wasn't Ariana. That Ariana, my grandmother, had been dead for half a century.

But before I could so much as stand steadily on my feet, the vampires caught up to me. Will—or whoever appeared to be Will—saw in horror from across the path as the vampires pinned me to the ground.

I closed my eyes as the vampires surrounded me, prodding at me with the barrels of their rifles, snarling at me, and jeering at me with their faces inches from mine. I could smell the unearthly stench emitting from their mouths and feel their fangs coming nearer.

If this was death, it could have been worse. I could have died of old age, having lived a sorry life in that dreadful town. At least, in this way, I was going out on my own terms.

As much as I told myself this, it did not help lessen the terror pervading through me.

And as the vampires began descending upon me like a swarm of insects, my vision started giving away to a ghastly, suffocating darkness. My body became numb in the wake of fear, my faculties froze out of shock, and I started losing consciousness.

Chapter 2: Will

I couldn't just stand there as those rabid beasts attacked my beloved Ariana. Whatever had transpired would mean nothing if I didn't save her from the vampires. Vampires in Fiddler's Green? Now that was something unheard of. How long had I been held captive? Surely it must not have been more than a couple of weeks or months.

I had no time to ponder over what had been in the face of what was happening in front of me. Despite every inch of my being aching with blaring pain and my body still being under the effect of the drugs that my captor had injected in me, I shifted into a wolf and pounced upon the swarm of those bat-like abominations.

Had my time in captivity rendered me a phantasm? The vampires never saw me coming. Or perhaps they were far too concerned with cornering the maiden that they had forgotten her protector stood sentinel nearby.

I dug my claws into the backs of the bloodsuckers, yanking them off Ariana, my heart frenzied with concern for her safety. It had barely been a few seconds since she was pinned down, but given what I knew of vampires, a few seconds were all they ever needed to bare their teeth and dig into the skin of their victims. It only seemed poetic that I dug my teeth into their skin and threw them off like ragdolls, lurching and screeching.

I had to protect her at all costs. In all my time spent bearing the torture and brutality of that eccentric occultist who had

caged me like I was some common dog, the only thing that had sustained me through that cold and dark was Ariana's warm and light memory.

I plucked them off her like leeches off a wound. They were bony creatures, all pale skin and teeth, and crimson eyes. With each blow I struck, with each slash that I cleaved across their repulsive skins, I could feel my strength returning to me.

Ariana lay there on the ground, weakened, whimpering, and shivering. She stared at me in disbelief and perhaps gratitude, not uttering a single word. I could see that her foot was injured. I did not expect her to shift and fight by my side. As the alpha of the pack, it was my sworn duty to protect her and all the members of the Grimm pack.

The vampires had rifles the likes I had not seen before. Now that they were getting back on their feet, their guns were aimed at me. What was this weaponry? I had not seen anything like this in my time during the war.

"Look out!" Ariana screamed at me. I barely had a second left to register what she was telling me to look out for. I had thrown off my enemies every which way, and now they had surrounded me, their bizarre rifles cocked at me.

Utilizing my recovered strength, I leaped high into the air, relishing the sensation of the cool night air as it ruffled my fur, and tore past the canopy, coming face to face with the splendor of the moon after such a long time. Below me, I could see the flash of their guns and hear the roar of the bullets as they tore past the leaves and flew past me into the night sky.

I dove with fierce force, crashing into a particularly hideous-looking vampire and knocking the gun out of his grasp. Upon

my falling on him, the vampire stopped moving altogether. I'd struck him lifeless. Now for the dozen more that were left.

A vampire is an agile creature. Every lore about them has this much in common. It is their speed that lets them get their way with their prey, whether it's sucking their blood or killing them for sport. However, a vampire is no match for a werewolf in his true form.

And I was in my true form after ages.

I traversed the forest in quick leaps, clawing at the shooting vampires, tearing apart their throats, their torsos, and every other part of their bodies that my claws could get a hold of. Those that were directly in my path faced an agonizing death through the crushing force of my muzzle. My mouth was bitter and wet with vampire blood. I cared not for the whizzing bullets that soared past me.

"Now there are two of them?!" screamed one of them in confusion.

"Retreat!" another yelled.

Those who had fallen in their battle with me were scrambling to their feet, hastily scampering back into the depths of the forest like rats. Many of them abandoned their firearms and their torches.

I intended to give chase and eliminate them as retribution for their attack on Ariana. But despite my will, my body seemed to say otherwise. I had overreached my limit, forgetting that mere hours ago, I was shackled in a dark basement, my body swollen purple with the bruises that my captor had inflicted on me.

Realizing that my strength was waning because I had just utilized the last dredges of it in fending off the vampires, I abruptly shifted back into my human form. My tattered clothes reminded me again that I, once the alpha of my pack, was reduced to nothing but a laboratory experiment.

The forest resumed its meditative quietness. The air no longer stank with the stench of blood and that festering odor that the vampires carried with them wherever they went. As far as I could see, there was no sign of them any longer. Now that both of us were no longer in immediate danger, I turned my attention to the woman who had enamored me all her life.

I could feel something stirring within my being. It was a magical prompt that resurrected itself in my heart, a desire I had long thought was dead. My feeble body was attracted to hers in an uncanny magnetism as I walked up to her as she walked up to me.

And when I touched her gentle cheek, electricity issued from her body and imbued itself in my fingertips. Only in lore had I read before about the sacred bond of fated mates. Only in my deepest dreams had I wished that I would one day bond with Ariana as her mate. My despair in my prison was lessened to mild irritation due to the hope that someday, I would be free, someday, I would be rejoined with her.

It was happening. One had no control over this primordial force of nature. A bond formed of its own accord. You could never force it.

I saw in her eyes the same wonder that was in mine. Awe, at the sanctimony of the rite that was taking place so

serendipitously. Her mouth was agape, gasping as both of us felt this surge of union strengthen our relationship.

Despite my weakened state, I lifted my other hand and gently held her other cheek, my faculties still in disbelief at the occurrence of this binding—in here of all places, with her of all people, and now out of all the times.

A gentle wind blew around us as our bond strengthened. Silent leaves slithered to life and sang a symphony of nature, serenading the cementation of our link. Moonlight fought past the darkness and sought our forms, lighting our bodies in a celestial glow.

And then, that fantastical moment was over. The forest went back to being a quiet forest, devoid of light and air. The charge I could feel upon touching her skin quickly simmered down, leaving only the soft sensation of her warm cheeks under my coarse hands.

“Holy shit,” she exclaimed. “What just happened?”

“Does it need to be any clearer than it is? My Ariana, at long last, we have bonded as we had always desired. I am your fated mate, and you are mine,” I gasped, unable to believe the very words that were coming out of my mouth.

“You keep calling me Ariana. I hate to break it to you, but I’m not Ariana. She died like fifty years ago,” she said, stepping away from me as if I was some sort of deranged madman.

I groaned in despair as my knees buckled, and I collapsed on the floor. My hands dug into my hair and tugged of their own volition, deriving pain all over my skull. Ariana? Dead? Dead for fifty years? A gut-wrenching moan escaped my lips,

quaking through the entire forest. Tears followed soon after, hot billowing tears clouding my vision.

“If...” I stuttered. “If...if Ariana is dead...” I couldn’t even believe that it was true, even as the sentence left my mouth. How could it have been fifty years since she had died? How could I have been gone for so long? “If Ariana is dead, who is it that I have bonded my soul to?”

“I’m Alexis. Ariana was my grandmother.”

During my time in captivity, I had syringes that were thicker than my index finger pierced through my body. I had scalding irons clapped to my back in an effort to make me shift into a wolf. Liquids that burned like molten lava poured down my throat while I was chained in barbed wire that tore deep into my skin. My captor would prod me with an electric stick that would send jolts of volts burning through my system. When feeling especially frenzied, he would tear off a chunk of skin just for sport, leaving me thrashing in agonizing pain as I bled in my cage.

None of that hurt as much as hearing her say that Ariana had been dead for half a century did. My legs were the first to give away. Upon collapsing on the floor, I could feel consciousness leave my body like the last tendrils of night, fleeing the sky at dawn.

The girl knelt beside me as weakness took hold of my body. Darkness perforated my vision till it was all I could see any more.

“Who are you?” the girl inquired as she tugged my frail body. “Where did you come from? Why did you save me? Hello?”

The barrage of questions triggered my incredulity further. Yet, before blacking out, I managed to whisper, “Wilhelm.”

And then, I knew no more.

The sweet nothingness of unconsciousness was a welcome refuge from all the madness that I had gone through. This would be my respite from the pain, the agony, and the saddening news that, somehow, the woman that I had cared for had died long ago.

A sharp pain permeating through my chest brought me crudely back to awareness. With a sharp breath that served more to ache than rejuvenate, I opened my eyes to the strange sight of the girl bending over me, her hands pumping rapidly on my rib cage.

“Stop it, damn you! You’re going to break my bones!” I groaned.

“Listen up. The odds are stacked against us. You’re in no shape to be alive, and I’ve got a bad foot that’s making it impossible for me to walk. We’re going to have to work together if we’re gonna get out of this forest,” the girl said in rapid bursts of jumbled-up words. It was as if her syllables were crashing into each other.

“Leave me be. There’s nothing left to live for,” I said, misery taking hold of me. I closed my eyes and sighed dejectedly, feeling each muscle strain as I lay there limply.

“What are you talking about, man?” she asked. With my eyes closed, I could swear that it was Ariana speaking to me. This only worsened my melancholy. “You’re frail like a

skeleton. Don't you want to go back to the commune? Where they can take care of you?"

"Who's going to take care of me? Who? You say that Ariana has died not one or two but fifty years ago. It should make sense that everyone I knew should be dead as well."

I could feel her hands closing around mine. She squeezed my hand in her gentle grip and tugged at me, beckoning me to open my eyes.

"Look, you say your name's Wilhelm, right? As in Will Grimm, the pilgrim? The pioneer pack alpha who traveled with the Grimms from Germany to America during the Second World War? I've seen the old-timey pictures, those black-and-white shots of you, my grandma, and the elders. You're Will. And somehow, you're still alive. Still young as the day you were when you disappeared around seventy years ago or so," she said softly. Her words only confirmed my worst suspicions.

"You say that I've been gone for seventy years? It only seemed like a few weeks to me in that godforsaken cell," I said.

"Cell? You were captured?"

"Aye. I was. By a most malevolent occultist who went by the name of Edward Beckett. He is the devil incarnate. Or, at least, was. Until I killed him and freed myself," I said. It all started coming back to me slowly. The cloud of daze began lifting from my memory, recalling horrible torture.

"My point is, Will. You're somehow alive and in one piece. It's almost like a miracle. Would you like to give up now?"

After all you've been through? That doesn't seem fitting for the bravest wolf of our pack," she said.

"Is that what they say about me?" I chuckled. "That I was the bravest?"

"The pack reveres you. Every weekend, when the pack assembles for a campfire at the Grimm Abode, they talk of you as if you were a legend. Fred Grimm, your brother, speaks of you, speaks of your bravery, tells us tales of how you rescued your entire pack from the horrors of the Second World War in Germany and took 'em all to safety by charting a course through the seas across Europe to America. Now, in my opinion, that's the textbook definition of bravery," the girl spoke.

Bizarre as it was, the words that she spoke served as a balm to my bruised soul. I assembled myself and sat up straight, feeling embarrassed at my lack of proper clothes. I had worn these ragged tatters for how long I could not recall.

"Seventy years, you say?"

"Well, more like seventy-six. It's twenty-twenty-two, you know. You disappeared

sometime around, say, nineteen-forty-six. Or at least that's how the story goes," she said.

That vile occultist had kept me under lock and key for seventy years?! Even for a madman such as him, keeping me imprisoned for more than seventy years was gratuitous, to say the least.

"Very well, Ariana...I'm sorry...Alexis, was it?"

“Yeah. Alexis. Pronounced like Texas,” she said as she smiled at me. “I still can’t believe that I just came across you. So random. So weird.”

“You say words that I know the meaning of, but you say them in a fashion I don’t understand. What does ‘so random’ mean?” I asked. Every word I uttered made sharp pain issue in my ribs, making me wince and groan as I struggled to sit still.

“Oh, my bad. That’s totally like a generation gap thing. I get it. So random sort of means, like, you know, coincidental,” she said.

“Then say that,” I snapped.

“Geez. I’m sorry,” she said.

“How do you propose we get out of here?” I asked as she helped me to my feet. “Why are there so many vampires here? Do they plague these lands?”

“Dude, you have no idea how bad it’s been for decades. Even before I was born, really. Vampires run this town. This forest, that cove, the harbor, the wharf, everything in between. It’s all their turf,” Alexis said. Even though she put on a brave face, the evidence of pain betrayed her as she helped me to my feet. I could see her foot drenched in fresh blood.

“Vampires in Fiddler’s Green. That is most strange. You must tell me more,” I said. “And you should also get that foot looked at. It can get infected. You could end up losing it.”

“Thanks for the grim reminder,” she said. “And yeah, the vampires run this entire town. There’s nothing one can do about it.”

“One can fight,” I said. We were moving extremely slowly, relying on balancing each other as we walked arm-in-arm along the dirt path. Tortoises moved faster.

“Oh, yeah, right. Fight. Try telling that to our alpha,” Alexis scoffed. The disdain was plain as day in her voice.

“You do not approve of the alpha that you have?” I asked, my concern growing graver for the integrity of my pack.

“Maurice Grimm is a man with no backbone. He’s a politician first, a greedy bastard second, and a werewolf third. You try telling him that we can fight the vampires. He’ll laugh at your face,” she said in a voice trembling with rage.

I prodded the matter no further. I would see to it once we’d get to Fiddler’s Green.

“What were you doing out here, risking your life at this hour?” I asked. It had piqued my curiosity that I would encounter a lone wolf out here in the forest, a lone wolf surrounded by vampires.

“Promise you can keep a secret?” she asked.

“Given that I saved your life, and then you resuscitated me, and given that we’re helping each other hobble back to the commune, sure. I promise I can keep a secret,” I said.

“I was running away. At least that was the plan,” she said, weighing her words. “Until the vampires caught up to me. Until I came across you. Until we freaking bonded together.”

“Ah, that we did,” I said, my heart sinking upon remembering that not minutes ago, the bond had surreptitiously worked its magic, binding us together as fated mates. The woman I had

yearned for was dead. And here I was, bound to her granddaughter.

As if to compensate for any lacking in the grief that I was struck with, the forest graciously produced a fresh hell for us to deal with.

The vampires were back in greater numbers than before, armed with far more than just flashlights and guns. They were combing the trees ahead of us, quickly closing in on our location.

A wild panic shot through my peripheries, freezing me to my spot. Beside me, I could hear Alexis whimpering in fear.

What was the saying? Out of the frying pan and into the fire?

Chapter 3: Alexis

A few hours ago, my first order of business was to escape from this town and never return. Of course, now, given the serendipitous events of the last few hours, everything had changed, prompting me to rethink my entire strategy.

I had always imagined I would find myself blissfully fated to some hipster-looking guy with a full face of facial hair, smoking an elegantly rolled cigarette in the back of some antique bookshop in Maine, perusing some Victorian-era literature. I'd walk over to him in the aisle, he'd notice me, we'd touch hands accidentally, and then boom, we'd both bond with each other.

Except now this had happened. Instead of some covert werewolf in a Maine bookshop, here I was, bonded with someone I had spent my entire childhood hearing tales about. The great Grimm wolf, the savior of the pack. Will, who by all reckoning should be in the nineties but looked no older than I did.

What unspeakable horrors had he been through? Who had mutilated him so much?

“As much as I would love to stay here,” he said sarcastically, “those vampires are closing in on us, girl. And we have nowhere to go!” His voice was a pendulum oscillating between panic and disbelief. But it served the purpose of bringing me back to reality.

“I...” Truth was, I had frozen in fear. Off the top of my head, there was nothing that I could think of doing that would save us both in the face of this new threat. I had spent weeks trying to chart a course out of the forest and had planned impeccably for each step of the way. Even with all that planning, the margin of error had been quite significant.

Now, I had no plan. There was no contingency in my mind for such an event.

“Listen to me, girl. I have not survived the depths of a dungeon and the tortures of a madman only to be smitten by a horde of brainless bloodsuckers. Let’s get out of here this instant!” Will snapped.

“You have no recourse either!” I snapped back. “What are you hassling me for?”

“I happen to have a recourse,” Will stated. “Vampires tend to instill fear in the hearts of their enemies via numbers. But they’re always overcompensating; remember that. They have a weakness that makes their numbers pointless. Can you tell me what that is?”

My eyes shot wide open as I understood what he was saying. “The sun!”

“Yes, girl. The sun, indeed. And when it comes up, no matter if there are hundreds or thousands of them out there, they are going to have to seek shelter unless they want to die.”

“Right on,” I said. “So, what do we do now?”

“Look to the sky. It is at its darkest now. If anything, that’s a prelude to dawn. The stars have dimmed their shine, and the moon is receding along the horizon. Any moment now, the sun

is going to emerge from behind the mountain and burn these vampires,” Will said.

I clamped my hand over his mouth before he could utter any more words. The vampires had covered great distance and were now standing on the other side of the clump of bushes we were hiding behind. The air around us became stagnant with the smell of stale blood.

Will’s eyes grew wider as he, too, saw what I was seeing: The barrels of the vampire’s guns prodding the bushes, the beams of their torches penetrating through the darkness of the forest. It would be foolish to wait for dawn any longer.

I nudged Will to come closer. When his ears were within whispering distance, I said, “When I distract them, you head north. You keep running in that direction, and you don’t look back. You’ll find your way to Fiddler’s Green.”

“What about you?” Will whispered back, his face contorted with concern.

“You let me worry about myself. I’m going to distract them. You get to safety. When you head into Fiddler’s Green, head over to the Grimm Abode. They’re bound to recognize you as I did. Okay?”

“It is not the mark of an alpha to leave a member of his pack behind. I cannot doom you to danger,” Will growled.

“Between the two of us, I’m in better shape. I’ll give them a chase, and by then, the sun will come up and do its bit. I’ll come back for you,” I said. “Don’t you worry. Just run north so that the vampires don’t see you.”

Will cast me a wounded look, a look that tore through my heart and made me feel terrible for abandoning him like this. But this was his plan. He was the one who had suggested that whole Gandalf-turning-the-trolls-into-stone idea. I was just implementing it.

“Farewell, Alexis,” Will whispered.

“Take care, Will,” I said. Then I shifted, rising above the thick overgrowth of bushes that we were cowering behind, and howled fiercely to draw the vampires’ attention.

“Do not spare her!” A vampire shrieked and opened fire in my general direction. This was soon followed by a flurry of more gunfire issuing from the weapons of other vampires.

As I ran zigzagging through the woods, my peripheral vision was lit up with flashes of muzzles, and my ears rang with the sound of bullets whirring by me. Despite my aching foot, I ran like the devil himself was on my tail.

The strain on my injured foot would have impeded me had my will not been so adamant. It wasn’t just about me anymore. Back there, there was a weakened wolf who relied upon me to save him.

Wolves are at their strongest when they’re part of a pack.

I powered through the pain and raced along the forest path. At first, the fact that none of the bullets were hitting me was a little hard to believe, but then it dawned on me that it’s hard to keep one’s aim true when one is running. Still, I was not out of danger. The bullets were still soaring around me, and dawn seemed like a far way off.

However, the ferocity of the chase had propelled me past the forest. Here I was, back again at the edge of the forest where I had first found Will, only this time, there was no Will to hold me back. Just a few steps away, the trees ended, giving way to a clearing that marked the end of Fiddler's Green and the start of the state of Maine.

I stopped to catch my breath in the wake of this liberating sight, and just then, as the vampires caught up to me, a vibrant sun rose from behind the singular mountain and shone its magnificent light on the forest, its rays piercing through the canopy.

I swerved just in time to see the vampires sizzling in the sun, screaming as their bodies smoked and burned. They were no longer concerned about their quarry. Their very survival was at stake.

Where would they run off to, I wondered. I shifted back to my human form and saw the vampires hissing and screaming as they ran for cover in the shade of the forest trees, leaving their guns and their flashlights behind.

The sight was so odd and bizarre that it made me burst out into laughter. All their strength of numbers and their ferocity could not keep them safe from the sun.

But this newfound freedom also put me in a state of indecision. Here I was, standing at the brink of Fiddler's Forest, looking at the path that led to my freedom. And yet, I could not move. Something intangible was holding me back, and it was after I stood still and pondered for a long time that I realized what it was.

My bond.

I had become fated mates with someone who needed me. Who knew whether Will had made it back to Fiddler's Green or not? In hindsight, leaving him behind and running off to my freedom was a very selfish thing to do.

The lyrics to The Clash's song rang in my head, "Should I stay or should I go?" Running off to Maine would mean I'd never have to bear the humiliation of the Grimm pack. My future would await me with open arms, with opportunities at every step. Even though it was kind of late, I'd somehow get admission into an actual college and get a degree that I wanted instead of the community college associate's degree that I had.

I would get a job and my own place. I would be independent. I'd go to coffee shops and drink the expensive kind of lattes while working on my laptop in front of the window. I would reinvent myself. Maybe even ditch my identity as Alexis Richards and take up a new name. I would never shift again, so no one would ever have to know that I was a werewolf.

All that lay just a few steps ahead. All I had to do was cross the threshold.

But I remained frozen to the spot, unable to move. It was only when I decided to turn back and go back to Will that I was able to move my feet again. I resented myself at that moment, having to choose from two extreme choices, but in the end, it prevailed upon me that Will, the werewolf that I had somehow bonded with, needed me and that he was a stranger in a strange land. He had been gone for more than seventy years. The world was not his ally any longer. He would need someone who understood his circumstances to guide him and help him make sense of this crazy new world.

“Damn it, Alexis,” I groaned as I traced my steps back to where I had last left Will.

He wasn’t there.

Good. This meant that he had paid heed to what I’d told him.

I still had one last chance to turn around and leave.

But the gnawing sensation in my chest beckoned me to go further and see if Will was okay. If he were to turn up to Fiddler’s Green just like that, people would be confused. Some of them would not even believe that it was the real Will Grimm.

And for better or worse, he was now my mate.

I hobbled along the dirt path, looking for signs of Will. Now that adrenaline was not coursing through my system, the pain in my leg had resurfaced and was making its presence known. I winced as I walked, but despite the agony, I kept on walking.

I had walked for ten minutes when I saw the thing I had been dreading all this time.

It was Will. He lay there on the ground, knocked out, the back of his head bleeding. Not that I was a detective or anything, but from what I could see, I inferred that one of the vampires who had been running off to shelter hit him in the back of the head, causing him to faint. Otherwise, why would he be lying here in the middle of the forest path?

“This is not going to be easy,” I moaned miserably as I lifted Will’s body off the ground and flung him over my shoulder.

And so, I began my descent down the path that led to Fiddler’s Green, back to square one. My effort to escape had been

thwarted, and I had been plunged into a completely new, completely bizarre situation.

Half an hour later, when my body had exhausted its depleting reserves of stamina, I collapsed at the gates of the Grimm Abode with Will on my shoulders.

I was too weak to croak out a call for help, let alone move further.

My vision had turned bleary, making it hard for me to make out the face of the person approaching me.

“Lexie? Holy crap, where were you?” It was Vincent’s voice. Vincent was one of the good ones, roughly a few years younger in age and sort of like my only friend here at the commune. He was the exact opposite of his father, Maurice, in every way. Vincent was a caring wolf, a gentle soul, and a kind friend.

“Vince?” I groaned. “Help me.”

Vince’s arms gripped me. He helped me sit up against the picket fence boundary of the commune.

“Lexie, where were you? Everyone here at the commune thought you’d done a runner,” Vince said.

“Vince, look who I found,” I said weakly, pointing a wavering finger at the unconscious man lying by my feet.

“Who is it?”

As Vince turned around Will’s unconscious body, he gasped and staggered.

“I can’t believe it,” he whispered.

“He looks just like in the pictures that Fred showed us, doesn’t he?” I asked.

“Lexie, how in the hell is he still alive?” Vincent had his hands on his head, the first signs of someone considerably freaking out.

“Vince, I’ll tell you everything, but first, you gotta take me to my home. Help me,” I said faintly. Now that the bursts of adrenaline had subsided, I could feel how much pain I was in and how much each muscle was strained—moving felt like an impossibility. My body refused to budge. My foot throbbed with agony. But lucky for me, Vincent was a man with great emotional intelligence. Rather than pester me about what had happened and what I was doing with the long-lost alpha of our pack, he simply hoisted Will’s body on his shoulder and assisted me in walking as we headed into the commune.

The commune was a collection of cottages and homes built around the commune center, where everyone gathered on the weekends for a bonfire and pack meeting. My house, luckily, was close enough to the entrance of the Grimm Abode. It was the house where my parents and I used to live before they died. Now, I lived here alone.

Vince kicked the door open. He took most of Will’s weight under him and took him to the bedroom beyond the lounge. Meanwhile, I sank into the sofa in the living room, my body’s weakness and pain prohibiting me from moving an inch further.

Vince came running back from the bedroom. He didn’t say much as he looked at me and then shot a look at the kitchen. He nodded as he ducked behind the shelf and reappeared with

a bottle of whiskey and my first aid kit. He passed me the bottle, which I first used to sterilize the injury on my foot, then used to sterilize all the wild thoughts that were bouncing around in my brain.

“Let me fix you up,” Vince said.

“Vince, I can do it myself,” I protested.

“No. You let me do this while you explain yourself to me. We weren’t exactly very secretive as we came to your house. Someone’s bound to have seen us come in, and someone’s bound to have told my dad. He might be on his way right now. So, if you want me to cover for you, just give me the barebones of what happened,” Vince said.

I swallowed the remaining whiskey in the glass and watched as Vince patched me up with bandages and gauze from the kit.

“Promise you won’t tell a soul?” I asked once he was done.

“Scout’s honor,” he said, extending his pinkie. I coiled my pinkie around his and tugged, then smiled at him.

“I was trying to run away,” I whispered.

“In the middle of the night?!” Vince gasped.

“Shh, you idiot. Yes. In the middle of the night. Long story short, the vamps caught up to me, but I still managed to escape. As I’m about to leave the forest, I come across this guy... Will... just stepping out from behind a couple of trees as if he’s... I don’t know... out of a daze or something. So, yeah, I saved him, and here he is, lying on my bed. Oh, and here’s the absolute kicker. We freaking bonded with each other,” I said. I poured myself some more whiskey and downed it, letting it sedate me into a calmer state.

“What the...” Vincent’s mouth was gaping open and shut, and no words were coming out.

At that moment, before I had any more time to clarify the details of my adventure to a confounded Vince, the door of my home banged open.

There, standing with his face fuming and his muscles twitching, was Maurice Grimm, the pack alpha.

“You...” He growled at me. “Tell me, girl, what were you doing out at night beyond the hours of curfew?”

On ordinary occasions, my faculties tended to freeze whenever Maurice approached me. But today, I had just been through hell and worse, which lent me a false sense of courage, allowing me to stand up and face Maurice and say, “Let’s just say I was rescuing one of our own.”

“What?” Maurice snapped in confusion. “Speak no lies, girl. I can smell them off you.”

“Oh, that’s just whiskey, Maurice. And I’m not telling any lies. Here, let me show you,” I said, heading into my bedroom, where Will lay unconscious.

“Who is this hobo you’ve brought into the commune?” Maurice asked loudly as he prodded Will’s body and turned him around.

“You mean you can’t tell from looking at his face?” Vincent asked from behind.

“Quiet, boy. I’ll see to you later!” Maurice roared. “As for you, you’ll have to answer for your actions in front of the pack.”

“Maurice, take a good look at the man lying in my bed. Can’t you recognize Wilhelm Grimm, the original alpha of the Grimm pack?” I said defensively, standing between Maurice and Will’s unconscious body.

Maurice’s face broke into a series of confused expressions as he bent and observed Will’s face. Then he got up and faced me, eyeing me with glaring anger.

“This bearded, dirty man is not Will Grimm. Will Grimm died some seventy years ago. Perhaps your delusions of grandeur have finally cracked your brain,” he said.

“We can prove it. We’ll call Fred. He’s the only living member of the original pack. And Fred’s bound to recognize his brother,” Vincent said.

“Very well,” Maurice said, regaining his composure. “Go and get your grandpa.”

Vince cast me a worried look as he left the house. I blinked at him reassuringly to let him know that I was capable of holding my own against Maurice.

Vincent had barely left my house when Maurice, who had so far been holding his thinly veiled rage, snarled at me with madness dripping from his eyes and pinned me against the wall with his hand closed around my throat.

“I have heard what you’ve done. My sources tell me that you were deep in the forest in the middle of the night. You know what the penalty is for breaking the curfew, for disobeying the alpha...and now you bring some random mutt to the Abode?”

I could not breathe, and I had no fight left in me to defend myself. Maurice’s grip around my neck tightened, lifting me

up in the air. My hands closed around his grip but to no avail. With legs flailing in the air and the vision getting blurrier and blurrier by the second, I struggled to breathe as Maurice's hand tightened around my throat.

"This isn't the first time you have been insolent to me, but this may be the last," Maurice spat.

The last remnants of conscious began escaping from my body the harder Maurice choked me. My arms fell limply to my sides, and my feet stopped thrashing. The only sound in the room was the hoarse gurgling issuing from my throat.

And despite this violence that I was experiencing, the only thought that was coherent in my mind was this: Why had I even bothered to come back?

Chapter 4: Will

I woke up to the sensation of great pain in the back of my head. For a second, gripped with panic, I thought I was back in that great dark prison where I had been kept for who knows how long. But when I opened my eyes and adjusted to this new reality, I saw that I was lying in a warm and soft bed. I had forgotten the sensation of sleeping in a bed.

It was not soon after that I heard the grating sounds coming from my right. To my horror, I saw my savior, the girl Alexis, being choked to within an inch of her life by a man.

I strode across the room just in time to pry this man's fingers free from Alexis's neck. Then I grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him across the room.

"Have I been gone for so long that the Grimms have abandoned chivalry for madness?" I roared as I advanced on this man.

"I will not be spoken to by some common..." this man began, but I had no intention of letting him live, not after what I had just seen him do. I recoiled my arm to strike a killing blow to this foe.

But before I could do that, I heard someone approach through the doorway. It was upon seeing this person that I lowered my hand and stood there in utter silence, shocked senseless. So, the girl had not been lying.

"Wilhelm?" the withered old face, covered in white beard and wrinkles, stared at me with cataract eyes. "Is it really you?"

It was none other than my younger brother, Fredrick Grimm, standing before me. Though, he looked nothing like I had last seen him. Fred had aged, and terribly so. He stood there with his weight supported by a walking cane. He wore the garb of an old man. His hair had thinned, and what remained of it looked like white cotton candy.

“Time has not been kind to you, younger brother,” I said as I walked up to him.

“And it has seemingly spared you entirely, brother mine,” Fred said as he threw away his cane and grasped me in a fierce hug. To feel my own flesh and blood hugging me like this, it broke me down completely.

“Father, you can’t trust the words of this girl,” the man whom I had pried off Alexis spat from behind.

“Maurice, I should think that I can recognize my brother when I see him with my own eyes,” Fred said. “And Alexis has done our pack a great service bringing the long-lost Grimm back to his home.”

“Alexis saved my life, dear brother,” I said to smooth over whatever confusion prevailed in the room. “Had she not been there to save me, I would have been outnumbered by the vampires, left for dead. I am eternally in her debt.”

“As are we all, Maurice,” the greasy little man who had moments ago attacked Alexis quickly changed his tone and his stance. He got up and cowered before me, holding his hands together apologetically. I ignored him and looked at Alexis instead.

She was helping herself to her feet, massaging her neck. I walked up to her and helped her as she steadied herself.

“I don’t understand,” the young boy standing behind Fred spoke for the first time. He bore a remarkable resemblance to both Fred and Maurice. “How are you still alive?”

“Will, I want you to meet my grandson, Vincent,” Fred waved his arm. “And that man over there, well, you’ve met him already. He’s Maurice, the present alpha of the pack.”

“How nice to be acquainted with you,” I said to Vincent. I extended no such courtesy toward Maurice. “And as for what happened to me and how I still am alive, I have to say that it baffles me. I have been through hell, brother, and I do not say that lightly.”

“Maurice, why don’t you go and assemble the pack? They will want to meet the founder of their pack,” Fred said as he helped himself to the only vacant chair in the room. He sat down on it and breathed heavily.

Maurice left with Vincent trailing behind him. I could not make out what they were discussing in hushed whispers, but the tone sounded hostile and angry. Now with only me, Fred, and Alexis in the room, I turned to face the girl who saved my life.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I said. “I don’t know what happened after you told me to run. Dawn did come, and the vampires were running off, but it seems that one of them must have struck me in the back of the head.”

“No sweat,” Alexis said, still massaging her neck. “I’m just glad all that effort didn’t go to waste. I did carry you on my

shoulders for about two miles. But like I said, no sweat.”

“Brother,” Fred spoke. “You look frail. You need to rest and recover, and we must have the healer tend to your injuries.”

“Aye, that would be wise. But I am starving and parched, brother. Perhaps some food and drink would sway me to loosen my tongue. Let’s just say that my captor wasn’t a very hospitable fellow.” It was strange how being out of immediate danger alerted you to your body’s less imminent needs. Now that I wasn’t trapped or hunted, now that I was safe within the confines of this quaint home, I realized just how badly I wanted to drink a cool glass of water and eat something warm.

“Captor?” Fred asked.

“Ah, yes. As I said, it is a long tale,” I said. “One that I have no pleasure in recounting, but I must tell it to make sense of all the madness. Maybe some answers have eluded me.”

“Umm...Will,” Alexis spoke finally. The tenor of her voice was not one of fear or respect. There was a subtle subtext of care, of love, in her voice. She spoke so softly, as if she was addressing my soul. “You need rest—a lot of it. You’re also wounded. If you’d just let me take care of you. You can sleep in my bed. I’ll take the couch and fix up something for you to eat. Why don’t you rest here and talk to your brother while I make something for you and come back with some bandages and ointments?”

“Thank you, Alexis, that would be very kind,” I said and smiled at her as she walked past me and headed out of the room. The moment she was gone, so was the smile on my face. I could only feign for so long. The woman was the spitting image of Ariana. Looking at her, talking to her, being

in her presence, it all made the pain come back. Ariana was dead, and she, her granddaughter, was the living reminder of it.

“She looks like the spitting image of...” I began, but I could not finish this sentence.

“I know she does,” Fred said. “Poor girl, she’s been through the wringer. Her parents died when she was a kid, and, well, I’m not the only one whom time hasn’t been kind to. She’s been dealt a rough hand.”

“Fred. I bonded with her out there in the woods,” I said. “It happened before I knew that she wasn’t Ariana. I don’t question the tapestry of fate and what it’s woven for each of us, but it has me confounded. All my life, before my capture, I had assumed that I would eventually bond with Ariana.”

The sorrow and horror of my situation hit me like a bag full of bricks. In my old life, I played things close to the chest, never truly revealing how I felt to anyone save a trusted few. It was how I made sure that my pack survived the atrocities of the war. It was how I managed to sail with them to safety. But how could one cope with a tragedy of such magnitude? Tears? No. I was beyond tears. This was a level of grief that came to the brink of madness. I clenched my jaw and dug my nails into my palms, my knuckles turning white as the moroseness of the situation started unfolding in front of me.

“What good is my freedom if all I yearned for is gone?” I asked hoarsely.

Fred’s hand rested on my shoulder and squeezed. “Not all is gone, brother. The pack lives on. Ariana’s memory lives on in

her granddaughter. You are still alive. As am I. Do not despair. Tell me, instead, what happened to you.”

Someone knocked on the ajar door. I looked at who was standing there. For a second, my mind played a cruel trick on me and made me think that it was Ariana. But it was only Alexis, standing there with a tray in her hand and what looked like a medical kit slung from her wrist.

“If it’s okay with you, should I give you this food and patch you up while you tell your story?” she asked in a small voice.

I smiled at her with pursed lips and nodded. “You saved me. I think I would like to share my story with you.”

I was all prepared to share my story with them, but the moment she put down the tray in front of me, I forgot about everything. There was so much variety of food and drink available on that tray that it made my mouth water and my stomach lurch. In all the excitement, I had completely forgotten how ravenous and famished I was.

There was a bowl of steaming soup with chunks of chicken and vegetables swimming atop the thick broth. Warm toasted bread cut into thin slices, smeared with cream cheese and butter, lay along the side of the tray. On the main plate, cut vegetables lay on the side of a big, sizzling, rare steak covered in thick gravy. Slices of bacon lay crisply to the side, soaked in grease.

In one of the glasses, black Coke fizzled. In yet another glass, there was warm milk. And there was a third glass that only had water.

I looked at the tray and then at Alexis.

“Don’t look at me. Word got around the commune, and people pitched in. I normally only have takeout in my fridge. This is from all the people of the commune. They’re eager to meet you, but I told them to wait their turn,” she said, beaming at me. “Oh, I’ve also got some whiskey if that’s more to your taste.”

I could not speak much in the face of this kindness. This was the first time someone was extending this sort of compassion toward me in a long time. My captor had kept me barely sustained on scraps and morsels.

Taking a bite of the steak, the bread, and the bacon brought back vivid memories of taste on my tongue. I had craved the texture of food for the diverse variety of sustenance that the outside world offered. I had forgotten that something as simple as steak and bacon could taste so heavenly.

I tore off the bread and consumed it ravenously, barely chewing on it before gulping it down to make room in my mouth for the next bite. In my days of youth, I had never sought vegetables. Oh, how I missed the flavor of vegetables when I was imprisoned. I took each bit of carrot, pepper, lettuce, onion, and tomato that I could, letting their juices and their crispness fill the void of my mouth.

Then I drank the water. The cool, clean, nice water rejuvenated my throat. As I gulped it down, the glass of cola enticed me and forced me to drink it in two quick gulps.

“Oh, Lord, have mercy on me,” I said out loud once I was done. “This was a meal fit for a king. I cannot thank you enough.”

Alexis handed me a warm towelette to clean myself and took the tray away. She came back promptly with another tray with a pot of tea.

“I did make this tea myself, though,” she said as she poured the boiling black liquid into a cup and stirred milk and sugar into it. “Try it. You’ll love it. It’s called chai.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said as I reached for the cup. The warmth coming from the cup felt so wonderful on my fingers. I drank the hot liquid and felt a jolt of energy rush through me. I was utterly transfixed by the delicious taste of this tea. I’d never had something like this before.

“Now, brother, I must implore you to share your tale with us,” Fred said. “As happy as it makes me to see you alive, hearty, eating, and drinking, I want to get to the bottom of the matter and understand how you, the bravest wolf of the pack, were captured. And by whom? And why for this long?”

I looked from Alexis to Fred and then to Alexis again. “I think I’ll take you up on your offer of whiskey.”

“Got it,” she said and disappeared once again, only to come back with a full bottle of caramel-colored liquid and three glasses balancing in her other hand. She handed Fred and me the glasses and poured us quite a lot of whiskey. I immediately brought the glass up to my nose and welcomed the tangy and sharp smell of the spirit in my nose.

Once I’d taken a deep sip from my glass, I took a deep breath and began my tale. After all, it was clear from both their faces that they were impatiently waiting for me to begin.

The greatest calamity I had seen, the Second World War, had been officially over for a year, or so they said in the news. I had no way of knowing, obviously, as I had taken my pack and traveled across the seven seas to the safety of another continent.

We had settled here, in Fiddler's Green, as it was the first port we came to after months of sailing the open seas. The air was fresh, the grass was green, and the locals who lived there greeted us and treated us very amicably.

In time, the members of my pack integrated into the fabric of the town, becoming essential workers along the wharf, helping with the loading and unloading of cargo on ships, and taking up jobs that would help them survive in this new world, America.

A year passed, and I adjusted to a commoner's life in this quaint little town. I was the alpha of my pack, and my best friend, my brother-in-arms, Kenneth Richards, was the second in command. We built the commune known as the Grimm Abode by hand, laying down the foundation for each house using Kenneth's architectural knowledge and my knack for lifting and setting heavy things. Of course, wherever he could, my younger brother Fred always lent a hand.

All this while, I had my eyes set on the fair maiden Ariana Brubaker, my pack's beautiful woman who hadn't yet bonded with anyone as a mate. My heart was set on her. Sometimes, I would take her with me into the forest, and we would take long walks and talk with each other.

I had become acquainted with her company, and if I'm being honest, it was her company that had helped sanity prevail in

my otherwise tumultuous life. But despite my advances, she would never reciprocate the love that I felt for her. She would be polite with me, courteous as one can be, but the more time I spent with her in the solitude of Fiddler's Forest, the more I realized that this love was one-sided.

It was one unfavorable night in 1946; I think Ariana and I were taking one of our walks in the forest. It was late at night. This was usually when she and I used to wander and ponder together, usually after dinner.

Despite the realization that her affections did not extend towards me the same way mine did towards her, I still preferred her company, as she was a kindred soul. She would humor me and tell me the most affirming things, making me feel confident in my decisions as the alpha.

I hadn't exactly made my peace with the notion that we hadn't bonded, but for all intents and purposes, I believed that I would bond with her the moment she felt for me the same way I felt for her.

That never came to be.

On that night, as we walked side by side, the forest came alive with the sounds of rushing steps. Soon after, the sight of lit torches warned us of marauders in the forest. I knew that the forest was a wild place, particularly dangerous at night, but I had never before encountered any danger, and perhaps that had caused me to become lax.

It was an ambush. Those were not mere marauders but mercenaries under the order of some powerful man. At that point, I did not know anything about who that man was. All I knew was that I had to keep Ariana safe.

Those men referred to us as wolves. It surprised me that they knew that both of us were wolves. It meant that someone had let slip our identities to these soldiers. They attacked us from all sides, surrounding Ariana and me.

The look of terror on her face made my heart sink. I could not risk getting her in danger, not after I had brought her to another land for the sole intent of escaping from danger.

And so, I shifted and fought off those men while Ariana made her escape. It wasn't that she was being selfish; I had commanded her before shifting that she should escape and call for help.

I never knew what had happened to her after that. It turned out that the sight of her running through the forest would be the last time I would ever see her.

Those mercenaries had tranquilizers of some kind that they used upon me, knocking me out. I had been putting up a brave fight and would have surely continued to fight and would have eventually won had they not cheated. Had they not used those tranquilizers.

When I came to, I was in shackles. I was no longer in my wolf form. I regained consciousness just in time to see my captors bringing me to a humongous Victorian-style mansion in the forest. I tried to free myself, but those men had me in a cage. They prodded me with sticks and threatened to sedate me if I didn't stop fighting.

And so, helplessly, I witnessed as the architect of my capture stepped out of the door of his mansion, a menacing man with madness lit like fire in his eyes. Despite the maniacal aura he was emitting, he was a man with manners.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” he said as politely as he could, completely ignoring the

fact that his men had a noose around my neck and were dragging me out of the cage like I was a rabid dog. He kept on talking as if he was at a tea party. He had a thick British accent that made it harder for me to understand what he was saying. “I am Lord Edward Beckett, retired from Her Majesty’s service in the East India Trading Company. My various adventures and quests have brought me to this brave new world. Personally, I find the freedom that this country offers quite liberating. The air is alive with opportunity. And that’s where you come in, my friend.”

All the torture and experimentation that followed would have been far more bearable had the man fit some evil archetype. But the very fact that he was such a polite, mild-mannered, well-dressed, articulately-spoken gentleman made everything worse.

Tied in shackles, I was dragged through his mansion to his basement, where there was an elaborate trap made of some form of glass. Once they put me inside it, I was unable to move or shift into my wolf form.

With no windows or any source of exterior light in that murky basement, it was impossible for me to know what time of day it was. All I knew was Edward would appear periodically with vials and syringes and inject me with pain-inducing chemicals that would make me go berserk with agony. I would pass out and wake up weaker. He would drain my blood and take it away.

During these sessions of torture, he would talk to me, almost like one does to a friend. He told me that he was an occultist who knew all too well the existence of vampires and werewolves. He wanted to derive the secrets of my genome. He wanted to unlock the secret to strength and immortality using my blood.

He'd keep me sedated for long stretches of time, barely keeping me alive. After a while, I was too weak to struggle or even think of fighting back. His men would torture me whenever he wasn't in the room, prod me with electrical sticks, and bludgeon me with batons. When I'd be at my wit's end, they'd feed me scraps.

I was robbed of my sanity. The perception of time was completely lost to me. But even in that delirious state, I noticed that the mad occultist was aging. His hair was graying, and his face was becoming populated with lines and stretch marks.

The only thought that kept me alive was Ariana. She was out there, waiting for me. If or when I'd escape, I'd make my way back to her and become her fated mate. We'd be married, have children together, and grow old alongside each other. This was my sole tether to whatever sanity I had left.

But the occultist, it transpired, was not having any success with his experimentations, despite the effort he had put in. Soon, he stopped visiting me altogether. I was left stranded alone in his basement, tied to iron chains, locked away in an inhumanly small cage, malnourished, a mere ghost of the man I once was.

Then one day, his soldiers rushed to the basement, telling me that my imprisonment was at an end. My captor had issued the order that I be set free by way of death. They said it was his dying wish.

It brought me bittersweet joy to know that Edward, my captor, was dying of old age. This notion gave me enough strength to defend myself against the soldiers. Somehow, and I don't know how, I was able to escape from the basement, leaving a pile of corpses in my wake.

I could just as well escape by then, but boiling vengeance was coursing through my veins. So, I searched the mansion and came upon him, lying withered on his deathbed, tied to machines that beeped and whirred.

He laughed at me as if this was what he had expected.

“You will never truly be free. Not after what I have done to you.” These were his last words.

I shifted after ages and pounced upon him, tearing into him, rending limb from limb and ripping apart his body, leaving a mess of entrails, bones, and torn muscles in my wake.

And once I was done, I escaped into the woods, thinking it had only been a short while since I had been imprisoned.

“And that's when I met you, Alexis,” I finished my tale, my hands quivering as I struggled to hold the empty glass. “And that's when I realized that my merciless captor had me imprisoned for seventy-something years. It's only now that I understand that his experimentations on me altered me in some way, robbing me of the ability to age normally, leaving me

stuck in a young man's body with an old man's mind and soul.”

Fred was at a loss for words, and his mouth hung wordlessly open.

Alexis's hand closed around mine and squeezed. “To think that you have been through such horrors...I can't even imagine,” she said.

But upon listening to her empathetic words, instead of feeling reassured and comforted, a bizarre emotion took hold of me: Wrath.

“How would you be even able to imagine?” I said, my voice rising. “I have just recounted a tale as harrowing as one could ever hear, and you bring me this hollow sentiment?!”

“I...I'm sorry,” Alexis whispered, her eyes wide with disbelief.

For some twisted reason, this enraged me even more.

“What would I do with your apology? Would it turn back the wheels of time? Bring back the woman that I loved? Unbind me to you, a complete stranger I don't know? What does your extra apology accomplish?”

“Wilhelm,” Fred said softly as if to warn me that I was letting my temper get the better of me. I had no control over it at this moment.

Watching her rush out of the room, distraught, made me feel a wicked sense of satiation. As if by projecting my misery onto her and making her miserable, in turn, quenched the desolation I was feeling.

And just as swiftly as this malignant rage had consumed me, it left just as fast, leaving me confused at my outburst. I intended to go after Alexis in an attempt to make amends for my behavior, but Fred put his hand on my shoulder and sat me down.

“I don’t blame you. You are at your most vulnerable right now, having just told us your story. She’ll be fine. I want you to rest and recover your strength. When you wake up, I want you to meet the pack. Rest now; rest here. I am glad you are back,” Fred said.

“I feel like I am a mutated man,” I said as I lowered myself into the bed, feeling wearier by the second. “I feel like I will never be normal again.”

And with that statement, I fell deep into slumber, my sleep haunted by cloaked occultists, mercenaries running through the forests with torches, and snarling vampires with their strange firearms.

Chapter 5: Alexis

I sympathized with Will. I really did. Although I hadn't been exactly in his position, I did know what it felt like to be trapped somewhere. I knew what it meant to be alone. That being said, his abrupt hostility toward me was a bit shocking, to say the least. I didn't want him to lash out at me anymore. In that regard, I was a very non-confrontational soul. I didn't deserve to be shouted at.

His words and tone stung me. I realized that he was probably going through some PTSD and was probably not within the right frame of mind, but that did not give him a license to misbehave with me as he had just done.

I was brooding in the bedroom that used to belong to my parents when I heard footsteps approaching me. I looked up and saw it was Fred.

"He didn't mean that," he said.

I nodded at Fred to let him know that I got it. That it wasn't unusual for people who had gone through severe trauma to lash out at those around them. But I was too taken aback to say anything.

"Why don't you rest, Alexis?" Fred said, then left the room.

First, Maurice pins me to the wall, choking the life out of me, and then Will Grimm lashes out at me so cruelly. It was precisely this sort of crap that had prompted me to leave this godforsaken town in the first place. And here I was back again, trapped in this misogynistic hell.

Unable to shake the sorrow that Will's words had embedded into my heart, I struggled with sleep. He had extended bitterness in my direction, and that bitterness was akin to venom, seeping through my system, making me feel bad. At long last, when sleep did come, I was thankful for it.

Sleep did wonders for my worn body, but it did nothing to subside the heartbreak Will's rudeness had caused. When I woke up, drenched in sweat, I noticed that I had slept for the entire day. Maybe some fresh air would do me good?

Despite his behavior, I was concerned for him. We had bonded, after all. So, as I left the house, I checked in to see if he was sleeping or not.

The bed was impeccably made, the empty tray, plates, and glasses were stacked on the bedside table, and there was no sign of Will. Good. I didn't want to confront him right now. Not until he'd issued some form of apology for his outburst. Maybe he was out in the commune, interacting with the pack, talking to people.

I snuck out through the backdoor and pulled my hoodie over my head, concealing my identity entirely. I could hear Will's voice coming from the center of the commune. From the sound of it, they had lit a bonfire in his honor, even though it was a weeknight.

"...caged like a lab rat inside a horrible mansion..."

The crowd went, "Ooh," hanging on to his every word.

I crept out of the commune, sneaking through the unguarded front gate. Right as I was about to leave, though, someone grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. I wheeled around to

attack whoever it was but stopped when I saw that it was Vincent.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He asked.

“Why aren’t you over there with the rest of the pack?”

“Hey, I asked first.”

“Fine,” I sighed and pulled my hoodie off. “I just want some fresh air. Something happened with Will earlier today. And then there was the whole thing where your dad was trying to strangle me. I just need to be away for a while to reorient my thoughts and everything.”

“You’re not thinking of running away again, are you?” Vincent asked gravely.

“Look, Vince, you’re the only person here who’s ever been nice to me, hasn’t treated me like I was dog crap, never ignored me. Besides you, I haven’t got much here. The pack doesn’t even acknowledge my existence. The guy I rescue ends up hollering at me. The pack alpha hates my guts,” I burst out bitterly.

“Listen, Alexis, I know it feels like things aren’t going your way, but the pack will eventually see that you did a noble accomplishment. They’ll admire you for it in time.”

“Vince, I envy your optimism. Truly. I think it’s too late for things to change,” I said.

“Fine, I won’t stand in your way then,” he said, stepping aside and letting me pass.

“Oh, stop being so dramatic. I’m just going for a walk. It’s still an hour before curfew. I’ll come back,” I said dryly.

From inside the Grimm Abode, I could hear loud laughter and chatter, which only made my bitterness worse. Will had only been here for a few hours, and already the pack had accepted him.

From here, I could see the blinking and shimmering lights of Fiddler's Green a mile below me. That calm little seaside town would be the perfect escape for me just now. I could go to a bar, get hammered, and then throw rocks into the ocean at the wharf. Maybe I'd get into a bar brawl with a couple of unhappy, drunk sports fans. It would be so cathartic to walk into the cold, breezy, and dark streets of the town. But going down there on foot would take me fifteen minutes. Another fifteen to come back. By then, the curfew would already be in place, and I'd catch hell from the pack members for breaking the rules. As if I wasn't in hot water already.

As I briskly walked, I tried to reason with my mind that I should go easier on Will and let it go that he had snapped at me. It wasn't that big of a deal. People do all sorts of things when they're experiencing post-traumatic stress. In a way, I was being selfish, making it all about me.

I never got to finish my self-actualizing.

The same stale stench of blood, that salty metallic tinge, poured through the air just as it had done last night when I had come across the vampires in the forest. The townsfolk were blissfully unaware of the existence of creatures like werewolves and vampires in their midst, but we werewolves knew that the vampires thrived somewhere in the direction of Fiddler's Cove. Some of us had a rough idea that maybe they

even lived down there, where the sun never shone, the air was cool, and there was access to the sea.

None of us were allowed to venture that far under orders from our alpha.

But this smell and this airborne taste of blood weren't coming from as far as Fiddler's Cove. This was right here. I had barely even left the outer limits of Grimm Abode. What were the vampires doing here?

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I caught the first glimpse of the shadows moving through the trees and heading into the clearing. There was no doubt in my mind that they were the same vampires I had encountered in the forest last night. I couldn't just stand there and ogle as they approached the Grimm Abode.

This was what I had always feared. It wasn't always like this. When I was a kid, the vampires did not hold sway over the town as they do nowadays. I couldn't believe the sight that I was seeing. They were so brazenly walking up to the commune as if this was their turf.

But they were still half a mile away, which gave me enough time to run to the Grimm Abode and warn everybody.

And so, begrudgingly, I raced back to the commune, my heart palpitating, my extremities going cold. The events of last night played like a reel in front of my eyes.

I burst through the gate, running past Vincent, who was sneaking a cigarette by the entrance.

"Alexis? What's up?" He called after me, running behind me to catch up.

I had no time to stop and explain the entire situation to him. I stormed past the cottages and came into the clearing, where I could see that Will was still sitting in front of the bonfire, covered in a warm shawl, surrounded by the pack members. Maurice was standing in the far back, eyeing everything with disdain.

“Guys! The vampires are approaching the commune!” I yelled.

“Oh look, it’s the wolf who cried vampire!” Maurice, who I presume had been stewing all the while the pack members were crowding around Will, spoke angrily.

“I’m not lying!” I said, reciprocating the anger. “You only need to go out and look at them approaching. They’re packing guns and everything.”

Maurice stared daggers at me and stomped past me with some of the pack’s able-bodied, young members following him. I was not one to simply stay behind. I raced behind them as they stepped out of the commune’s gates and came face to face with the sight that I had been warning them about.

Maurice took one look at the approaching vampire, then came hurtling back inside, looking panicked and crestfallen. He was rubbing his chin and muttering something to himself while all around him, the werewolves were clamoring and demanding a plan of action.

“What are we going to do, Maurice?”

“Maurice, should we fight?”

“We can’t all fight!”

“Do we meet them in battle out in the field?”

So many discordant voices and so much chaos. I shot a look at Will, who was still sitting at the bonfire, staring deeply into the flames.

“Flee,” Maurice spoke slowly, in a voice so quiet that most wolves stopped shouting to try to understand what he had just said.

“What did you say?” I called out loudly from across the bonfire.

“I say we don’t spill blood. I say we pick and choose our battles. This one is not in our favor. The vampires outnumber us. They have weaponry we don’t possess. Flee! Run to the town and seek shelter there. Abandon this commune. We are, after all, not defined by where we live but by who we are!” Maurice said.

There was confused silence throughout the pack as they stood there, trying to perceive what their alpha was commanding them to do. My blood, on the other hand, was boiling with rage at the cowardice that Maurice was showing.

“No.”

Everyone turned around to see who had spoken. It was Will. He had taken off his shawl and was standing dangerously close to the flames. He was wearing a loose pair of nondescript jeans and a t-shirt.

“Excuse me, did you say something?” Maurice, who had so far avoided any major confrontation with Will, asked loudly. “Are you questioning the alpha’s decision?”

“You are as much an alpha as much as I am Fenrir,” Will said quietly, but each word he uttered carried powerful weight. I

could almost see myself forgiving him for his outburst earlier, given that he was standing up to Maurice. It was about damn time that someone did.

“Fenrir?” Maurice growled confusedly.

“A man who is unaware of our lore, unaware of the great wolf Fenrir, the Norse mythological being whom werewolves all over the world venerate. Is this the man who is assigned the alpha of my pack? A man who would choose to run in the face of a fight instead of standing his ground?” Will said, taking giant strides across the ground and coming face to face with Maurice. He easily towered above Maurice with his physique.

“I’m sorry, who are you to give commands to my pack? You may have been alpha once, but you’ve been presumed dead for more than half a century, and now you come here, in my commune, barking orders, tarnishing my character with your words?” Maurice spat back.

“I would tarnish your character if you had any,” Will said. “But you lack conviction, moral fiber, and any ability to lead these men. We are not going to flee. I did not lay the foundations of the Grimm Abode with my bare hands so that one day we would run away from a scuffle with, what, vampires?”

I had to say or do something. The pack was indecisive as to who to turn to for leadership, and time was already running out. The vampires must have covered a lot of distance by now.

“Listen to him. We have to fight,” I said.

Before anyone could pay attention to me, Maurice took a cheap shot at Will, punching him sternly in the face. But this

did not sway Will or even draw blood. But something happened to me as Maurice recoiled his fist and prepared to attack a surprised Will again.

A strong force propelled me to defend my...my mate. Every part of my being became infused with an energy that I could only perceive as the bond that tied me to Will. I rushed forward and shoved Maurice away from Will.

“Don’t you attack him,” I said as I pushed Maurice away. Maurice staggered and struggled to keep his balance.

“Listen to me, child!” Will grabbed me by the shoulders, tight enough to hurt. “I do not need your help. I am capable of doing this on my own!”

I did not have the time to register that he was being impatient with me. There was no time to worry about mannerisms and formalities. The time would come for that later. If Will did not require my help, so be it.

I stepped back and turned my attention to the women and children instead. They were all huddled in a corner, looking utterly scared and perplexed.

“Follow me. We can head over to the south of the commune,” I said, waving to the women and the children to listen to me. “The vampires can’t get to us there. Come. I’ll help you.”

As the women and children began jogging after me, I turned to see what Will and Maurice were doing. They were still engaged in a verbal spat, loudly shouting at each other. Fred, along with the other older members of the pack, sat by the bonfire, looking sullen and confused. And the men—they just stood there in silence, not doing anything.

“Run into the barn and lock the doors behind you,” I said to the women and children and went back to where the men were standing.

“Wouldn’t you rather do something than stand here as the two of them duke it out? Protect the commune! The vampires are coming. There’s no time to stand here idly,” I shouted.

“She’s right,” Vincent said as he emerged from the crowd of men. “We have to barricade the commune.”

The crowd of men thinned as they headed out of the Grimm Abode and began barricading the commune for the fight that was to come.

I’d barely stopped for a second, thinking about my next recourse, when a heavy plank hit me on the back of the head, knocking the wind out of me, making me lose my balance and fall face-first on the ground. Blood came from my nose as my face collided with the hard floor. I rolled around in time to see who had attacked me.

It was Maurice, holding one of the spare pieces of wood we kept for kindling the bonfire. The diplomatic look that he bore at most times, the sly political face that he used when addressing the people of Fiddler’s Green as their mayor, was completely gone. In its place was ravaged madness etched across his face. His eyes were lit and wide with frenzy.

“What gives you the right to command my men and women like that, huh?” He screamed at me and swung the plank again.

I braced my face in anticipation of the brutal strike.

Chapter 6: Will

It had only taken me mere minutes to gather that the pack's designated alpha, Maurice, was just as Alexis had described him to me in the forest. He possessed no backbone nor any integrity. When he spoke, it was with the tongue of a politician. Every expression that was cast across his face was a carefully calculated one. Every move that he made oozed diplomacy.

When I woke up from my troubled sleep, Fred took me to meet the members of the pack at the bonfire. I could feel the warmth of emotions and happiness coming from the members of my pack. I could sense it in their embraces, their shaking of my hand, and their revering glances. But when Maurice addressed me, it was with a mirthless tone. His very words felt like the contractual language of a business negotiation.

And now, here he was when his authority was being questioned in the wake of his stupid decision to flee instead of fight, swinging a plank at a defenseless girl. I could not deny that there was something stronger and deeper at work that tugged at my heart to worry for Alexis. It was surely the bond that existed between us, as much as I tried to deny its existence.

Maurice behaved like a cheating rodent. He had struck me when my attention was occupied elsewhere. And just now, he had struck Alexis when her back was turned to him.

I could not allow him to strike her again. My reluctant mate or not, savior or not, this woman was a member of my pack, and

I was not going to simply let someone abuse her like this.

I caught the plank on the upswing and threw it away. This caused Maurice to turn back and come face-to-face with me. He was seething with rage, but too bad for him, the fire of wrath that burned within me was far hotter.

“What kind of foul creature are you to strike a woman?” I roared as I grabbed Maurice by the neck and threw him into the stack of firewood. I felt like it was well-deserved.

Maurice appeared from behind the stack of firewood, not as his human self but as a wolf. He howled at me from atop the wood and jumped on me with his fangs bared and his claws extended.

I did not need to shift to take him down. I had known men like this back in Germany. They were fickle cowards, hiding behind their uniforms, toting the orders of their fascist leader as a symbol of false strength, never playing fair, and never fighting with honor.

I grabbed one of the pieces of firewood and swung it at an airborne Maurice, catching him in the midriff. He emitted a high-pitched yelp and crashed into one of the cottages. I ran after him, wood in hand. He clawed at me and tried to slash at my torso, but I gave him no quarter. I thrashed him to within an inch of his life with the thick piece of wood until it finally gave in and broke on his back.

Maurice yelped one last time and ran out through the commune doors, fleeing as he had always intended to do so.

With one imminent danger gone and only one more remaining, I attended to Alexis, who was struggling to get to her feet.

“Are you all right?” I asked, extending my hand to her.

“I think I might have a terrible concussion,” she said. She took my hand and hoisted herself to her feet. “Thanks...I mean, for saving me just now.”

“Would I be fair in saying that we’re even?” This was me trying to extend some softness to her after all the times I had been needlessly harsh to her. I knew that I had been rude and part of me wanted to apologize, but part of me—the part that had prompted me to lash out—had a sick control over me, not allowing me to tap into my kind self. Even as I tried to make amends, every time that I saw her, I could not help but see the woman that I had loved so long ago, the woman who had died while I was imprisoned. The woman, who, according to Fred, had taken Kenneth—my best friend—as her husband. The woman who died tragically during childbirth.

With each glimpse that I caught of Alexis, Ariana’s image danced before my eyes, making it a psychological struggle to behave normally with her. It did not help that I had bonded with her. It only made things all the more complicated.

“Will?”

“Oh. Pardon me. I was caught up in my own thoughts.”

“I was saying we don’t have any more time left. With Maurice gone, the pack’s gonna wanna look to someone for leadership. Help us fight off the vampires?” she asked.

I nodded, not possessing the will to reply to her after she had just spoken in a dialect and inflection that was eerily identical to Ariana’s. Her voice was toying with me mentally, making me agitated with each syllable that she uttered.

After what Fred had told me of Ariana's life, how she had found love in the man who had been my best friend, how she had bonded with him a couple of months after my disappearance, and how they had lived happily for many years until, of course, she died during childbirth, I felt left out. As if I was a leaf plucked from a tree in the middle of its bloom, cast away to float alone in the air while the rest of the tree flourished and bore fruits. My absence did not prompt her to mourn. Instead, she resumed her life and lived it as fully as she could.

My cacophonous and intrusive thoughts halted when the commotion from beyond the commune grew to an uproar of vampire screams and wolfish howls. The battle had begun. I raced alongside Alexis, heading out the gates, ready to take part in the fight and protect the commune.

"Any idea why they are attacking us like this?" I asked.

"I bet it's their notion of retribution for what we did to them yesterday in the forest," Alexis replied. She did not speak anymore. Instead, she shifted almost seamlessly and jumped into the fray.

The food and rest had rejuvenated me. I could feel myself coming back to my full strength, ready for battle. I yearned to shift into my true form and show my enemies that the pack was not defenseless. That their alpha had returned.

And so, when I shifted, I shifted into the wolf that I used to be so long ago, the spectral beast that loomed larger than life, with claws that looked like daggers and fangs that resembled swords.

Upon seeing me shift, the wolves howled, and their resolve strengthened, helping them push against the wave of the vampires that were advancing up to the commune-like rodents.

I dove into the fight headfirst, tearing away limbs, rending flesh from bone, clawing off appendages, and beheading the vampires who had so brazenly thought that they could simply come up to my abode and attack my people with no consequences. Their audacity fueled my rage further, allowing me to take on an oncoming swarm of vampires with their weapons held in front of them.

I never allowed them to unleash gunfire on me. Swiftly, like a shadow, I swooped upon them, dismembering them with no mercy, ripping their weapons free from their grips with the brute strength of my bite.

Despite all my efforts and my relentless offense, gunfire roared from somewhere behind me. I had not braved the horrors of captivity to return to find more death in my path. I could not let my pack members die. I shot like a dart through the air and advanced to where the shooting was coming from.

My heart sank upon seeing the sight of a horde of vampires overpowering Alexis, cornering her, and aiming their rifles at her. It baffled me that no one from the pack was defending her or fighting by her side. I would have to teach the pack about how to fight alongside each other later.

Ever since I had laid eyes on their rifles, a part of me had wanted to try them myself. They were so elegant and sleek, these long guns with their black glossy look and their smooth barrel—nothing like the guns used in the Second World War. In place of wood, there was only metal.

I shifted into my human form once again and grabbed one of the rifles of the fallen vampires. The horde that surrounded Alexis was too dense in numbers for me to take them on in my wolf form.

And so, donning the identity of the soldier I once was, I cocked the rifle to my shoulder and aimed it at the vampires. I pulled the trigger, feeling the surge of the force with which this automatic rifle spat out bullets in flurries. I advanced upon the vampires and swung the rifle in an arc to catch every one of them with my gunfire. Even amidst the flash of the fire and the fleeing of the vampires, I could see that Alexis had ducked behind a sturdy cover, safe from the whizzing bullets.

The vampires were struck fatally, many of them falling dead as gunfire tore through their bodies, crushed their bones, and pierced their vital organs. They had expected docility. They did not know that I'd be here to defend what was rightfully my legacy.

As I did not know the reloading mechanism for this rifle, I threw it once the magazine was empty and picked up another one, keeping my aim true to catch the running vampires. When the last of them had either fled or died, I threw away the rifle and went to Alexis.

“Are you hurt?”

“I would have been if you hadn't interceded,” she said, climbing from behind the cover of the metallic trellis.

“What were you doing taking on such a huge number by yourself?” I scolded her. “Do you have that little regard for your life?”

She cast me a hurt look before shifting into a wolf and joining the rest of the pack in battle. Except, well, there was no longer a battle anymore. It was now the vampires who were outnumbered and outwitted.

But this did not grant me any satisfaction. Had I not been here, had I not stepped up and taken charge, this would have been the end of the pack. Even now, as we were on the cusp of victory, I could see the fighting style of the wolves and was sorely disappointed. They had not been trained in the art of fighting, of battle. They were haphazard in their offense and clumsy in their defense.

I picked up one of the rifles, smattered across the floor, and shot a burst into the air. Upon seeing this, the vampires who had remained hissed miserably and began retreating.

The wolves chased them through the field, biting at their heels and clawing at their cloaks. I watched as the last of the vampires fled in the direction of Fiddler's Cove. There would come a time, I thought to myself, when we'd go after them and fight them on their turf and drive them out once and for all, but it would not be right now. Right now, my pack was not ready for a confrontation of that nature. They had barely stood their ground during this fight.

It was not my lack of strength but that of my pack that made me feel inadequate. Their power had waned enough to make the vampires bold enough to attack our commune. Things were not as I had left them seventy-six years ago.

As the wolves started returning to the commune, shifting into their human forms, I wondered what Maurice had been doing with them. Had he not trained them at all? It was always the

job of the alpha to teach the wolves the craft of battle, to strengthen them in both body and mind. And speaking of Maurice, where had he run off to? His behavior befitted that of a traitor, making me think that perhaps he was in cahoots with the vampires. Why else would he suggest fleeing? Why else would he flee instead of defending his home?

I headed inside the commune, back to where the bonfire was roaring, and awaited the return of my pack. When the last of them had poured in and had surrounded me, I finally spoke.

“This was a chance victory, nothing more. It could just as easily have been defeat. Not one of you was prepared for battle. Had I not interceded, had you let Maurice command you, you would have all run, you would have all let this place go to the vampires. The course of your life up till now has made you seem like a weak opponent in the eyes of your enemies. Those vampires would have never attacked you had they known that the Grimm pack was not one to be trifled with. I implore you all to see reason. To understand that the strength of the pack lies in their ability to fight together as a team to defend each other. Out there on the battlefield, I saw barely any teamwork. There was no order to your fighting. You are not trained as I had expected you to be trained,” I said, my ears growing hotter with each word, my voice raising gradually.

“Will you lead us, then?” a voice rose from the crowd around me.

“I would take the mantle of alpha as it once belonged to me and swear to every one of you that I shall strive to strengthen you into the formidable werewolves that I know you can be.

The world shall know before long that the Grimms are fierce wolves. Tonight, we defended ourselves. That's a start. But we have an uphill climb to go from here. I believe it is fate that has brought me back to my kin, and I believe that fate has a plan for each one of us," I said.

"Hear, hear, then!" A voice rose from the crowd. "To Wilhelm Grimm, the new alpha of the pack!"

There was immense silence for a brief moment, followed by an uproar of affirmations and chants of "Yes!" and "Aye!" that rang through the night.

As I was climbing down from the footstool, Alexis approached me from the crowd. Even though she hadn't spoken to me yet, I already anticipated a talk coming. However, I was not in a mental state to have the kind of talk that she wanted to have.

"Can I have a word?" Alexis asked.

There it was again, that sick, alien impulse that gripped me every time Alexis was near me. This sadistic urge to inflict emotional damage on her for being who she was. I tried to hold it back, to appear peaceful, but the longer she stayed around me, the harder it got for me to hold my violent impulse back.

"What do you want?" I asked in a stony voice.

"I just wanted to clear the air between us," she said, holding her hands together defensively. There was optimism in her eyes. Her expressions were sincere in their intensity.

The women and children were coming out of the barn and integrating with the rest of the pack. The wives were tending to their injured husbands, the kids were hugging their fathers,

and the rest just stood there as the men informed them that I had been made alpha. The entire pack was here.

“There’s nothing to clear,” I replied, trying to keep the curtness out of my tone, but it was a futile effort. Her lingering presence was a constant reminder of my loss.

“We are bonded together, Wilhelm. Does that mean nothing to you? I wasn’t expecting it either, but ever since we’ve bonded, it has meant something to me. I feel something in my heart for you. Call it care, devotion, adoration, the bond at work, or whatever else you will, but there’s something between us, and I want you to acknowledge it. Also, while we’re on the subject of acknowledgments, I want you to acknowledge that you’ve been harsh to me on multiple occasions. I did not deserve it,” she said.

“Do not talk to me of deserving. I did not deserve to be imprisoned, experimented upon, tortured, and set free when all I had known was lost. I did not deserve to waste away in prison while the woman that I loved married someone else, birthed a child, and then died. There’s no turning the clocks back. What’s lost is lost!” The rage I had kept under control was erupting and taking control of me. My voice was raised enough to draw the attention of everyone around me.

“But...” Alexis pleaded.

“I do not question the intricate pattern of fate except in this case,” I said, my voice almost a scream. “It is a mistake that we are bonded together. It is a lie—a mirage. I do not accept this bond. I do not recognize you as my mate. I reject the existence of the tether that you think ties us!” With each word I inflicted irreparable emotional damage, I felt the surge of a

sick pleasure within me. Sick because, in my heart, I could feel the pain that she was feeling. Pleasure because, as depraved as it was, another part of me reveled in hurting her.

The pack was completely silent except for a few faint whisperings in the back, no doubt discussing what was happening in front of their eyes.

“There is no love that exists between us. As far as I am concerned, nothing does. So don’t try to reason with me or appeal to my better nature!” This was the final thing I yelled at her before she ran away, whimpering, covering her eyes with her forearm.

Was this me? Was this cruel, deviated trait an integral part of my personality now? Is this what Edward Beckett meant when he uttered his dying words? That I won’t ever truly be free after what he had done to me? Had he mutated my psyche with his experiments?

I cared not for these questions except for the fact that they resounded in some small part of my mind, a minute chamber somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain that felt that I had been brutal to Alexis. Or perhaps it was deep within my heart that I felt bad for behaving with her this way.

What other choice did I have? The girl sought no propriety, did not take into account the tumultuous ordeals I had been through, and was not able to conceive that I was thrust into the role of leadership of a pack that had grown weak as a result of a soft alpha. All she wanted from me was to reciprocate whatever she was feeling, accept her as my mate, and God knows what else.

How was I to even take her as my mate when I barely felt adequate to lead a lost pack in the face of grave dangers surrounding us from all sides? How was I supposed to just get over the death of Ariana, which I had just found out not more than a day ago? Did I not deserve time to grieve? Time to adjust?

I made no effort to go after her nor gave any order to the pack to stop her in her tracks. If she wanted to leave, so be it. I was done with her anyway.

“From tomorrow,” I said, returning my attention to the stunned crowd. “All able-bodied Grimms, whether man, child, or woman, will assemble in the training grounds. That’s an order. You need to prepare for the threats that you face.”

They murmured and nodded. That was all they did. And now, when my anger had subsided, I felt hatred for myself for what I had just done right in front of the entire pack. They looked to me not as they had done earlier tonight when I was telling them of my plight. No. There was no pity in their eyes. No adoration.

They were all scared.

Chapter 7: Alexis

Funny thing, heartbreak. It doesn't manifest when you're already living a miserable life. That constant existence of compounding pain—yes, terrible—makes a person strong enough to thrive in this misery, just as I had done all my life. There was no chance that things were going to get better, and I had made my peace with that. However, introduce a little ray of hope into the mix, and you'll see that the organism that had been surviving in total darkness begins to believe that things are going to be better. And then snatch away that hope, plummeting that being into the desolation that its previous life used to be.

That's how you get heartbreak.

Had I not saved Will and had we not bonded, I would have been a constant participant in the misery of my life, not knowing what hope felt like, and I would never have known heartbreak.

But now, now that he had crushed my hopes with his bewildering statements of rejection, all I knew was heartbreak. All I could feel was bitter agony.

It was this bitter agony that prompted me to pack up my things in the dead of the night and leave in my father's pickup truck. After his and mom's death at the hands of the vampires, there were only a couple of things that I got in the will. A shabby Ford pickup truck and a couple of thousand dollars that I burned through in a few months. I learned only later that the house they lived in was not their own. They had been renting

it. Out of nostalgia and attachment to my parents, I chose to rent the house too, and the pack was considerate enough not to charge me abominably for the rent.

Ever since then, I have lived a hand-to-mouth existence, surviving on the meager salary that my two jobs provided. You could not get a nice job with educational background such as mine. And another thing, for a nice job, you actually had to be where the nice jobs were being handed out. Places like Bangor, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago. That's where people my age were thriving in careers such as data science and biotech.

The only options available to someone like me were to be either a waitress—which I was in the evenings at Fiddler's Diner—or a smalltime gig at the wharf. By day, I worked at the wharf, marking the ships that arrived in the port, checking their inventory, and entering that data into a computer. It was menial work, and it paid menial money, but it was better than nothing.

“But it's not going to be enough now,” I whispered to myself. Oh, yes, one of the side effects of spending life as a loner was you started to talk to yourself as if you were another person entirely. Sometimes, that was comforting. Most times, it was pathetic.

No one stopped me as I drove my truck out of the commune. I cast one last look at Will standing there by the fire like a deranged prophet, beard so long that it was reaching past his neck, hair falling in locks on his shoulders, shrouded in his long shawl. Why had I even bothered saving this jackass when I could have just as easily escaped?

Why had we even bonded? Not that it mattered now, given that he had publicly humiliated me and rejected me in front of the entire pack.

“But where are you going to go now, Alexis?” I found myself asking myself. I had a faint idea of what to do, and I was hoping that this idea would form into an actualized plan by the time I reached Fiddler’s Green.

The vampires might have been defeated in this battle, but the fact remained that they still controlled the passages coming in and out of the town. I wasn’t going to risk coming across them again tonight.

Tonight, I needed a place to crash and get drunk.

I picked up my phone and dialed the number of the only person I could trust. My only friend, Maliha Fresco. Maliha was an eccentric communist who, despite possessing the skills of a decent black hat hacker, chose to spend a low-key life as a diner waitress. It baffled me that she never fretted about the big things in life, such as falling in love with someone, having enough money to move about the world freely, or, you know, having a functional life.

“What’s up, baby girl? Missed your shift tonight,” Maliha said in her singsong voice. Even though I couldn’t see her, the enunciation of her words made it apparent that she was chewing up her perpetual wad of chewing gum that she kept adding new gum to. Every couple of days later, when that wad would be the size of a golf ball, she’d throw it at a passing car and laugh gleefully as it would stick to the car. She called it “spreading her seed,” whatever that meant.

“Hey, Maliha. Things are kinda effed up,” I said. Maliha did not know about my true reality, my life as a wolf. But she was still the closest thing I had to a friend, and what is it they say about friends in need being friends indeed?

“Talk to me, girl. How can home girl help?”

“I kinda need a place to crash,” I said.

“For tonight, or how long are we talking about?”

“That’s undecided. Can you help me out?”

There was a long pause during which I could hear the icky sound of Maliha chewing on her gum in contemplation.

“You can come by my place. Sleep on the couch. But if we’re talking long-term, baby girl, we’re gonna have to get you a studio apartment. Lucky for you, the one at the end of my hall just became vacant. Rent’s pretty reasonable, and that horrible smell, you know, the one, is long gone,” Maliha said. “I’m getting off my shift in a few minutes. Head on over to my apartment. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thanks, Fresco,” I said.

“You hungry? Have you eaten anything? Need me to bring something? We’ve got some delish pastrami sandwiches and half a blueberry pie. I called dibs. You want some of it?”

That was Maliha for you: kind, considerate, compassionate, and hospitable. It was no wonder that we were friends.

“Pastrami sounds great,” I said weakly, driving down the highway that headed into town.

“Baby girl, I kinda feel like your entire vibe is way off. Maybe you need a little something, something?”

“Like what, weed?”

“Nah, nah, my supplier’s kinda suspicious right now. I do have two bottles of Jack Daniels and some peach schnapps,” she said. “Oh, shit, the manager’s looking at me all freakily. See ya, girl. I’ll meet you at my place. Muah!”

When scientists discovered a perpetual motion machine, I’d tell them that they were too late. There was already a perfectly functional perpetual motion machine that never ran out of juice and was always full of zing and pep, and her name was Maliha. Her over-cheeriness kind of balanced out my usually sulky mood. As much as my heart was breaking, I was glad that I had someone I could turn to, gladder that it was someone like Maliha.

The town was dark, its streetlights dim and distant, barely illuminating the shadowy buildings along the road. The people moved like silhouettes, silent and stealthily. The shopkeepers were pulling down shutters in front of their shops, locking up their places of business, and heading back home.

I rolled my window down and welcomed the fresh, cool, salty air coming from the sea. As much as I tried to get the recent memory of Will’s bombardment on me out of my mind, it further intruded and prevented me from thinking any other thought.

His words stung like poison. The image of his wild eyes glaring into my soul as he uttered that vileness haunted me. Why did he have to do that in front of the entire pack and deprive me of all manner of respect?

A new thought came to me as I confronted these thoughts. Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe this was the push of

finality I needed to finally ditch this town once and for all and leave everything behind. Yeah. This sealed the deal. He had rejected me, after all.

“But you can’t just up and leave with nothing to your name,” I said out loud.

Yep. I was right. I’d need some resources, a little bit of cash, some new clothes, and a game plan before I’d try to escape again. Last time I was being too hasty, too absolute. It was a little too now or never. Maybe this time, I would think with a cooler mind and make a plausible plan.

I’d driven beyond the suburbs, past downtown, and had come to a halt at the beachfront apartment complex where Maliha lived. I parked my car in the parking lot and got out, taking out my quickly packed belongings with me.

Luckily, much of Maliha’s wardrobe would fit me. My present bizarre fashion style was all due to Maliha, who herself dressed like a punk goth, inspired by characters of the show *Mr. Robot*. The same show, she claimed, inspired her to become a hacker. I’d tried to watch a couple of episodes, but the show was too depressing for my taste to truly get into it.

But I liked how the characters dressed as background dancers in an early 2000s Avril Lavigne music video. That style resonated with me, the purple-streaked hair, the long leather boots reaching past my knees, and the fishnet stockings. It was a complete vibe. Although, now that I was in my late twenties, I sometimes kind of felt awkward in that particular getup.

I stared at the monolithic apartment complex and took a deep breath, knowing that the apartment’s elevator was busted and

I'd have to climb all the way to the tenth floor through the stairs.

Here's to your new life, I thought, and began my ascent.

After spending a week in Maliha's cramped apartment that was ninety percent a digital haven and only ten percent inhabitable, I couldn't take it anymore and got that studio apartment at the end of her hall. Maliha was pretty nice and extremely welcoming, but those long server towers in her living room emitted a level of heat that was simply unbearable for me. It did not help that every wall surface was completely covered with LED monitors connected to RGB desktops, making the whole place look like the inside of a disco ball.

"But we've had so much fun!" Maliha protested as I took my belongings and dragged them down the hall.

"Maliha, I love you and all, but only you could live in that sweltering temperature and consider it fun. I appreciate that you let me crash with you for as long as you did, but I gotta think about my survival here, girl. At least that studio apartment's not two hundred degrees," I said.

"Well, if you knew what these servers were for, you'd want to live with them all your life," she said, making a pouty face and dry-knuckling her cheeks. "But hey, I can come visit your apartment. We can have crazy parties there. Slumber parties!"

"Slumber parties sound excellent," I said. "Now help me move my crap."

"You never told me why you had to leave your place. Weird choice, though, renting a place way outside of town in that

commune. I think it's about time that you moved into the city," Maliha said as she lifted the single mattress I'd ordered from Amazon for my new place.

"Let's just say that I've outgrown that place," I said, not wanting to discuss that matter any further. It had been a quiet, peaceful week that I'd used to my advantage and detoxed myself of all thoughts of Will and what he had done. I did not want to get into it now.

"Well, you're always welcome to come back to my place anytime, whether it's a random pop-in or maybe you want to raid my fridge for some cheese," Maliha said, straining under the weight of the mattress.

We reached the studio apartment after a minute of grunting and panting as we dragged my things. This was the first time I was seeing it from the inside.

Huh. As far as studio apartments went, this one was not bad at all. Ash white walls, faux wooden floor, and a giant window that overlooked the ocean. Not bad at all. But then there was the kitchenette directly facing the toilet. That was a bit troublesome, but considering that this was only a temporary measure until I'd get enough money to move out of Fiddler's Green for good, I'd make it work.

"It's not that small," I said.

"It's not that big, either," Maliha said.

"It's perfect for me," I said, taking the mattress from Maliha and flinging it across the room. It fell right under the window.

"Whoa. That was a heavy mattress. How did you do that?" Maliha whistled.

“Um. Pilates?”

“All right, keep your secrets,” Maliha said, shoving me gently.

“Well. I gotta head to work. It’s a shame you quit. Now I don’t have anyone to talk to during the evening shift.”

“You know I had to quit. Otherwise, I’d have stayed there forever and never would have taken a chance to apply for a better job,” I said.

“Yeah, but Beckett Pharma, really? Those corporate overlords?” Maliha scoffed.

“Hey, they’re paying three thousand dollars a month for the position of lab technician,” I said. “*With* onsite training. No previous experience required. How often am I going to get an opportunity like that?”

“Well, the manager did tell me to tell you that you’re always welcome at the diner, and in case things don’t pan out with your job hunt, you can come back,” Maliha said. “And she actually meant it. Like, she wasn’t being sarcastic or anything. You know, you really carried the whole diner on your back during the evening shifts, not that the manager would ever admit it to your face.”

“Well, tell the manager that if things don’t work out, I’ll consider coming back for a ten percent pay bump,” I said. It was then that I stepped into my apartment for the first time, coming to grips with the realization that this new, small, cramped, claustrophobic place was going to be my new home indefinitely. At least the view from the window was pleasant.

Maliha gave me a quick peck on the cheek and squeezed my shoulder as she left. I busied myself with bringing the rest of

my stuff into the apartment and setting my cupboard up with my clothes.

Quitting the waitress gig because I was looking for a new job was just the reason that I'd given to Maliha and the manager. The real reason was the diner's vicinity to the commune, making it a hub for members of the Grimm pack to get their lunch and dinner whenever they were in town. I had no intention of coming across my pack members, not after the humiliation I had gone through in front of them. That's also why I quit my job at the wharf. Half the pack worked there.

The other reason was that I had come across a job opening at Beckett Pharma. It was after the three-day slump during which I mourned over what had happened, mainly through emptying bottles of Jack Daniels and being completely blitzed out drunk. As hazardous as that was to my health, it did grant me some closure. Alcohol has a funny way of doing that. It chips away at your liver and your sobriety and leaves you with few platitudes in return. Not to mention, when you do come out of that hangover, you feel like you've got a new lease on life. You also swear that you're never going to drink that much again, but that's mostly a hollow promise.

Maliha had been patient with me during that week, but even her patience had its threshold, which I felt that I had started toeing the line with. She had a very non-confrontational nature, so the closest she got to telling me to get my own place and get on my feet was by showing me the job ad in the local newspaper and telling me that it was worth a shot.

I pored over that ad a dozen times. I even used one of Maliha's old laptops to create a resume and send it to Beckett Pharma.

Three thousand dollars a month after taxes for the positions of lab technicians, operators, and data entry personnel. The two jobs I'd recently quit provided me with barely fifteen hundred dollars combined. This new opportunity would allow me to improve my credit score while saving up enough money to get the hell out of this city.

It was just nine in the morning. My interview was scheduled for noon today. I had some time to myself. Truth was, I was so surprised when I heard back from the HR rep from Beckett Pharma. I even inquired as to why he had called me. He told me that they were only considering people who were from Fiddler's Green. No outside hires.

I didn't comment on the strangeness of that statement. I was just too grateful to get a shot at an interview that would hopefully set my life straight.

It had been a week, and no one had called me. Will hadn't come to apologize to me, and no one had even bothered to find out where I was living. That was how little regard that pack had for me.

I set an alarm for eleven o'clock and crashed on my mattress, staring at the gentle waves crashing on the shore as I struggled to stay awake. It had been a tiring week.

I woke up with a start, my heart beating fast in my chest. The alarm was blaring, and a loud wind was crashing against the window, rattling it in its frame. I guess that was why the previous tenant chose to ditch this apartment. It was a hellish noise, the wind whistling through the cracks in the frame, clanging against the metal lattice of the window.

As freaky as that sound was, it woke me up just in time to head down to the interview. I fixed a quick cup of coffee for myself, took a five-minute shower, dried off in my room, hoping no pervert was staring from the beach, and got dressed in the most professional-looking ensemble that I had. I'd just bought it a day ago from the thrift store downtown. It was a peach skirt, a white shirt, and a peach coat with a maroon belt. I looked at my reflection and chuckled at the air hostess-looking stranger staring back at me.

Considering the ten minutes it took me to sprint down the stairs, the added fifteen minutes it took me to drive downtown to the only skyscraper in the city with its top blaring Beckett Pharma in blue neon in the middle of the day, and the five-minute walk it took from the parking lot across the street to the entrance of the building, I made good time. Hell, just in time to get in the building and tell the receptionist that I was there for my interview.

“What the fuck?” I gasped as I noticed the figure coming out of the front entrance. I forgot all propriety and immediately ducked behind the giant fountain in the courtyard, hoping that the person hadn't seen me.

It couldn't be. Was it really Maurice?

I ducked my head out to see, and immediately, my suspicion was confirmed. Worse than confirmed: He was staring in my direction, locking eyes with me. It was Maurice Grimm, dressed in an elegant suit, holding a half-smoked cigar in his hand.

The second I realized that he had seen me, I crouched behind the fountain and receded into the decorative bushes behind me,

praying to God that he hadn't seen me.

What was he doing here?

I had no view from where I was hiding, but I could smell the stench of the Cohibas cigar he had been smoking becoming stronger, followed by the heavy thud of his footsteps.

Fuck!

Chapter 8: Will

“**Y**our bloodwork’s come back from the lab,” Dr. Morris, the commune’s designated healer, said as he gravely took off his stethoscope and set it on the table. “And I’m afraid it’s not good news.”

I expected no good news when I walked into this clinic. The interior design of this place was throwing me off. There were ancient tomes of old medicine on one shelf, which I had managed to salvage from my old home in Germany. But then, right on the next shelf were all these glossy, slick books on modern medicinal topics such as pharmacology, anatomy, and pathology. It was a strange mismatch, a hodgepodge that jarred the senses to look at.

“What does the bloodwork tell?” I asked bluntly, my attention still derailed by the odd design choice of the clinic. There were charts of werewolf body anatomy with Nordic runes written all over them, but then there were also promotional posters of Zoloft, Lexapro, and Venlafaxine, creating discord on those brown walls. Ugh. Brown walls. Why weren’t they plain white as most clinics?

“Oh. I can explain,” Dr. Morris said once he noticed that I was more concerned with how the clinic looked than I was with my diagnosis. “All the old stuff, that’s from the first generation of Grimms who set up this clinic. I felt it sacrilegious to touch what they had left behind. I’m the sixth doctor to hold this office, and it’s been a custom amongst the doctors of the

commune not to touch the stuff the previous doctors left behind. Our way of honoring our legacy.”

“It’s extremely visually off-putting,” I stated. “But that’s not why I am here, am I? To pass judgment on how things appear? I apologize.”

“It’s completely fine, sir,” Dr. Morris stuttered.

“Please. Will. Call me Will.”

“Fine. Will it is. Your bloodwork was too complex for me to decipher here in the clinic, so I sent it to the lab in town. It’s... as I said, quite remarkably complex. There are chemicals that I can’t even comprehend the chemical composition of. They have merged with your red blood cells and your white blood cells and have even integrated into your platelets. By definition, this extreme of a mutation should kill you, but somehow, the opposite is happening. Some of these chemicals are even enhancing your abilities. You might have noticed how you haven’t aged a day. You might even be feeling some psychological ramifications. The only possible explanation is that your body and mind have been altered to an extreme extent,” the doctor said. It was hard to get a read on his expressions, as everything that he spoke was a flat statement devoid of any emotion.

“Outbursts of anger? Rage? Would these chemicals account for my agitated mental state?” The way I had behaved with Alexis had still not left my mind. Not once, not twice, but three times. Three is not a coincidence. Three warranted an explanation.

“Let me tell you why someone ages. I’ll try to put it in simple terms. Aggregation of proteins, telomere shortening, oxidative

stress, glycation, and damage to your cells over time caused by the disintegration of molecules, organelles, and other structures is basically what causes someone to age. Now, the cells in your body are not disintegrating but rather replenishing their resources faster than most people's do. Your body's antioxidants are off the charts, making it immune to oxidative stress.

Similarly, because of this regenerative ability, everything else, including telomere shortening and aggregation of harmful proteins, is completely halted. I would say that we don't know the long-term effect of these chemicals, but seeing as how you've been alive for more than seventy years, I will say that we do know the long-term effects. Overall, they are in your favor," the doctor said.

"Dr. Morris, most of what you just said went over my head, I won't lie, but I think I get what you're saying. You're saying that the experiments that my captor did on me, they worked in some bizarre way?"

"Worked and then some. Your metabolism is extraordinary. Your wounds heal in real-time. Your hormone levels are optimal. Your bone density is remarkable. Your organs resemble those of a teenager. By medicinal law, none of this should be possible," he said.

"And yet it is. But you still haven't explained why my anger overpowers me," I said abruptly.

"Will, I'm not a psychologist. But I would go so far as to say that what you went through was deeply traumatizing. Anger, bitterness, hatred, and depression—are all traits that follow trauma. But I would not rule out a physical cause, either. As

much as these chemicals are benefiting you, they might be serving as catalysts to your mental agony.”

“Mental agony?”

“Yes. They have affected your mind just as they have your body, destabilizing the ordinary perception of sanity, triggering rage, and enhancing negative emotions,” Dr. Morris said grimly. “I can prescribe some lithium, some lamotrigine, and an antidepressant to help you calm down and regulate your emotions.”

“No!” I spoke. “No more chemicals. I’ve had my lifetime’s share of them. I shall have to overcome this myself.”

“Exercise regularly. Meditate if you can. Breathing exercises, yoga, Pilates. These can be your allies. They can help reduce stress and improve your mood.”

“I will take your word for it, doctor,” I said. Then we shook each other’s hands cordially.

“Most of your injuries have healed completely. If you care about aesthetics, there is an excellent plastic surgeon in town who can remove your scars.”

“As I said, I’ve spent enough time under needles and scalpels to last me a lifetime. I’m okay as it is,” I said.

I stepped out of his clinic and into broad daylight. The training grounds were filled with werewolves to whom I had delegated training exercises—balancing techniques. Fighting stances. Teamwork tests. At night, they trained as wolves. During the day, they worked on their human skills. I’d been working them like this for a week, and as such, there were no improvements in their overall behaviors. I could not believe that many of

them were miserable during their training, as if they preferred to relax and be complacent.

How would they even stand up for themselves if they were so defenseless?

“Will!” Vincent called out from behind me. “I’ve had them run ten laps just now.”

“Did you run with them?” I asked.

“Of course. I was leading them. They finished a mile sprint in record time,” Vincent said.

“That’s an improvement, but I would want to see more of an improvement. They’re werewolves. Not werecats.”

“Don’t you think you’re going a little too hard on them?” Vincent asked, panting and wiping the sweat off his face.

“Too hard? I have barely exerted them. They would all rather fling their fingers on their gadgets and watch their televisions than do something productive. I have barely begun!”

“Those gadgets are called smartphones,” Vincent laughed. “And you should get one before you complain too much about them.”

“All the smarts I need are in here,” I prodded at my head. “I don’t need to rely on a phone.”

“Suit yourself,” Vincent said. I watched him run off into the training ground to resume his exercises. He had been a most helpful, most accommodating person so far. Perhaps the only one in the pack who treated me like a normal human being. It almost felt as if we were friends. Almost.

It turned out that a week was not enough time for the pack to get over my outburst. They never spoke of it to me, but I could sense their hushed whispers when they thought I was not around. But I had kept a lid on it for quite a while, not resorting to my violent nature.

Remorse was a strange emotion. It is birthed after you make a mistake, not before. As much as I felt justified in rejecting Alexis—as much as I tried to justify, that was—I couldn't help but regret in my heart of hearts that I had been so absurdly angry with her. I should have been kinder. I had driven her off, and I don't know where.

But would I be able to control my rage if she were in my presence? Would I be able to stop myself from verbally abusing her, from inflicting emotional damage on her? I had no way of knowing that.

It was too late. I had severed our bond. I had turned away fate's gift, and now fate was taunting me, leaving me stranded in time, purposeless. What good was I as a leader to these people, these people who weren't invested in their own prosperity? Where were my kin and kith of old, my friends from days gone by? Only Fred remained, but he mostly rested in his cottage, and most of our talks were very formal.

I had been given a second chance, and I had thwarted it before it could blossom into a real possibility.

Moreover, the consciousness that I possessed was a consciousness beyond my control. I could reason, communicate, and perform my daily tasks and duties, but whenever I thought of Ariana's passing, of my bonding with

Alexis, the knots of bitterness tugged into my chest and made me uncontrollably enraged.

The pack had been cordial enough to prepare my old home for me—the place where I used to live before I was kidnapped. Fred told me that after I had disappeared and a couple of decades had passed, the pack decided to close off the home in my memory. As much as I respected the notion, I would have much better liked it if someone in need had started living there. Adjusting to this new world has been a challenge for me. The only semblance of sanity that prevailed in my life was when I was inside my old home, where it felt like time had stopped in the 1940s and everything was just the way it should have been.

But I never got to enter my home now.

Just as soon as I had touched the doorknob to the main door, the same electricity that I had felt when I had bonded with Alexis took hold of me, jolting me where I stood, filling my body with a sense of frenzy.

What was happening? Was this the bond at work? Had I not severed it? Had I not rejected her outright? Why, then, was I feeling this magnetic force pulling me? What was it trying to say?

And in return, the answer that came wordlessly was this: Danger. Grave danger. Not for me, but for Alexis. Wherever she was, she was not safe. I could not understand how I was able to intuitively know this. All I knew was that Alexis was facing a terrible peril.

The electricity seeped into my body and paralyzed me with its strength, forcing a vision on me. My eyes closed under the

strain of the force, and at once, I could see her lying on her back, her hands held over her face defensively, her nose dripping blood.

In place of wrath, I felt ... *protectiveness*. I had to save her, regardless of how I had behaved with her in the past. She needed help.

Would I be able to save her? And if I did, would I be able to confront her regarding the way I had been with her?

There was no time to ponder the abstract answers to these pointless questions. Instead of heading into the house, I raced out of the commune, allowing that mystical electricity to guide me to where she was.

I would not be able to forgive myself if something happened to her, and I never got to make amends. It had already happened once with Ariana. I was not going to let it happen to Alexis, rejected mate or not.

Chapter 9: Alexis

I slipped out from under the bushes and fell on my back as Maurice stepped further. He was prodding into the bushes where I had been just a few seconds ago. I looked behind me and saw a slope descending into Beckett Pharma's underground parking. Without thinking much about it, I rolled on my back and fell down the slope.

My head spun with the blunt force trauma that I received when I crashed one floor below.

"Hey!" the guard at the check-in screamed and came running to where I had fallen. This much noise would attract Maurice too. Disregarding the pain pulsing in numerous parts of my body, completely ignoring the fact that my thrift store formal dress was all muddied up, I huddled to my feet and made a run for the underground parking, hoping to lose both the guard and Maurice in there.

I did not turn around to see who was following me. With my eyes ahead, I darted through aisles of parked cars and rolled behind one of them, tucking my entire body behind a blue Tesla.

The guard was shining his flashlight between the aisles of cars, trying to figure out where I'd gone. There was no sign of Maurice, thankfully.

Before the guard could come and snoop where I was hiding, I spotted the elevators heading up the building and made a run for them.

“You come back here!” The guard yelled and ran after me.

I slammed my hand on the elevator’s call button, hoping against hope that the doors would open before the guard caught up to me. My legs felt like they were infused with molten iron. My heart beat like a jackhammer in my chest. I could not catch my breath, even as I stood motionless in front of the opening elevator doors.

I dove inside and pressed the close button just in time to prevent the guard from stopping me. The doors slammed shut before he could jam them with his hand.

“Goddammit! Not again,” he yelled from the other side.

I pressed the button for the lobby. The elevator whirred to life and began ascending upwards. I checked the elevator clock and saw that it was eleven fifty-nine. I couldn’t afford to be late for my job interview. I needed this.

I saw my reflection in the elevator’s mirror wall and began wiping dirt off my dress. I’d done an admirable job getting most of the mud off before the elevator doors opened into the busy lobby. Thankfully, the density of the crowd was thick enough to hide me from that guard. Before he could emerge from the entrance or the elevator, I dashed to the receptionist and stood against the counter, looking like I belonged.

What an absolutely close call.

“Hey, Alexis Richards here for my twelve o’clock interview,” I said to the receptionist. She looked up from her computer screen, analyzed me with her cold glare, then shook her head.

“Cutting it close, are we? It’s a minute past twelve,” she said icily.

“I’m really sorry,” I said, straining my face to show some remorse.

The receptionist sighed and tore a piece of paper from a machine, and handed it to me. “This is the guest pass. Take the elevator to the third floor and head right to the HR wing. All right?”

“All right. Thank you!” I squealed and made a run for the elevators in the lobby. Just as I was running towards them, the elevator that I had used to come up opened, and the guard emerged from it, staring into the crowd.

Before he could figure out that I was standing beside him, I slipped into the open elevator and closed the doors just before he could turn around.

I pressed the third-floor button and then buckled at my knees, trying to catch my breath finally. What a hectic and chaotic start to my day. The only good thing to have come out of this series of unfortunate events was that I had completely forgotten about Will and what had happened between us.

Great. There. I’d started recalling it again.

“You don’t have the time. No.” I said to my reflection and shook my finger threateningly. “Not the time.”

The doors opened on the third floor. I immediately stepped out before the guard could alert the building security, and they’d start a building-wide search of the crazy girl who had been running maniacally everywhere.

I followed the receptionist’s directions and came to the HR wing. There was a translucent door with the words “Interview Room” on it. I knocked on it rather quickly.

“Come in,” a deep voice resonated from the other side of the door. Something was unnerving about the reverberation of that voice that made me feel nervous. I told myself that it was just pre-interview jitters and headed inside.

“Running a little late, are we, Miss Richards?” the lone man who sat behind the interview table asked, smiling at me. There was a magnetic quality to the way he spoke and how he looked.

He was a dark-haired, blue-eyed, clean-shaven man wearing a crisp suit that fitted his body in all the right places. His physique was apparent even from underneath his suit. He had a toned body with muscles jutting out from under his coat.

“Erm...” I was at a loss for words.

“Please,” he said, extending his hand, waving at the empty chair. “Be seated.”

I followed his instruction wordlessly, slinking into the seat, feeling extremely underdressed and tacky compared to him. The term white trash came to mind.

“I went over your resume, Miss Richards,” the man said, taking out my resume from his file and eying it casually. “You don’t have a technical background. It says here you majored in fine arts and business management?”

I had to say something quickly. This man was so well-spoken, and my window of opportunity for delivering the first impression was closing fast.

“Fiddler Community College does not offer a wide array of classes,” I said, clearing my throat. “Just a few technical courses, as a matter of fact. With my resume, you’ll see that

I've attached my detailed mark sheet. It shows that I have taken twelve technical courses, including computer maintenance, but because the majority of my courses were business-oriented and fine arts related, that's what it shows as my major."

"Good. Good," he said, slowly nodding. "Three point nine CGPA. That's impressive."

"Can I be honest with you?" I asked, trying out a little informality. It couldn't hurt. I read online that it worked well with interviewers. "I wanted to attend a proper college. But you know how Fiddler's Green is. It's hard to break out from here."

"I know what you mean, and that's why I extended this opportunity to residents of this town rather than hire from outside. It's a closed-off life, and that makes opportunities harder to come by for the people who live here, but I believe that everyone deserves an equal opportunity to thrive. Isn't that what makes America great?"

"It does," I nodded vigorously.

"So, if we hire you, what do you think you would bring to the table?" he asked.

"Erm...Mr...."

"Blair. Blair Beckett," he said.

It felt as if someone had thrown a bucketful of ice at me, freezing me to the spot. Blair Beckett was the CEO of Beckett Pharma. What the hell was he doing interviewing me directly?

"Holy crap. You're the..."

“CEO, I know. Let’s just say that I’m very invested in the vision of my company and wanted to conduct these interviews directly. Don’t be alarmed. Be as you were five minutes ago when you were talking to me so candidly. I appreciate candidness,” Blair smiled.

“It’s kinda hard to be candid when you know the CEO of a company’s interviewing you directly,” I said.

“Great. That’s a very candid response,” Blair Beckett threw his head back and laughed. “So, what would you bring to the table, Miss Richards?”

“Well, Mr. Beckett, I’ve been balancing two jobs for the past few years. I was a waitress at Fiddler’s Diner,” I began.

“Great pastrami sandwiches. I love their selection of pies as well!” Blair said, clapping his hands.

“Yes, they do have excellent pastrami sandwiches. Our secret? We get farm-to-table fresh organic meat, and the bread’s baked in-house,” I said. “But as I was saying, I was a waitress during rush hours, allowing me to deal with stressful, high-tension situations. So, I’ll always be on top of things regardless of the situation.”

“That’s excellent. You have the motivation and drive that we’re looking for. That’s an excellent response,” Blair said, giving me two thumbs up and winking at me. “Carry on. Mark me impressed.”

“And secondly,” I said, grinning back at him. There was something about his nonchalance that made me feel very much at home—comforted, even. If this guy was going to be my boss, maybe I’d stick around town. “I worked at the wharf.

There, I was in charge of entering cargo data every day and accounting for the inventory that the ships brought in. That job required me to be very good at applied mathematics. It also required a lot of computer fluency in using different software. So, I can say with confidence that I can compute large amounts of data in a small amount of time.”

“Well, a lab technician’s primary role is to take laboratory data and enter it into the software. So, I’m happy to know that you have experience with that as well,” he said, getting up from the chair. He circled the table and came face to face with me, sitting on the table’s edge. “I must say that your experience, your competence, and your educational background would allow you to go to the top if you keep at it. Maybe, in a few months, you can get promoted from lab technician to lab manager, and from there, you can try out for corporate positions. This leads me to my next question. What’s your five-year plan? Where do you see yourself in five years?”

“To be honest, I didn’t have a five-year plan before entering this room. I have not been afforded an opportunity to think in such stable terms. I’ve faced poverty most of my life, and the two jobs that I used to do, didn’t provide me with enough money to think in terms of years. I could only plan for what I’d do next week or next month. But, suppose I get this job, I would strive my hardest, make sure that I bring a hundred percent to the company, and contribute in every way I can. If it works out, I’d love to be a part of the company five years from now,” I said. I meant every word.

“That’s a very honest answer, and I appreciate your honesty,” Blair said, never breaking his eye contact, never receding his

smile. It struck me a little bit odd. “Allow me to be just as honest with you.”

“Please,” I said, anticipating what he would say.

“You’re not getting this job.” The stare was a scowl now. The smile immediately departed his face, leaving him with a stony expression with pursed lips. He had thrown me such a curveball just now that I was completely confused.

“What?”

“Yes. You’re not getting this job. In fact, you’re not getting out of this office alive.”

I stood up defensively, toppling over the chair I was sitting in.

“Fighting me would be futile. Running would be pointless. That door’s locked, and it’s made of a titanium alloy. I doubt you would be able to break it...in your current form.”

My eyes turned wide with shock at what he had just said.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice quivering. I backed up against the door, trying to get as much distance between him and me.

“Well. I am as I said I was. Blair Beckett. You, on the other hand, are Alexis Richards. Orphaned in your childhood. Part of a werewolf pack that doesn’t give two shits about you. And, if I understand correctly, you’re fated mates with a man I am most interested in. What was his name? Oh, yes. Wilhelm Grimm.”

How on earth did he know all this, and what was his agenda?

“You might be thinking how I know what I know,” Blair smirked.

“No. I’ve just pieced it together,” I said. It dawned on me too late where the Beckett in Beckett Pharma came from. “You’re Edward Beckett’s son.”

“You’re sharp, but not too sharp, are you?”

“What do you want from me?” I asked as my hand rolled around the doorknob and tugged it to no avail. The door didn’t budge. He was right. I was trapped.

“The way I see it, your mate killed my father, desecrated my family home, and laid waste to everything I held dear. It only makes sense that I do the same with him. Starting with you,” he said.

“Well, your father imprisoned him and tortured him for seventy-six years!” I snapped.

“A small price to pay for attempting to evolve mankind beyond its current form, don’t you think?” Blair said calmly, taking his seat behind the table.

“Your father was a madman who abused Will. Why am I the one paying for your father’s mistakes? Why drag me into this?”

“Because I believe that hurting his mate would draw him here. Isn’t that how your bonds work? I’ll kill you in front of him, and then, in his final moments of agony, I will kill him. I believe this simple transaction equates to me getting my revenge, don’t you think?”

I started laughing. It wasn’t a mirthful laugh but a cackle derived from hopelessness and madness.

“What’s so funny?” Blair scowled at me.

“You’ve clearly been getting your information from outdated sources,” I said, still laughing. “Will’s not coming to save me. We aren’t bonded together anymore. He rejected me quite some time ago. Go ahead, kill me. You’ll only be putting me out of my misery. Don’t think that it’s going to get you even with Will.”

“You lie!” Blair spat and rose from his seat once again, this time holding something behind his back. “You lie to save your life. I can see through your lie.”

“See harder. You’ll see that I’m telling the truth. Whatever your father did to him has morphed him into a bitter person. He doesn’t care about me. I am afraid your elaborate plan of getting revenge on him is going to fail.”

“Liar!” Blair yelled and swung a canister of gas at me far too swiftly for me to react.

The canister hit me in the head, bludgeoning my nose. Before I could get up, he struck me again, this time straight on the head. Darkness swept my vision, and my senses betrayed me, leaving me unconscious.

Chapter 10: Will

I had never felt something so strong take charge of me before. This force that beckoned me to head into Fiddler's Green was more powerful in magnitude than the immense rage, hatred, and bitterness that coursed through me uncontrollably at times.

This force had a language of its own. I could feel it directing my course as I raced through town. The sun shone mercilessly from above, taking away my advantage of shifting into a wolf. I could not shift in broad daylight in front of all these townsfolk.

Still, my legs turned into powerful pistons as I blazed past buildings, cars, and people. If I closed my eyes, I could sense Alexis's presence. If I focused harder, I could feel the pain she was feeling. But the good news was, there was still a bond between us, a bond alerting me of her current state. This meant that despite the danger she was in, she was still alive.

The surge of the electrical force in me shone a beacon-like light in my eyes, illuminating the only skyscraper in front of me. Is that where Alexis was? How had I missed the giant letters etched along the length of the building? Edward Beckett was dead. How was his enterprise still running in this place? Why did the building say Beckett Pharma?

What madness was this?

I approached the entrance of the building, cursing under my breath as I saw groups of people coming in and out of the

building as if it was just business as usual. I would not be able to shift in front of them. If I aroused suspicion, the many guards who patrolled the premises would be alerted. There had to be another way.

Alexis was inside, this much I was certain of. As to who was torturing her, who had kidnapped her, the mystery prevailed.

A counterintuitive thought struck me out of nowhere. Perhaps it would be wiser to enter the building in the evening. To wait it out. The last time I was so bold, it cost me seventy-six years of my life.

Haste was not the answer here.

Patience was.

It turned out that I got my opportunity before nightfall. At around five in the evening, the doors of the building swung open, letting out everybody who worked inside. I counted more than a hundred people just pouring out of the building. I would not get a better opportunity than this.

I emerged from my vantage point and merged into the pouring crowd, utilizing the sheer numbers to my advantage. As I entered the building against the stream of outpouring people, no one stopped me or noticed me. Still, the stark contrast of my casual attire would sooner or later draw attention. Stealth had been my ally so far. It wouldn't be my ally any further.

I gazed across the lobby area and saw the signs for the bathrooms. A half-formed plan came to my mind. In the rush of people leaving the lobby, I darted across the lobby and went inside the men's room.

A guy was standing at a urinal, whistling loudly. He had exactly what I needed. I stepped onto the urinal next to him.

“Hey, listen, buddy, there’s plenty of space for everyone. Why don’t you go stand over there?” He said, looking at me amusedly.

“I apologize for what I’m about to do next,” I said, and before he could get a chance to register what I had said, I banged his head against the wall. The man crashed to the floor, his pants still between his knees. I felt sorry for the poor bloke for what I had just done to him, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

I dragged him into one of the stalls and propped him up on the toilet. I took off his coat and tie and then snatched his card off his neck. I tucked my t-shirt into my pants and wore his coat over it. On second thought, I ditched the tie. No one was going to take that careful a look at me, not when I had the official company card slung around my neck.

Before stepping out of the men’s room, I locked the stall with the unconscious man from the inside.

Then I headed into the lobby, a little surprised at my ingenuity. The bond tugged at me again, bringing my attention to the present. From the lobby, I stepped into the elevator, skating past the guards who were patrolling the interior.

“Where do I go from here?”

My intuition prompted me to press the button for the fifteenth floor. It was strange that a small town such as Fiddler’s Green now had a skyscraper that went all the way to thirty floors.

Then again, there was nothing I would put past someone who shared Beckett's last name.

Perhaps a child? In all my time in Edward's prison, he had never mentioned a child. To think that that deranged person possessed the ability to have a family while keeping me locked in his basement. Unbelievable.

Just as I had finished my musing, the elevator doors slid open on the fifteenth floor.

"Alexis?" I called out.

The floor plan was immense. There was just one large room on this floor, with several glass walls and glass doors serving as barriers. Test tubes, pipettes, beakers, and flasks containing multicolored chemicals were placed along the shelves and tabletops. The air smelled of ammonia and nitrogen. A pungent smell if there ever was one.

I stepped into the fifteenth floor, scouting the surroundings for signs of anyone here. From where I stood, it was hard to scan this maze of tables and shelves and lab equipment. I began moving inwards, pushing doors that swung soundlessly, letting me deeper into the laboratory.

It was only when I saw the syringes lined up neatly that the terrible memory of Edward injecting me with chemicals resurfaced in my mind, paralyzing my senses.

Had it not been for the bond's electricity coursing through me, I would have cowered there, frozen with fear, but I realized that something bigger than me was at stake here: another person's life.

"Alexis? Where are you?"

I perked my ears when a faint, muffled sound came from deep within the laboratory. I raced through the lab, slamming open doors, and finally came to a terrifying sight.

On an operation table, with all four of her limbs strapped and her mouth gagged with a cloth, Alexis lay helplessly, her eyes showing absolute fear.

“Ah, I was wondering when you would show up,” a deep voice said from behind me. My impulse took over, and I jumped out of the way just in time to avoid a crushing blow from a gas canister. I shot one look at Alexis to gauge how much she had been tortured. Her nose was caked with dried blood, and her face was bruised purple.

What wretched good-for-nothing had lifted a hand on her? I swiveled around and saw the man who had just tried to hit me.

He bore an uncanny resemblance to my captor. The same hair, jawline, and eyes.

“Before I rip you apart, muscle by muscle, limb by limb, tell me what you have done to her!” I roared. This time, I welcomed the rage that flooded through my body, filling me with manic strength.

“Ah, I did nothing to her except knock her out. This one believed that you wouldn’t come to save her. I told her nonsense! Of course, the great Wilhelm Grimm, the fabled werewolf, would come to save his mate,” the man said and laughed. He set the canister on the floor and walked over to where I stood.

“I believe introductions are in order, although, I must say, I already know everything there is to know about you,” the man

said. "I, Wilhelm, am Blair Beckett, son of the man you so violently murdered on his deathbed."

My eyes began seeing red. My body began quivering uncontrollably. I grabbed ahold of the metal railing of one of the tables and steadied myself. "Free her, and I may grant you the mercy of explaining your actions before I take your life."

"Ah, so violent. So angry!" Blair laughed. "Why would I free her, Mr. Wilhelm, when I want to kill you in front of her? I hear there's a special sort of pain reserved for wolves when they see their mates die. A pain so strong that it drives them insane."

"I am about to introduce you to some pain that's going to drive you insane," I said.

"So be it! A battle! Ever since I saw my father's mutilated corpse in his bed, I have been yearning for the opportunity to take revenge! Fate has been so kind to grant me the opportunity," he said.

"Do not speak to me of fate!" I yelled and threw myself onto him. I grabbed him by the sides and crashed him into a glass wall.

Immediately, Blair kicked me in the midriff and pushed me off.

"My father was a pacifist. He did not believe in fighting. His was the domain of the mind. I'm not like him. You see, I believe in the ability to defend yourself. You will find that my resolve is equal to yours."

"You talk too much," I said, getting up to my feet.

“Ah, ah, tsk, tsk. Would it be a fair fight if you shifted into a wolf? Come on now, let’s not resort to cheap measures. There are enough lethal chemicals at my disposal in this lab that would drop you dead within seconds. If you fight me, you fight me as a human,” Blair said, lifting his hands and coiling them into fists.

“So be it,” I said, rolling my hands into fists of my own.

I finally gave in to the rage that I had been wrestling with. I let it control my fists. I let it possess my body. I dodged each blow that Blair threw my way and advanced upon him with a frenzy coursing through my veins.

My first blow crashed my fist into his chin, and my second blow knocked the air out of his lungs. I wasn’t done. I brought my knee up in a quick arc and hit him in the face, feeling a deep satisfaction as my kneecap connected to his teeth. Then I grasped him by the shoulders and flung him across another glass wall.

For all his talk, he was a meek fighter. He just lay there, writhing, unmoving, moaning.

I turned around and went to Alexis. I undid the four straps that tied her to the table and stripped off the tape from her mouth.

“You came,” she whispered.

“I...”

“Behind you!” Alexis yelled.

I rolled around just in time to block Blair’s blow. The cunning man held a syringe with glowing liquid inside it in his hand. I slapped it away from his grasp and grabbed him by his head.

“Don’t hold back now, you brute,” Blair spat blood on my face.

Perhaps he underestimated the severity of hate I had for his father, the same hate that I extended to him for threatening Alexis’s life and for luring me into a trap. I recoiled my head and crashed it into his head. The blow did nothing to me, but it knocked a few of his teeth loose.

Surprisingly, he did not give up. Instead, he pulled me back and threw me into a cart loaded with test tubes and beakers. Glass crashed into my face, dazing me out.

“I have had my eyes on you since the moment you escaped. I’ve been spying patiently on every single of your developments. Do you think you can train your pack of dogs? You? You ancient fossil?”

Blair took advantage of my dazed state and delivered a spinning kick to my face. I brought up my hand and caught his kick in midair.

As I pulled him by his foot, my arms suddenly started shifting into their wolf form. My fingernails extended into lethal claws, digging into his skin and drawing blood.

“Will!” Alexis yelled from behind, but I was too occupied with fury to pay heed to her. Rather than try to control it, I directed that malevolent energy into shifting into my wolf form.

Blair crawled away from me, his hand disappearing behind his back. His face betrayed the horror he was feeling. As I leaped into the air, crossing the distance between us, I saw him take out a handgun from behind him.

I came down upon him, my claws striking away the gun from his hand before he got the chance to shoot it.

“Turns out we’re both cheaters, huh, Will the wolf?” Blair laughed.

I dug my claws into his torso and pulled, fulfilling my promise of rending his flesh. He screamed as his skin came loose and blood spurted from his chest.

“Will! Stop!” Alexis jumped out of nowhere and threw me off Blair’s bleeding body. “You can’t kill him.”

Perplexed by her behavior, I shifted back into my human form and approached her.

“You ask me to spare this man, this vile vermin who beat you, bound you, and used you as bait?” I asked. I was addressing Alexis, but my eyes were constantly fixed on Blair. I had torn gashes into his chest, gashes that would leave a scar forever, reminding him of his mistake.

“You already have red in your ledger, Will,” she said. “There’s blood on your hands. I...I just don’t want you to have any more blood on your hands. Can you please understand this?”

Gently, she placed her hand on my chest, coming close to me.

“Feel it in your heart,” she said. “You don’t want to be a murderer. This is beneath you. Don’t let rage take hold of you. Do not let your anger overpower your senses.”

I stepped away from her, approaching Blair. I lifted him by the collar of his shirt and made him look me in the eyes. “Had she not pleaded on your behalf, you would have been rotting in hell with your father right now.”

“Seems like you’ve got a keeper,” Blair said.

“I am sparing you this time. The next time, I will not be considerate. If you so much as think of coming near my pack or me, I will unleash the wrath of Fenrir upon you. You’ll wish you were dead, but I’d deal you a fate far worse than death.”

“Oh, yeah? What are you going to do? Trap me in a basement against my will?” Blair cackled. “Come on. Don’t listen to your lady. Do it. You know you want to do it. Kill me!”

“Will, please!” Alexis moaned from behind.

I threw him on the floor.

“Coward!”

I did not have to kill him, but I did not have to take his shit, either. I brought my boot down on his face, crushing his nose and knocking him unconscious.

“Not that you can hear it, but that’s for hurting her face,” I growled.

He did not move. I could see that he was breathing, but other than that, Blair was unconscious.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, finally directing my undivided attention to Alexis. I lifted her face in my hands, inspecting her facial injuries.

“No, it just hurts a little, but I’m okay,” she said. As I noticed the flush on her cheeks, I quickly let go of her face.

“You’re safe now,” I said. “Now, stay this madness and come back home.”

Alexis took a couple of steps away from me, looking at me with disbelief.

“Come home? Are you crazy?”

I could feel it coming back, the ire, the vehement fury, the impulse to lash out at her. I tried to hold it back.

“Yes. A wolf without her pack is susceptible, vulnerable,” I said. “You belong with the pack.”

“No. I don’t think I do. And I’m not coming back! And why do you care? You rejected me and humiliated me in front of the entire pack!” Alexis yelled.

She left me without a rational recourse. I had no control over what I did next.

Chapter 11: Alexis

I watched as his fingers coiled into a fist and the first thought that came to my mind was that he was going to hit me. Instinctively, my hands shot to my face in self-defense, and I backed up a step.

Will punched through the table I had been strapped to, splitting it in half. His hand was bleeding, and he was looking at the blood with a dazed look on his face. Then he looked up at me, the ferocity back in his face, and scowled.

“Do you get a kick out of being so stubborn?” He asked. His voice was surprisingly quiet and calm. This only served to unnerve me only further. “Why can’t you listen? Why don’t you obey?”

“Obey you? Am I crazy?” I had had enough. If I was ever going to stand up for myself, this was the time. “Take a look at yourself. You’re filled with anger. You barely have a lid on it. And on the few occasions that you do decide to talk to me, you yell at me as if I’m the architect of your misery. You scream and insult me with no regard for my feelings. You must really have a ton of screws loose in your head if you think I’m going to quietly come back with you and pretend nothing’s wrong.”

“Come back for your own safety,” Will said softly. “There are dangers lurking around every corner. It only makes sense that you be with your pack. There’s strength in numbers.”

It surprised me how he was able to say that entire sentence without resorting to raising his voice. Was he exercising self-

control, or had he finally decided to see me as I was, a real person with real feelings?

“You should really get that hand looked at. It’s bleeding pretty badly,” I said. “As for me, don’t act like you’re concerned about me all of a sudden. None of you ever came looking for me when I went away, so I’m assuming that means that the pack’s well off without me. And you know what? I’m better off without you guys. I’ll be more careful. Relax. You don’t have to come to save me again.”

I turned around to leave. I hadn’t exactly shouted at him or snapped at him, but given that I’d spoken my mind for a change and he had listened instead of retorting with rage, it made me feel a little bit better. Not that there wasn’t wisdom in what he was saying. He was right. There was strength in numbers, and given what had happened today could just as easily happen again, it made sense that I went back to the pack, but where would be the dignity in that? I’d much rather die with dignity than live in disgrace.

Before I could take so much as a step, Will caught my wrist in his bloodied hand and pulled me back.

“Stop that!” Will said.

“No,” I said, yanking my wrist free from his grip. “You stop that! What’s your deal anyway? You seem to enjoy treating me like shit, you shout at me at the drop of a hat, and when you don’t hear what you want to hear, you’re manhandling me? Leave me alone and spare me the twisted emotional merry-go-round of toxic behavior. I have had enough of that for a lifetime.”

His bloodied handprint was enveloped around my wrist. I wiped it clean with my shirt. I looked at him one last time before I headed for the elevator. What a total disaster today had been.

“Alexis,” Will called.

“What?” I asked without turning back.

“Why did you come here today?”

I rolled my eyes, suppressed a sigh, and wheeled around again.

“Kind of a strange time for you to start giving a shit about me. What do you care?”

“I care about the pack.”

“Yeah, right, the pack. Well, as I said, I’m not a part of your pack anymore. You saw to it yourself. And it’s not like we’re mates either. You also saw to that. So what’s with the sudden interest in my life?”

“You could have died tonight,” Will said.

“Geez, would that have been so bad? It’s not like life’s handing me anything other than piss-soaked lemons.” It was funny. I wanted to leave. The elevator was right there, a few steps away. And yet every time he opened his mouth and said something, I felt prompted to respond.

“I want to say that I’m...I’m no stranger to suffering,” he said.

“Way to make it all about yourself again,” I said. I didn’t enjoy the fact that I was being so confrontational with him, but it felt right that I should at least give him a little taste of his own medicine. It wasn’t like I was doing this on purpose. I was rattled. I’d been knocked out, strapped to a table, and

threatened with death. “You realize misery’s not a competition, right?”

“What do you want from me?” Will asked.

“Leave me alone!”

“I did leave you alone. Don’t you see that?” Will shouted from across the room.

“If that’s true, why did you come here? If you had truly rejected me, why did you come here, risking your life to save mine?”

Even from this far away, I could see emotions convulsing across his face. For once, he did not have a response or a retort to the question. I felt like this was the right time to make my exit, given that I’d gotten the final word.

As the elevator doors closed, I caught one last glimpse of Will standing there against the backdrop of the city, against the cold blue moonlight shining through the broken glass windows. It felt cruel, breaking things off like that when he had just rescued me. On my part, it felt like I had indulged in something gratuitous.

When the elevator opened up on the ground floor, it was extremely uncanny. Everyone present inside was going about their business as if nothing was wrong. As if a great battle had not taken place a few stories up. The receptionist and the guard were flirting with each other. There were a couple of suited gentlemen sitting in the lobby sofas, perusing magazines, looking at their phone screens, and watching the television. The receptionist saw me and smiled at me, unnerving me.

“I hope the interview went well. It most certainly went long, didn’t it?” she asked.

“What the hell?” I felt as if I was trapped in a surreal nightmare where people chose to ignore the presence of the big bad evil entity haunting the only person who could see it.

“Mind how you go,” the guard said. “There’s broken glass on the pavement.”

As I walked across the lobby, I could feel each pair of eyes boring through my skin, all those glares malignant with ill intent. I wouldn’t make it out alive, would I? I wondered.

But the never-ending walk from the elevators to the main entrance finally came to an end, and I was out again, breathing the chilly night air. I shot a look up the building, wondering what would become of Will. He was still up there, up there with Blair.

“You know what? Not my circus, not my monkeys,” I said, throwing my hands up. I had dealt with enough shit today. Now more than ever, I needed to be free from this. On top of all of this, I had no plan any longer. With Beckett Pharma’s job opening gone, I was back to square one. Scratch that. I was even worse off than at square one. I didn’t have the two part-time gigs that I was doing either. I barely had any money left over to pay for food, utilities, and rent. Where was I going to find a job again?

But here was the thing about familiar things: They drew a boundary around you, putting you in the so-called comfort zone, making you think everything was fine the way it was. When I got into my battered pickup truck, the truck that I had associated fond nostalgic memories with, memories of my

father taking me to the farmer's market every weekend, memories of my mom and me going to the mall in Derry in the truck, the comfort zone enveloped me like an ethereal hug. It was as if my parents were reaching out from the beyond, letting me know that I was going to be okay. I gripped the steering wheel and felt the grooves and dents that years of wear and tear had caused. My hand was too little to fit into those grooves, but I remember my dad's hands fitting into them just fine. It was the same with the seat. It was sunken after years of use. Sunken just enough to make me feel like I was in a cradle.

When all was against me, when it felt like the world had closed itself off to Alexis Richards, the comfort inside my pickup truck gave me just the right amount of strength to make me optimistic enough about whatever awaited me tomorrow. Tomorrow would be a new day. It didn't matter that I didn't get the high-paying job at Beckett Pharma. I would make do somehow.

As if the universe was taunting my will, it started raining. This was one of those classic Fiddler's Green things. You never knew when it began pouring. In high school, they'd taught us about the water cycle and how water from the sea and other bodies of water evaporated and then condensed into rain clouds, causing it to rain. With the sea so close and with the wilderness all around us filled with lakes and streams, it wasn't exactly a mystery as to why Fiddler's Green got as much rain as Seattle did.

"Don't give up on me now," I said to my pickup truck. It sputtered in response. For the next fifteen minutes, as I drove back to the apartments, I drove with bated breath, wondering

when the engine would give up. Fortunately, it did not happen. Well, at least there was one thing going for me.

I climbed the stairs up to the apartment, feeling like the protagonist in some low-fi anime where the main character has to mandatorily make their way through a neon cityscape, then seek refuge in their apartment overlooking the cyberpunk landscape while slurping on noodles. But there were no neon lights in my life, no futuristic city with flying cars, and certainly no noodles in my apartment waiting for me.

I could go to Maliha, maybe raid her fridge and spend the night with her. The heat from her servers would be quite welcoming in this cold weather. But on second thought, I decided against it. I simply did not have it in me to match Maliha's optimistic, overly-cheery energy.

I had suffered a defeat today. It only made sense that I recovered in solace.

As I walked through the corridor leading to my apartment, I passed Maliha's apartment. Blaring music was coming from behind her door. Her off-key singing voice soon followed. I chuckled dryly at the mental image of Maliha dancing in her underpants with headphones on and singing horribly while it rained outside. That girl was truly a universe unto herself.

Once I had crossed the rest of the apartment entrances and was just a few feet away from mine, I realized something was wrong. For one, wet footsteps were leading to my apartment. My door, which I was certain I had locked before leaving, was halfway open, creaking against the wind.

All of a sudden, the low-fi anime that I had projected myself into had turned into a slasher horror movie. It was thundering

outside. Lightning flashed in the dark hallway. Rainwater managed to find its way through the leaky roof in the building and was pooling all along the hallway. And my door was open, swinging precariously.

The wolf within me begged to be let free. Why shouldn't I? Earlier today, I was knocked out before even I got the chance to show Blair my true form. When I came to, I was tied with straps around my limbs, preventing any movement.

This was not the case right now. Whoever was inside my apartment had made the grave mistake of crossing paths with a girl who had been through the wringer today. It did not matter if it were Blair's men, the vampires, or Maurice himself.

It was time to stand up for myself.

I jumped through the doorway, shifting in mid-air, and landed on my paws, snarling at the silhouette tucked away in the darkness. My instinct hadn't been wrong. Someone had indeed broken into my place.

I could see better, hear clearer, and make out the shape of the man even though it was pitch black. But when the lightning shone through the window, I caught a fleeting glimpse of the man shifting into a bigger wolf. As he filled the room with his massive size, an impulsive thought raced through my brain.

You can run.

No. I was done running. The universe should've realized by now that I was not someone to be messed with. What grave sin had I committed, what blasphemous act had I performed, that I was being punished by life so ruthlessly? It was not fair, and I was about to make sure the universe knew it.

The wolf was bigger than me, but I had the advantage of being more agile. Within fractions of a second, I came up with an attack strategy. A wolf could be as strong as they wanted, as quick as light, but if you injured them at the right place, it did not matter how strong they were, how fast they were, or how bravely they fought. A blind wolf was just half a wolf.

With that in mind, I slashed at their eyes. But the wolf swerved just in time to miss my claws, proving that they were faster than me. To my surprise, rather than attack me, he receded further into my apartment and shifted back into his human form.

“Stop, for God’s sake!”

Will?

In my disbelief, I shifted back. I went to the light switch and turned the lights on. Without a doubt, it was Will. He was soaked in water, his face looking haggard, his eyes bearing the marks of tiredness.

“What the hell are you doing in my apartment?” Whenever I was feeling overwhelmed, my hands darted to my head, tugging at my hair. I fought every impulse in my body to tug my hair and forced myself to stand still. “How did you even get here? Do you think it’s wise startling me like that? After what I’ve just been through?”

Will waved his hands at me in an attempt to pacify me. He maintained his distance as he circled around the room and closed the door so that our commotion wouldn’t be heard by anyone else in the building.

“Listen,” he started.

“No, you listen to me for a change. I already said everything I had to say back at the lab. Why are you here, then? How could you think that breaching my privacy was a good idea? I could have hurt you just now!”

“Will you calm down?” Will asked. He walked around the apartment casually, looking at everything in great detail. “I tracked you down. It’s...it’s the same way I tracked you when you were in danger. As much as I would be willing to admit that I was the one who untethered our bond, it still works in terms of helping me find you and alerting me when you’re in danger. I don’t understand it. I came here because of what you said to me in Blair’s lab. You and I have got unresolved issues. I came to talk.”

“That is not an explanation for why you broke into my apartment!” I said, trying to overcome my perplexity. “You can’t leave me alone, and you don’t want me around. What do you want?” I asked. I was just as exasperated as I was shocked. If someone were to measure my agitation and my perplexity on a scale, it’d be exactly half and half.

“I don’t know what I want!” Will exclaimed. I braced myself for more of his anger. But then he said something in a tone so mellow and unlike him that I was too taken aback to respond to it.

“I don’t know what I want, Alexis. My body is free. My mind is still in a prison of its own making. All this time, drugged and dazed, I kept thinking that your grandmother, Ariana, was still alive. That my old life was just on pause, waiting for me. And I’m not prepared for this new life I find myself in. That includes you as well. It includes the fact that the moment I

came back, I had to resume the role of alpha of a pack that didn't even know how to protect itself. It means that I get to wake up in a world where vampires roam free and haunt werewolves. I am not prepared for all of this. And on that note, I do realize that I misbehaved with you. For that, I am deeply sorry. There are many things that aren't in my control. It seems that my freedom has come at the price of violent outbursts of rage. I apologize for bashing you out in the open, for being rude to you, for... for...everything.”

Of all the things that I had expected, I had never expected an apology. It left me completely disarmed and wordless.

Chapter 12: Will

Apologizing to her was not easy. Admitting that I was wrong, saying sorry, and being earnest were all things that made the inner beast within me mad. The more I tried to be nice, the more this alien sensation within me prompted me to lash out at her, scream at her, and punish her.

But I did not do any of that. I tried to control it as best as I could and continued providing her with an explanation. The sudden shift of her expression from exasperation to pure shock told me what I needed to know; she was just as surprised by my behavior as I was.

“I was never like this before. I was kind and never thought about resorting to anger. Not even when the Nazis decided to ransack our village. I kept a level head, and I rescued every single member of my pack. I couldn’t have done that if I were driven with rage. A hotheaded version of me would have singlehandedly charged at the Nazis, gotten shot, and died on the spot. Instead, I waited under the floorboards with the rest of my pack for the Nazis to leave, and when they were gone, we snuck to the harbor. I did all of that calmly,” I told her in as gentle a tone as I could muster.

I did not want to offend her again. She had been through enough today. Her life had been put in danger, and all because she was affiliated with me. She had banished herself from the commune, and I didn’t know how she was making ends meet, but in terms of being dealt a shit hand, hers was as shitty as it got, and it did not make sense for me to burden her any further

with my irate outbursts. Those outbursts were the reason she had left in the first place.

“Something life-altering happened to me as a result of the experiments that Edward had conducted on me. They seem to have left me infused with a sense of mania, a feeling of unkempt anger and hostility. I hurt you with my words and my tone. I am sorry for that.”

Alexis paced in a straight line, fiddling her thumbs. She cast me a look, then stopped in front of me, maintaining her distance. The longer she kept silent, the more unnerved I became.

“Please say something,” I ushered.

“I never really had a boyfriend before,” she said finally. “All my life, I kept to myself. I loved the idea of having a soul mate who was preternaturally fated to me. Instead, I got you. A man who cannot say a straight sentence to me without snapping at me. At first, I thought to myself that given what you had been through, you deserved compassion. But I saw that you weren’t exactly steaming at anyone else. It was just me you had a problem with. Then you decide to make a mockery of me in front of the entire pack, rejecting me in front of the very people I grew up with.”

“I am sorry for how I’ve been,” I said. “And I know you’re not weak. That night, when you saved me, you held your own against a whole bunch of vampires. I don’t think there’s anyone else in the pack who could have stood against the vampires as you did. I know you’re strong. Ariana was strong. You’re her blood. Kenneth was strong. You’re his blood too. I know you’re not weak. And I apologize for undermining you,

for treating you like you were a kid, or thinking that you wouldn't understand."

Alexis gradually got to her feet, approaching me where I stood.

"I'm also not unreasonable. You apologized, and I've decided to forgive you. Awkward platonic handshake to seal the deal?" She held out her hand, smiling a little.

Her wit amused me. I smiled back at her and shook her hand.

"Why are you being like this, though?" Alexis asked, the smile leaving her face as she broached this serious subject.

"Today, when you were in danger, I felt like I was in danger. When you felt pain, my body felt it too. I was guided by a force towards you, a force that's bigger than both of us. When I rescued you, and when you pleaded to me to spare Blair's life, it made me see you in a new light. You appealed to my better nature. I could have just as easily killed Blair and been done with it, but the way you appealed, telling me that I didn't need more blood on my hands, stopped me from taking someone's life. I owe you that." Every word of what I had said was true. I hoped that she would perceive it as such and believe me.

"I understand what you're saying," Alexis said. "But when you chuck a giant rock into a lake, you create splashes and ripples."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Meaning you're the rock, and I'm the lake. And you've splashed and rippled. It's gonna take time for me to become all

beautiful and placid again. Everything you said and did is still pretty fresh.”

What she said made sense. I wasn’t going to start arguing with her. Although the beastly impulse certainly beckoned me to do so. Maybe it was because I was far too tired after expending a day’s worth of energy, or maybe it was something else, a far deeper truth, but somehow, I had brief control over my manic rage for the time being. For that, I was thankful.

“So what do we do in the meantime?” I asked, not knowing where to go from here.

“Oh, I guess you should enjoy bobbing up and down in the lake as the ripples ebb and flow to the shore,” she said.

“I really meant it. I am sorry. I want things to be normal between us. Can we have that?” I asked.

“I’m not mad at you. I know what you’ve been through. I understand. I feel sorry for you. You had to leave your homeland, witness a war, move to a new country, fall for someone, and never bond with them. On top of all of that, you got kidnapped, trapped, and tortured. It’s too much for a person to bear.”

“I don’t think Ariana and I were ever supposed to be mates.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, for starters, she became mates with my best friend. That’s what fate dictated. That’s how you’re here, in fact. I’m just sulking in the depressing land of what-if and what-could-have-been,” I said.

“I’m no therapist, but what little I do know amounts to this: Dwelling on the past is a recipe for depression. Fixating on the

future is the root of anxiety. The only way you can find balance is by living in the present.”

Her words were oddly comforting. What she was saying didn't feel like some banal platitude. It was heartfelt advice that I could wrap my head around. She was right. Why was I looking at my situation from a pessimistic lens?

“What will you do?” I asked. Ever since she'd been in danger, my concern for her hadn't wavered.

“Starting tomorrow, I've gotta look for a job. It's not like my parents left me a fortune or I went to one of those Ivy League places where the students develop some billion-dollar app idea before they've even graduated. I hope to make my ends meet and then yeet.”

“Yeet?”

Alexis grinned at me. “It's Gen-Z slang. What the kids these days speak.”

“Gen-Z? What does that mean?”

“So, kids born between 1995 to 2005 are considered Generation Z. Those before them were considered Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and so forth. The youngest generation right now, the teenagers and those in their early twenties, they've created this slang language that is equal parts stupid and hilarious. Yeet means to throw something far. Or to fling something a long way.”

“So you are going to yeet yourself?”

“Yes. I'm going to yeet myself so far from this place that I'm in Mexico or San Francisco or Texas.”

“Before you go off yeeting yourself, I have to tell you something,” I said. “It’s not about us. It’s something else.”

“What is it?” Alexis asked.

“I don’t think there are many trustworthy figures around me,” I said slowly. Even as I said it, I made sure that my voice was partly drowned out by the sound of the rain and thunder.

“I think that’s called paranoia,” she said slyly and winked at me. “And I think someone in your position has the right to be paranoid.”

“But here’s the thing. Here’s the absolutely ironic thing. I’m not paranoid about you. I trust you for some reason. Everyone else at the commune seems to have their own agenda. When they talk to me, they speak as if they’re either afraid of me. Even my own brother talks in a calculated manner. The only person who’s just a little bit candid with me is that fellow, Vincent. But I don’t know anyone from Adam there. Even my brother feels like a stranger. The man I had left behind was young and spritely. The old man who greets me with his walker in a wrinkled hand is not the same Fred. And you might think that this is my paranoia talking, but something is happening in this town. I can feel it in my bones. I feel as if I am stranded in a strange country whose language I don’t speak and whose people are hostile to me.”

“They’re adjusting, the same as you. They’re not hostile. Think from their perspective. A person they had thought dead appears from out of nowhere, resumes the leadership role, and I’m guessing you’re grilling them pretty hard right now with training or something like that. They’re just adjusting to you. Just like you’re adjusting to the world. Also, it doesn’t help

that you're now notorious for your temper. People don't want to get on your bad side. That's what I think. And I think that's what's causing them to maintain a safe distance from you, making you feel paranoid and on the receiving end of hostility. But those are just my two cents," Alexis said.

I mulled over what she had just said and kept silent for a long time, during which she took her pajamas out of her closet, went to the bathroom, changed her clothes, and came out wearing sleepwear that was quite revealing and accentuated her figure. For a second, I was dumbstruck by the spectacle but then quickly lowered my gaze.

"I don't trust anyone," I said. I had been wanting to say this for a long time. "Except you."

"Why me?"

"You saved me. You rescued me when I was passed out and brought me back to the commune. Whenever anyone deals with me, they seem to have some sort of ulterior motive. I know what that is. They want to placate the alpha to earn his favor. I don't blame them for doing that. It's just...you're the only one who has been sincere with me. You're the only person whom I can look to for honesty."

"This is the sort of stuff one thinks and says before openly rejecting someone in front of everyone," Alexis said.

"I know!" It vexed me that she kept bringing that up. "I'm sorry. I know. I apologized for my behavior, and I understand that it's going to take time for things to ever become normal-ish between us. Right now, I want you to look past all that. Even an alpha wolf, when outnumbered, rethinks his strategy. Right now, I am outnumbered. I don't know what's happening

in this town, nor for that matter do I have a count for all the foes that lurk in the shadows. I don't even know if all of the pack members have the best interest of the pack in their hearts."

Alexis sighed deeply and pursed her lips. "I know I'm going to regret this, but how can I help?"

"I promise you won't regret this," I said as earnestly as I could. "Look. I know it's difficult for me to control myself. I know it's hard to cope with the changes that my body has been through. I will manage it. In return, I want you to assist me in understanding why the vampires are so bold and out of control. I want your help in weeding out any bad eggs from the pack."

"Well, you already weeded out one bad egg," Alexis said. "Maurice."

"Maurice?"

"Yeah. I saw him come out of Beckett Pharma today. In hindsight, isn't it clear that he and Blair are conspiring together? Dollars to donuts, Maurice has got something to do with everything. He's the freaking mayor of the town. He's got to have an angle."

"When the vampires attacked, the first order he issued was to flee rather than fight," I recalled. The more I thought about it, the more it became apparent that she was right.

"Look for yourself. The commune's in disrepair. The wolves have been under piss poor leadership. They are afraid of vampires. Before Maurice became alpha, this was not the case. Vampires weren't as blatant back then, either. Everything went

to shit when Maurice became the alpha. He was more focused on politics, on how to do these phony fundraising events for the town, and on how to launder that money. The town never saw any of that money. How did I know that? Well, take a look for yourself. Does this place look like it's been managed by a competent mayor?"

"You're right," I said. "There is something fishy about his behavior."

"You want my help? Look into what Maurice is doing. Why did he leave the commune? Why did he want the werewolves to flee when the vampires attacked? Does any of that add up?"

"You know, you're quite intelligent for someone your age," I said. It was meant to come off as a disarming compliment, or so I had intended.

"Dude, I'm twenty-six," Alexis said, rolling her eyes.

"Fair enough. Though, one can argue that I'm in my nineties," I said. "So, will you help?"

"I will help. But only because you asked and I kind of empathize with your situation. This doesn't change anything else," she said. "I'm not coming back to the commune. It also doesn't mean that we're friends or mates. This is just us getting even for you saving my life today. Think of it as a trial basis. If you snap at me or shout at me, then our collaboration is over, and you'll never hear from me again. Deal?"

I shook her hand solemnly and said, "Deal."

"Now, if you'll please excuse me, I have a very important appointment with that mattress over there," she said, cocking

her thumb at the floor. “After all I’ve been through today, I need my rest.”

“I will leave you to it, then,” I said. She was right. It was already quite late in the night. I had my own home to get back to and my pack to look after. It was about time I left. “Take care.”

“Don’t let the door hit ya where God split ya,” she called from behind.

The sheer absurdity of that last sentence made me burst out laughing. “What on earth does that even mean?”

Alexis was giggling too. “It means don’t let the door hit your ass as you leave.”

“One of these days, you will have to teach me this Gen-Z slang or whatever you call it,” I said, standing in the doorway.

“Yeah, well, remember what I said? Trial basis. And keep a cool head while you’re at it.”

“Trial basis. Cool head. Got it,” I said, closing the door behind me.

For some reason that I could not quite fathom, I lingered at her apartment’s entrance even after I’d closed the door. There was something I wanted to say to her. But it did not feel like now was the right time.

It would have to wait until the trial basis was over.

I couldn’t just stay outside her apartment building, but I couldn’t quite go right back to the commune either. At least not while danger lurked on both ends. This was one of the

curses of being an alpha, a curse that I did not expect anyone else to understand. Here was Alexis, a werewolf who had chosen to live in self-exile. Naturally, I was concerned for her, given the danger that she had been through. And there was my Grimm Abode, where my pack members lived. Pack members on whom danger loomed in the form of vampires that could attack at any given time.

And then there was me. I was a danger to myself. The alterations in my body were severe and many. I did not yet know the extent of the mutations that had been done to me. Besides the uncontrollable bouts of rage, what else had the experiments done to me? I was still young and strong, yes, but was there another change? I wouldn't get the answer to that question by simply sitting around in my home. Ever since I had been freed, I didn't have a chance to try out my new abilities, if there were any.

Not to mention the imminent danger that both Alexis and the pack were in. Why did it have to be like this? I was not going to stand guard by her apartment as a sentry. If she were to be in danger again, I would be preternaturally alerted to it, just as I had been alerted today. That left the matter of the pack to deal with. I could not just sit idly by and wait for calamity to strike again.

This left me with no other recourse than to track down where the vampires lived and where they conducted their illicit business from. Knowing was half the battle, and I needed to know how deep their operation ran and how many vampires there were. I was holding on to a lot of pent-up rage that I had contained during my confrontation with Alexis, and this rage

would consume me alive if I did not channel it. What better way to release it than hurting some vampires?

Thankfully, the downpour had stopped, allowing me to move through town without getting drenched. It surprised me a little that I did not feel quite as chilly. Maybe that was one of the abilities that I had gained. It was too soon to tell. I did think that it was cold, but the cold wasn't bothering me in any way.

From shadow to shadow, I snuck through the town and headed down to Fiddler's Cove. I was deep into the wilderness now, beyond the city. Rather than go down to the cove through the main road that led through the forest, I decided to circumvent and approach it via the beach. If there were vampires operating there, they would not see me coming from the beach. The cove was cut-off from the beach on both sides thanks to the rugged cliffs.

As the dark of the night deepened, and as my path veered further to the right, I finally came to the beach and could make out the shimmering lights coming from the cove. This was the base from where they operated their cartel. It had to be. The cliffs sheltered the cove from above, not even allowing moonlight to shine through.

Suddenly, to my left, a car raced through the forest. I tucked myself behind some shrubs to hide from whoever was driving to the cove. But this was an interesting development, prompting me to follow the car. I was not going to do this in my human form. As strong as I was, I could not chase a car in this body.

I shifted in the full light of the moon and chased the car from a safe distance, not coming too close to the road. In my wolf

form, I charted a path through the wilderness that was sandwiched between the beach and the road and came to a halt just a quarter mile before the cove.

From here, I could see who was coming out of the car. I could even see and smell the vampires as they came out of the cove to greet the person getting out of the car.

Fumes billowed from my nostrils as I identified the person. It was Maurice Grimm. Alexis was right all along.

“What was that all about, Maurice?” a gnarly voice came from the shadows.

“Ralph, I swear. I didn’t even know,” Maurice replied.

The vampire, whose name was Ralph, came out from the shadows. He was taller than all the other vampires standing around him. His face and his arms were riddled with scars. There was a giant patch of burned skin on his right cheek. Unlike most of the vampires, Ralph was not completely bald. He had a thick head of black hair that made his persona look menacing. He resembled a fierce nocturnal animal, standing there in his long leather trench coat.

“The deal was, Morty, you’d let us have the Abode, and we’ll help you in the next election. I don’t have the Grimm Abode. Does it look like I’m operating out of the Grimm Abode? No! Will I help you with the next election? No!”

“It’s not like that. I asked the pack to retreat. If it weren’t for that fucking Will, the pack wouldn’t have fought. I can tell you that if he’s around any longer, we’re both gonna be out of jobs,” Maurice said.

“Morty, Morty, Morty, that sounds like a threat to me. Are you threatening me?” Ralph crooned in a singsong voice, fiddling with the revolver he was holding.

“Fuck no. I’m telling you, we have a common enemy. But we also seem to have a common friend, someone who shares our vision,” Maurice said. “And don’t call me Morty. I’m not ten.”

“Fine. Maurice, it is. Tell me about this enemy. You say he just appeared out of nowhere all of a sudden?” Ralph asked.

I crawled to the edge of the wilderness. The only thing between them and me was Maurice’s car. As my blood boiled with fury, I wanted to take on all of them at the same time. Having learned that Maurice was a betrayer had driven me to the point of insanity. I sought no reason. The only thing that I wanted to do was fight the vampires and kill Maurice.

But then, at the last moment, right before I was about to pounce into the clearing, Alexis’s face came into clear focus. I remembered the words that she had spoken to me. Keep a cool head, she’d said.

So, rather than attack, I listened intently, barely able to control myself.

“Smells of wet dog here,” Ralph said, sniffing loudly.

“I told you I didn’t appreciate your wolf-phobic humor. I can’t help that I’m a werewolf any more than you can help the fact that you’re a vampire,” Maurice said.

“It’s not you. We’re used to your smell. Someone else is here. Did you rat us out?” Ralph growled.

“I swear I came alone,” Maurice replied, raising his hands in the air and waving them frantically.

“Look around, men!” Ralph said.

Before I could so much as move, I saw a group of vampires, all of them armed, coming out of the cove, poking around everywhere with the barrels of their rifles.

I slunk back into the wilderness, retreating into the shadows, surrounded by the thickets of trees and bushes around me. Here I waited in silence as the vampires prodded around.

I even shifted back into my human form so that they wouldn't be able to smell me.

To my right, Maurice's car veered and revved up the road. Had the vampires not been searching for me, I'd have chased Maurice and would have found out where he was hiding. I would have interrogated him ruthlessly and found out what he was planning.

But for now, I just lay low and waited for the vampires to move back into the cove.

I waited for a long time.

Chapter 13: Alexis

It didn't take me any longer than three days to realize that besides the too-good-to-be-true job openings offered by Beckett Pharma, Fiddler's Green didn't have much in the way of prospective careers. It wasn't for lack of effort on my part. I made accounts on all the job forums such as Indeed, LinkedIn, and Jobzilla, scouring through the dozens of low-paying jobs such as clerks, shopkeepers, hairdresser assistants, and departmental store attendants until I saw that there was only one option left for me.

I had to go back to the diner and get my shift as a waitress back.

The rapidly depleting funds in my checking account were a constant reminder that I could not just spend my days idly binge-watching Netflix series or doom-scrolling on Instagram. I needed money, and I needed it fast.

The hardest part about getting up in the morning and having no job to go to was convincing myself to get out of bed, take a shower, brush my teeth, tie my hair, get dressed, and head into town. A town that held virtually no promise.

Somehow, I made it through and got dressed, and gave myself a little pep talk in the fogged-up bathroom mirror, reminding myself that there was no harm in swallowing my ego and begging the shift manager to give me my job back.

I had only made it to the parking lot when I got the first surprise of the day.

Will was standing there next to my pickup truck. He had a crazy look in his eyes that made me fearful of what sort of mood he'd be in. And why was he here all of a sudden?

Right. I'd offered to help him.

"Hey there," he said, waving at me from afar.

"You really should get a phone and let people know you're coming. It's freaking strange to be just standing there like that."

"Vincent tried to show me how to use a smartphone, but my eyes started hurting a minute after staring at that screen," Will said. "I don't think I'll ever get used to them."

"You're supposed to turn down the brightness to match your comfort," I said.

"Don't tell me all that! I'm never going to understand computers and phones and all that electronic stuff," Will said with frustration.

"All right, calm down, cranky," I said, opening the door of my truck and getting in. I unlocked the side door and opened it for him.

"Sorry. That wasn't me being angry or anything," Will said.

"I know. That was you being a total boomer," I said. "Well, technically, you were born way before any of the boomers, so I guess that makes you a dinosaur."

"Is boomer yet another one of those Gen-Z slang terms?" Will asked, rolling his eyes.

"Yes. It means someone who's frustrated by the simplest of things. Things like not figuring out a smartphone," I said.

“Fine. I’ll learn it if you’ll teach me. Vincent...he’s just self-assuming, thinking I understand everything that comes out of his mouth. Half the terms he speaks are completely alien to me!” Will groaned. “Being alive in the twenty-first-century sucks.”

“Join the club,” I said, revving up my engine. “Now give it to me. You’re here for some reason. So, what’re the haps?”

“Huh?”

“What’s the sitch?”

“Are you deliberately screwing with me?” Will asked in a stony voice.

“Yes. I’m just trying to gauge how far I can take things before you...you know...go completely nuclear on my ass,” I said, grinning at him.

“I’m trying to keep it under control.”

“Good for you,” I said. “Now, tell me, what happened?”

Then Will filled me in on how he snooped in on the vampires and saw Maurice there. He mostly spoke while I drove to the diner. I listened intently and waited until he had finished his entire story. Then I turned to him and stared intensely at him and said, “You thought it was a good idea to go about snooping on vampires? Alone? Where hundreds of vampires live? All of whom are armed to the teeth?”

“I was feeling helpless,” Will said. “I didn’t know what to anticipate or how imminent the danger was. I just wanted to find out for myself.”

“Does putting your life in jeopardy seem like a fair trade to you for finding things out for yourself?” I asked.

“Ever since I first came across the vampires wandering so brazenly in the forest, and ever since they attacked the Grimm Abode, I have been on high alert. For me, at that time, it seemed like the only logical thing to do. Come to think of it, I wouldn’t have seen Maurice interact with Ralph if I hadn’t taken a bit of risk,” Will said.

“A little bit of risk? I’m sorry, but you were completely reckless. You went all by yourself, with no backup, and you went all the way down to the cove. If someone had found you out, what would have happened? If they kidnapped you, what would have happened then? If someone had opened fire on you, would you have stuck around to find out if you’re immune to bullets?” I asked.

“Which is why I didn’t do it again. I realized my error. That’s why I’m coming to you for help. Now please, what do you make of all of this? And why are you going in there?”

“I’m going to beg the manager to give me my old job back,” I said.

“Surely a woman of your skills and talents can find better-suited work than a waitress at a diner,” Will said.

“What do you even know about me? You don’t know me enough to say something like that,” I said defensively. In truth, what he had just said had shaken me to my core. It was a compliment, something that I rarely received.

Then Will came closer to me and looked me intently in the eyes, and said, “You are profound. I have yet to see anyone

stronger in our pack. Quick on your feet and with a sharp wit to boot, you've got it all. Why do you undersell and underestimate yourself?"

There was an awkward pause filled with anticipatory silence during which the two of us just stared at each other. For the most part, I was confused, but I was also inexplicably drawn to him as he spoke those words of consolation.

This moment did not last longer than a second. I recoiled, stuttering and averting my gaze, and said, "So...what's this job you speak of?"

Will reciprocated and took a step back, too, awkwardly twiddling his belt buckle and looking up at the diner's awning. "The family business. The Grimms run the wharf. I can make sure that you get a managerial position that pays well."

The bubble of hope he'd inflated burst with a loud pop when he mentioned the wharf. "I worked at the wharf. There's no managerial position there. It's all very physical work. Have you ever been to the wharf? Business is down in the dumps. They can't even afford to stay afloat. Do you see the irony in that? Ever since the vampires started barricading the town exits and controlling who came and went, local shipping businesses took a massive hit. People use other city ports now. It's only the local fishermen that use the wharves anymore, and even they're dwindling." I hated being this pessimistic with him right after he had said those kind words to me, but what I was telling him was the brutal truth.

"Well, can you hold off on begging your old manager for the job for just one more day?" Will asked impatiently, rubbing his

brow with his fingers; one of the classic tells that shows a man is getting angry.

“Sure,” I said, not wanting to deal with his grumpy side. “I’ll do that. But don’t you go making a habit of disrupting my daily life.”

“I promise not to disrupt your life from this point forward,” Will said, releasing his pinched brow and forcing a smile on his face. “Do you want to hear my proposition?”

“Go ahead. What’s the big plan?” I looked at the diner one last time before getting back into my truck, making a mental note to return here later.

“Back in the Second World War, the Allied Forces used code breakers. People like Alan Turing developed specific machinery called computers for that very purpose. To decipher the encoded messages that the Axis were sending each other. One might even go so far as to say that Alan Turing’s magical machinery helped turn the war’s tide. Do you know that?” Will asked.

“Duh. They tell that story in every single intro to computer science class in community college,” I said, unsure of where he was leading.

We drove around aimlessly in my truck as Will explained his plan.

“I was thinking that maybe we can do something to decode the messages that Maurice receives on his cell phone. In theory, that can be done, right?”

“That’s awfully bright of you to think of something like that,” I said, genuinely impressed that Will could conceive the idea

of hacking all by himself. “Did you really come up with that?”

“Why? Yes, as a matter of fact, I thought hard, and I concluded that this was the easiest way to track down Maurice and spy on him.”

“You know, you keep saying you’re not adjusting well to the twenty-first century, but I think you’re wrong. You’re taking to it quite well. Although your thinking worries me. What you just described is called hacking. It’s highly illegal and requires a level of skill that I don’t possess, but I know someone who does.” As I said this, I began regretting the notion of introducing Maliha to Will. Maliha was a woman without any sense of propriety. Who knew what she’d say that would set Will off and make him angry? It was like throwing kerosene on a dumpster fire.

“Will we be able to track him down using hacking?” Will asked. There was so much sincerity in his voice that it felt like a child was asking a grownup if they could buy ice cream once they were at the store or like a dog whimpering at its master’s feet to let it out for a walk. In so many ways, Will retained his innocence.

“We’ll be able to do more than track him down. We can eavesdrop on his calls, see what messages he’s sending, and who he’s talking to. But like I said, it’s very illegal. We get caught, we’re going to jail for messing with a government official,” I said, hoping he’d back down from this idea and see reason.

“Whom do you know who can hack?” Will asked. Maybe I imagined it, but there was a tinge of jealousy in his inquiry. As

if he was being possessive about me. Yep, the deluded prima-donna in me was just imagining it.

“It’s just a girl. She’s sort of like my best friend,” I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him relax his tense body upon hearing the response. I thought it wrong to smile, but I did anyways. “So, how are things at the commune?”

“I’m training them harder every day, hoping they learn how to become better werewolves and stronger fighters, even the women and children. It’s a gradual process, but I’m starting to see some improvements,” Will said.

“Have you had any more outbursts of anger lately?” I asked, carefully adjusting my tone so that he wouldn’t misperceive it as me being condescending or snarky.

“Yes. I do get these violent fits of rage. But I have learned to anticipate them. Rather than take them out on a person, I’ve started practicing at the shooting gallery.”

“Uh-oh, I hope you don’t mean you’ve taken up shooting heroin in your veins.”

“What? No. Is this more of your Gen-Z slang?” Will asked, exasperated.

“Yeah. But it’s more like junkie code. They have these abandoned places where they gather to inject themselves with heroin and get high. They call those places shooting galleries,” I said.

“I will never go near a needle again for as long as I am alive,” Will said. “I have had enough of them injected in me to last me painful memories for a lifetime.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was like walking around a minefield, talking to him. I never knew what would upset him or trigger memories of his torture and imprisonment. Or worse, what would set him off.

“There’s something about the brute force of a bullet leaving the gun, the sheer recoil of the firearm, and the loud bang that is followed by a blinding flash of light that speaks to my baser nature and calms me down. Drowns out the anger, soothes me,” Will said. “Vincent and I repurposed a building as a shooting gallery. I go there once a day and release most of my pent-up anger and frustration.”

“I’m happy for you,” I said. “That you’re coping. As long as you don’t hurt anybody.”

If I had been hesitant about introducing Maliha to Will, that hesitation was gone the moment Will stepped inside Maliha’s apartment. The sheer bafflement that he was displaying at every single thing present in there was utterly hilarious.

I watched him with amusement as he carefully went from server rack to server rack, ogled at the different LED monitors, touched some of the keys on the RGB keyboards, and cautiously touched the computer mice as if they would bite him back. It was like reintroducing Tarzan to modern society.

Will tried to make sense of all the blinking lights on Maliha’s desktop towers, attempted to peek through the glass slats to the machinery underneath, and even endeavored to understand the gibberish of numbers and alphabets that were running across the screens.

“This place,” Will whispered in awe. “Is a testament to human advancement. It is truly a digital fortress.”

“Let’s not get highbanded. It’s a tech junkie’s hoarding place,” I said, taking off my jacket and opening up the buttons of my shirt. The sweltering heat emitting from the servers did not seem to bother Will at all. Nor, for that matter, did it bother Maliha, who was sitting there with chopsticks in her bun, wearing a crop top and orange shorts. She was ogling at Will with her mouth half open.

“Babe, who’s the himbo in the normcore drip?” Maliha asked.

“Are you talking about me?” Will wheeled around and shot a quizzical look at Maliha. “I will confess I don’t know any of those words.”

“Relax, Will. She’s just being herself. She thinks you’re a dumb but good-looking person dressed in vintage clothing,” I said, stifling my chuckles.

“Look, madam, I will inform you that I was top of my class at Bertrand Gesamtschule! I would have pursued literature in Munich if the war hadn’t broken out!” Will said vehemently.

“Ooh, you’re from Germany? Guten Tag Herr Will,” Maliha said in a melodious voice and did a curtsy bow.

Will’s face was overflowing with zeal and mirth, and his jowls stretched into a smile. “Herr fraulein, sprechen sie deutsch?”

Maliha threw her head back, causing the chopsticks in her bun to fall out, and started laughing while holding her stomach.

“Nein, nein, ich spreche kein Deutsch.”

All the light disappeared from Will’s face, leaving a vestige in his eyes. “I really thought you spoke German.”

“Well, I just picked up a sentence or two from watching TV,” Maliha said. “And Schindler’s List.”

“Don’t mind Maliha here, Will. She’s eccentric,” I said, patting Will’s shoulder. I could see how discouraged he was feeling. “But she’s going to help us, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Any friend of Alexis is a friend of mine,” Maliha said, quickly getting behind a computer screen and racing her fingers across the neon-lit keyboard. “And just in case we get caught, the less I know, the better. I don’t want to know why you guys want to tap into the mayor’s phone.”

“Yes, the less you know, the better,” I nodded solemnly. I looked at Will. He had forgotten how disappointed he was a second ago in the wake of watching Maliha work on her computer. He watched her click and press and open up windows and write code with amazement.

“This woman’s speed is fascinating,” Will whispered to me.

“She pretty much runs exclusively on Monster and Red Bull. Don’t let it surprise you,” I said.

“What are those?” Will asked.

I shook my head, laughing a little. Sometimes dealing with Will was like teaching a toddler about the world. Instead of telling him what they were, I went to Maliha’s fridge and got a can of Monster out. I opened it and held it out to Will.

“It’s got a buttload of caffeine. Why don’t you drink it and sit down and let the hacker do her magic?”

Will politely took the energy drink can from me and sat down, taking cautious sips from the can.

“And I’m in,” Maliha said, cracking her knuckles.

“What? That fast?”

“He uses an Android phone. What do you think? You can pretty much remote hack them from any terminal if you know the phone number and the IP address,” she gleamed at me.

“And now, I’m mirroring his device onto this emulator. It’s genius. It’ll be as if you have his phone in your hands.”

“Can we take it?” Will asked.

“Sure. All my devices are disposable in case I get burnt. You can take this emulator phone with you and use it to snoop on Maurice. Don’t worry; my code will hold. The connection is secure,” Maliha said as she massaged her neck.

“Love you, girl. I owe you big time,” I said, hugging Maliha.

“Your efforts are truly appreciated,” Will said, nodding at her.

“Anything for my girl and her weird friend from Germany,” Maliha winked.

Before we could exchange any more pleasantries, as if right on cue, the emulator phone’s screen shone bright with the words “Blair” written across it. The phone accepted the call.

I yanked Will out of Maliha’s apartment and strode over to mine so we could listen to the call in privacy. Once we were there, I pressed the speakerphone option. We listened carefully; our heads almost pressed together.

“So what do the vamps say?” Blair asked.

“It seems that we’re all seeing eye to eye on this particular issue,” Maurice said.

“That’s excellent,” Blair said. “You know, your previous intel checked out. The girl was dear to him. He came as you said he would, and honestly, I don’t know what I was expecting, but I certainly didn’t expect to get beaten to death.”

“That was your mistake, wasn’t it? You should have had your men kill him with guns rather than take on him yourself,” Maurice sneered.

“Relax. I’m still alive. And I’ve got the perfect thing up my sleeve. One last gift from daddy dearest, it would seem,” Blair said.

“Will it help us all?” Maurice asked.

“Well, it will kill Will Grimm, so that takes care of your problem, the vampire’s problem, and my problem. You get to do whatever it is that you do without checking. The vampires can control more of the town. I get my sweet, sweet revenge. Perfect synergy, that’s what I call it,” Blair said.

“Tell me more about this potion,” Maurice said. “Color me intrigued.”

“Dad was a man of contingencies. He wanted to make sure that in case his plan didn’t pan out, he’d have a way to kill the monster that he had created. It’s a shame he never got to use it. Well, in theory, it could kill any werewolf. I just took dad’s recipe and perfected it in my lab. I call it Wolf’s Bane,” Blair said, and then soon after burst into sinister laughter.

“And you give me your word that you’re not going to use it on anyone else other than Will?” Maurice asked.

“I thought you didn’t care about the werewolves. I thought that was the point of your collaboration with the vampires. Wasn’t

that the deal? You get a cut from the vampire's business, and in turn, they can use this town however they please. They get to kill the werewolves and overtake that shabby old commune. So what do you care?" Blair asked.

"I'm not worried about them. I'm asking about myself. In case you didn't notice, un-fucking-fortunately, I'm a werewolf too," Maurice said.

"Ah, you're a snake. You're a sleazy politician, and you're a corrupt smuggler. That makes you okay in my book. Relax, I'm not going to kill you. Who'd help me and the vampires run this town otherwise?" Blair continued laughing maniacally.

"Fuck you," Maurice said.

"Fuck you, too," Blair said.

Then the call cut off abruptly.

I could feel my throat clogging up. My worst suspicion had just been confirmed. Maurice had been a rat all along, working with the vampires and Blair Beckett. Why were they planning on killing Will?

"It's not fair!" I yelled. I was about to chuck the phone at the wall in frustration, but Will held my hand back and took the phone from me. "Why do they want to kill you? It's not fair. You just got out after suffering for seventy-six years. You don't deserve this. What the fuck is wrong with this town? With these people? And Maurice? I knew he was a spineless jag, but I didn't know he was capable of conspiring at this level. It's simply not fair!" I yelled again and tried to stomp my feet, but Will held my body in an embrace, limiting my movement.

“Calm down, Alexis. Calm down,” he whispered in my ear.

“Don’t you get it? Even after you’ve escaped from your prison, you’re still not free! It’s not just about the mutations and the alterations. These people are out there to hurt you! They want to kill you, Will.”

“Yes, but you have helped me today in a way no one has before. You’ve given me a chance to know who my enemy is. Now that I know who to look out for, I can prepare better, make sure the pack’s strong enough, and be ready to confront my enemy. You’ve tipped the battlefield in my favor. Thank you for that,” Will said, still holding me.

“Why aren’t you freaking out? Shouldn’t the news that there’s a potion out there that can kill you upset you? Aren’t you devastated?” I asked angrily. Though, I did stop squirming. There was something about the comforting hold he had on me that calmed me down more than his words did.

“I’m not devastated,” Will said. “Knowing is half the battle, and now that I know, I’ve won half the battle, all thanks to you.”

“Will, you don’t understand. They’re out to get you,” I said, breaking free from his hug and staring deeply into his eyes to let him know the gravity of the situation.

“During the Second World War, I was shot at more times than I can count. When I sailed with my pack across the ocean to America, our ship was caught in eight different storms, but we somehow made it safely to land. When I was imprisoned by Edward, the pain of the torture could have killed me, but I did not die. When I escaped, that horde of vampires could have

decimated me. But you saved me. Do you know what that means?”

“That you’re impervious to death?” I couldn’t help but be sarcastic. In truth, I was feeling vulnerable for him. I did not know that I had the capacity to care for him as much as I was doing now. Why? There was no bond between us anymore. Why did I still care? Why did this news suddenly jolt my entire body?

Will laughed. It was the first time I was seeing him laugh from this up close. He had a very handsome smile that reached his eyes. “None of us are impervious to death. But I’ve lived somehow through all this because I’m destined for something. Fated to do something. At times it feels like fate has played a cruel trick on me, but I’ve recently started reminding myself that fate made sure I was alive all this time.”

His face was so close to mine. His eyes were gazing at me with a soft intensesness. As he spoke, his tone held such a lilt that it was hard to imagine that the very same man could be rude. Not this Will. This was the true Will.

I reached up and kissed him. I closed my eyes and let my lips feel the brush of his warm, soft lips. I expected him to recoil and retort, but that did not happen. He kissed me back, his lips nudging mine. I could feel succulence serenade my mouth as I, not knowing what I was doing, deepened the kiss and embraced his body.

The same powerful electricity that had lit up my body when we had bonded now bolted through my body, emerging from my lips and reaching to my extremities. I pressed harder, my

mouth firmly against his, my tongue gently caressing his tongue.

This moment ended as fast as it had started, leaving us standing in front of each other, arms in arms, looking at each other with flushed faces, wet lips, and beaming eyes.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“That was...something,” Will said in a soft voice.

“I’m sorry; I don’t know why I did—” Will didn’t let me finish my sentence, putting his finger on my lips.

“Shh, it’s okay,” he said.

It had been a spontaneous impulse that had prompted me to kiss him. What was pleasantly surprising to me was that he had kissed me back.

“Err...I think I should go back to the commune,” Will stuttered. “Erm...thanks for the help. I’ll...I’ll see you later?”

“Yes, la-later,” I said.

He left me standing there in the purple evening light coming from my window, with the ghost of his kiss still lingering on my lips.

Chapter 14: Will

Sometimes, it's not the brute force of a hammer that breaks a stubborn rock but the gentle pitter-patter of water droplets over time that cleaves it into two. Failing that, a bolt of lightning shows that even the biggest boulders are torn apart.

That kiss with Alexis hit me with the force of a hammer, felt as gentle as a drop of water, and jolted me as ferociously as a bolt of lightning. Were my heart a rock, it would have surely given in to the affectionate, spontaneous, and eclectic kiss.

But my heart was filled with darkness akin to the one that lies in the middle of a black hole. You cannot break darkness with a hammer. You cannot fill it to the brim with water. And you can only momentarily light it up with a lightning bolt, but the darkness is long and unending, and that sliver of lightning is a mere blip that only accentuates the infinite nature of that darkness.

And yet, there was more to that moment than just the kiss. When she learned that forces were conspiring against me, she became genuinely worried for my safety. As a mate would. In the past, whenever trouble came my way, I looked to my pack members for solace. More importantly, I would look to Ariana to give me a word of encouragement or to bolster my spirit. She never did. At best, she was generic in her diction, and at worst, she was completely indifferent.

Alexis had shown more emotion in that single night than Ariana had done in the entire time I had spent with her.

“We’re here, mister,” the cabbie said.

I cast a look at the fare meter. Inflation was one of the things that I was having some difficulty coming to terms with. In the ‘40s, I could buy groceries for two weeks for ten dollars. Now, a few miles from the commune to this apartment complex cost ten dollars.

Regardless, I fished out a ten-dollar bill from my pocket, handed it to the cabbie, and got out of the taxi.

I watched the cab drive off, leaving me standing in the parking lot of Alexis’s apartment building. This time I hadn’t come for help. This time I came out of my own volition. After last night’s kiss, I had trouble sleeping. To release my emotions, I even went to the shooting gallery and emptied a whole magnum clip on one of the crash test dummies that were standing at the far end of the gallery. But this was not anger that I was feeling. This wasn’t even some sort of confusion.

It was yearning.

Bittersweet yearning. Burdened with the realization that I had rejected her, hurt her feelings, and had been the primary cause of her leaving the commune, I could not feel the yearning in its purest form. I had to experience it mixed with the distorted emotions that my actions had caused.

But she had kissed me first. What did that mean? Was she ready for a deeper forgiveness?

I hesitated at the apartment building’s entrance. I had done something foolish. It was only nine in the morning. For all I knew, she might be sound asleep.

I scanned the parking lot for her truck, hoping that would give me some insight. But unfortunately, at this time, there were tons of cars parked here, making it nearly impossible for me to determine where she had parked her truck. Maybe she hadn't parked it here at all. Maybe there was an underground parking lot or garage system where she had parked it.

Oh, God. I was getting mind-boggled just standing here.

This was ridiculous. I wasn't going to accomplish anything by being confounded. I made up my mind and climbed the stairs leading to Alexis's floor.

But I stayed strong and walked to the end of the hallway and knocked on Alexis's door. My heart hadn't hammered this fast in a long, long time. I was suddenly nervous, unable to think of what to say when she opened the door.

I knocked again, my hands feeling cold and clammy.

When there came no response, I knocked a third and final time.

Perhaps it wasn't fated that we'd meet today.

"Will?"

Or perhaps it was.

"Alexis?" I turned around fast enough to make myself dizzy.

It wasn't Alexis. It was her friend, Maliha.

"Alexis was being super mysterious," Maliha said. "Didn't even tell me where she went."

"Is that so?"

“Yes. I was up all night doing a coding marathon. She came by my place at around six in the morning. She didn’t even, like, tell me where she was going. It’s not like her to be super mysterious. But then again, I never knew that she had a relative who lived in Germany, so maybe that girl’s pretty mysterious after all,” Maliha said. She was sucking on a lollipop in a most comedic fashion. She was dressed in almost the same attire as when I had last seen her. She’d swapped the top she was wearing for a floral shirt.

“I’ll just come back later, then,” I said, turning to leave.

“Or you can wait for her at my place. I saw you looking at my rigs. Don’t tell me you want to have a go at them.”

“I don’t even know the first thing about computers,” I confessed, hoping that it didn’t reveal too much about me.

“Old fashioned. I like that,” she said, twirling her hair around her finger. “Just to be clear, I’m not putting the flirts on you.”

“Do you have any more of that Monster energy drink?” I asked.

“You bet. Come on now, weirdo. We’re going to wait for your fraulein.” She strutted back to her apartment, holding out her lollipop as if it were some sort of cigarette.

In all my life, I had never seen a more bizarre character.

Maliha insisted that she wanted me to have fun, so she poured me a Monster energy drink into a glass and added a third cup of whiskey to it. In her own words, this drink was called the devil’s venom. After the first gulp, I didn’t care for how it

tasted. It just warmed me up and sent jolts of energy through my body at the same time.

But she didn't just stop there. She piqued my curiosity by introducing me to an altogether new form of digital entertainment.

“So, this is a video game. You've heard of video games before? No? You must be one of those Mennonites or those Pennsylvania Dutch Country folk. It's nothing to be ashamed of,” she said, making me sit down in front of a giant computer screen. The words GTA V were swimming across the screen next to a very lewd picture of a woman revealing half her bosom.

Then she handed me a remote controller with many multicolored buttons on it. “These are analog sticks. You make your character move with them. You press these keys to shoot a gun, X to run, and so forth. It's really intuitive.”

The screen with the lewd woman disappeared, giving way to a vibrant display of a metropolis. And there, smack in the middle of the road, stood a bald guy with a rocket launcher.

“Oh, yes, that's Trevor. You can press the weapon key and make him shoot those rocket launchers at cars and shit,” Maliha said.

“Like this?” I asked, pressing the key. Immediately, Trevor shot a rocket at an approaching sports car, blowing it into pieces.

“Well, what do you know? You're a natural,” Maliha said, slapping my back.

At first, the absurdity of controlling a character outweighed any enjoyment that I was experiencing. But the more I controlled Trevor with my controller, the more I understood that this was just a simulation. None of this was real. I could go to town in this game and do whatever I wanted.

I did not know how long had passed. I really didn't. All I knew was I had traveled across the fictional city of Los Santos, driving any car I wished to drive, shooting anyone who came in my way and outrunning the police helicopters as they chased me through the city. Now and then, Maliha quipped and let me know which key did what, guiding me on how to play the game. I turned around to see what she was doing. She was just propped up on a table, cross-legged, puffing out strawberry-scented smoke from an electronic cigarette.

I had never played a video game before. If this was how most video games were, I could grow to like them. The very notion that I could control a character in such an omniscient way was addicting.

I had lost all track of time. It didn't help that Maliha's apartment's windows were boarded up, not letting a single sliver of light through. The more I played, the drunker I got, both on the Monster/whiskey combo drink and on the entrancing visuals of the game.

“Do you have any more games?”

“Honey, I have the entire Steam Library, the entire PlayStation collection, and an Xbox Game Pass that lets me play any game whenever I want. I'd be more than happy to show you more games if you want,” Maliha said.

“Why are you being nice to me like this?” I asked, finally putting away the controller and forcibly veering my gaze away from the screen.

“It’s cuz you’re fucking weird. Like me. I’m drawn to weird people. You, Alexis, me, we’re all just a bunch of fucking weirdos. Most people spend their whole lives trying to be anything but weird. They try to fit into the societal construct of normalcy. I don’t get that feeling from you. You’re different, marching to the rhythm of your own drum and whatnot,” she said.

“And you’re quite astute. Alexis is lucky to have a friend like you,” I said, half-solemnly, half in a drunken state. I did not realize that the drinks that she kept pouring for me could inebriate me this much. The Monster energy drink seemed to make the whiskey more potent. I could not have drunk more than three or four glasses of that bizarre cocktail. And yet, I could feel crossing the borders from tipsy to lightly drunk.

Speak of the devil, just as I had mentioned Alexis’s name, Maliha’s apartment door opened, and there she was, standing there looking at Maliha and me with the most puzzled expression on her face.

“What the hell’s going on here?”

“Your German friend seemed lost. You know I have a thing for strays. I couldn’t just let him stand there in the corridor,” Maliha said.

I was far too inebriated to give her a proper response. So, naturally, I said, “We drank a lot of alcohol, and I destroyed Los Santos.”

“Maliha, what’s he talking about?” Alexis asked during bursts of giggles.

“Oh, I was teaching him how to play GTA,” Maliha laughed.

“I took a rocket launcher and blew a police helicopter to kingdom come,” I said, barely managing to complete the sentence without slurring my speech.

“Will, what are you doing here? Are you okay?”

As drunk as I was, I had enough propriety to know that such matters could not be divulged in front of Maliha. I staggered and struggled hard to maintain my balance as I stood up from her wobbly chair with wheels and trudged to the apartment’s entrance.

“He’s all yours,” Maliha said, closing the door behind us.

“Will, what the hell?” Alexis grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me hard. At once, I felt intensely nauseous.

“I came to see you,” I said, unable to help myself in this compromised state. “I...we kissed...I didn’t sleep at night. I thought of y-you.”

“How much alcohol did Maliha give you? Did she freaking mix it with Monster? That’s worse than absinthe! Jesus Christ. Let me make you some coffee and sober you up,” Alexis said, dragging me by the shoulder to her apartment.

The world whirled around us as we walked, the floor swapping places with the roof and the walls shifting as if this were some mystical labyrinthine maze protected by a minotaur.

I saw with blurred vision as Alexis prepared some coffee. I needed to rest my head. The mattress looked really tempting. I

collapsed on it face-first, feeling utterly goofy. My eyes were closed, and still, the world was spinning. But this state was deeply pleasing. I could not feel any of the pain of the mental baggage that I had been carrying. As much as I tried to fixate on it, it kept slipping away. And with it, I kept slipping away, barely able to stay awake.

“Here. It’s bitter and hot, but you need it.” Alexis handed me the pungent-smelling coffee and stood back as if expecting me to do something outrageous.

“I’m so drunk,” I whispered.

“Yeah, sorry about that. Maliha has a strange sense of humor. She probably thought it was hilarious to get you drunk.”

I was too far gone to speak anymore. In silence, I drank the coffee, enjoying its bitter flavor surge through my mouth. She was not kidding. It was extremely strong. By the time I had finished it, my head was no longer spinning, and my body felt back to normal.

“Why did you come here?” Alexis asked, this time gently and with much less worry in her voice.

“The way we left things off last night, it felt strange. We kissed, and I don’t know what that means,” I said, rubbing my temples as a faint headache started growing.

“Oh.” This was followed by a long spell of silence. “I don’t know what it means either. It was a very human moment. I was vulnerable and feeling quite worried. I’m sorry about that.”

She’d done what I had feared she would do. She’d gone defensive. I had to set things right.

“Please. Don’t apologize. It was both of us,” I said. Now that I was sobering and the emotional baggage was resurfacing, the rage was coming back too. And it couldn’t have come at a worse time. Whatever kind of relationship Alexis and I had formed, it was in a very delicate state. A mere shout would shatter it.

“Hey, I have an idea. Do you wanna just hang around? Let’s just do that, shall we? Not as rejected mates, not as partners in crime, not as people who kissed last night, and not as werewolves. Just two people, vibing,” she asked. “It would take the pressure off.”

I smiled at her. “That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“But there are ground rules,” Alexis insisted, counting the rules on her fingers. “You don’t get to mope about your whole sob story, and I won’t start self-pitying about my sorry-ass life. We’ll just spend some time together, as you did with Maliha, although I promise I won’t make you drunk. Also, nothing sexual will transpire. No kisses, long hugs, nothing like that. We’re not ready to cross that bridge yet, if ever. Lastly, you’re not going to be angry at me, and I’m not going to be impatient with you.”

I got up, no longer swaying, and held out my hand. “A gentleman’s agreement.”

“Agreed.” She shook my hand firmly and smiled at me.

If I could say one thing about humanity’s evolution in the past seventy-six years, it was that they had become more decadent. There was no other word for it. Alexis took me to this strange

shop called a 7-Eleven. It just so happened to be quite near the apartment building.

This was the first time I was walking into a modern-day store. The thousands of colorful items displayed on shelves, racks, and in the aisles were just too bedazzling and confusing to look at.

“What are we doing here?” I whispered fearfully in Alexis’s ear as we walked further into the store.

“We’re fixing our mid-day munchies,” Alexis said gleefully. “Catch!” She threw a huge bag of something called Doritos at me, which I caught at the last second. From the description written quite boldly across the bag, the contents seemed to be quite spicy. Spicy Nacho, whatever that meant.

“Here, you go, some Twizzlers, some fizzy gummy worms, Skittles, and a mega-size Mars bar!” Alexis just appeared out of a random aisle and unloaded the contents on my arms. I was already struggling to hold the overlarge bag of Doritos.

“One human cannot possibly eat all of this,” I said in protest.

“Just shut up and let me do this for you. You’ll get to see what you’ve been missing out on,” she said, trailing towards a machine that seemed to dispense red and blue colored ice.

“What is that?” I was too afraid to find out what that swirling liquid inside those containers was. It seemed like some classified military chemical was on display.

“That’s a Slurpee. Utterly cold, utterly delicious, and it’s gonna give you a brain freeze. Take your pick! Red or blue?”

“Okay, the blue one,” I said, finally giving in to my curiosity. As I said, decadent.

Five minutes later, when we both emerged from the shop with the junk food and the huge cups containing the Slurpees, I was at a total loss for where to sit and eat this hodgepodge meal.

“Come,” Alexis beckoned me. She was going behind the 7-Eleven building. Given my recent experience, I was a little too nervous as to what fresh hell she was hiding back there.

Behind the building, there was a lot of colorful wall art and a ton of colorful curse words.

“Is that like modern art?” I asked, pointing at the wall.

“That’s just graffiti. People use spray paints and vandalize all sorts of property. It’s counterculture. You know, punk, anarchy, hipster stuff,” she said.

“I don’t understand it. You must explain what all of that means sometime,” I said, still looking at a rather obscene cloud of blue paint spelling out the word “ASS!” What did that achieve? Painting that word on the back of a departmental store?

“Look here. You’re focusing on the wrong thing,” Alexis tugged at my sleeve.

It wasn’t until I had turned around to see what she was beckoning me towards that I gasped in awe. There was a deep chasm in the ground with a lot of slopes and a completely smooth surface. It resembled a swimming pool more than anything. Inside it, there were teenagers, kids, and some adults performing tricks on top of—

“They’re called skateboards,” Alexis said. “Now do as I do. Sit down at the edge of the skating rink. Put your feet down. Watch the skaters while you eat and drink.”

“All right,” I said, following her lead.

We sat side by side, watching as the skaters flew in the air, crashed on their knees, performed strange tricks with the board, and collided with each other. Alexis shared the giant bag of Doritos with me. Crispy, coarse, and spicy, those Doritos were burning a hole in my tongue. But thankfully, the ice-cold Slurpee immediately numbed the pain. I experienced what Alexis had called a brain freeze. I drank a little bit too much too fast, and my head felt like it had turned to ice.

Gorging on this weird combination of food made me realize just how much hungry I had been. Alexis showed me how to eat the Twizzlers. I was a bit disgusted by the look of the fizzy gummy worms, but Alexis assured me that those were not real worms and that I should try one of them before I made up my mind.

“Fine!” I exclaimed as I pulled one of the fizzy worms free and put it in my mouth. A sour explosion took place in my mouth, making my eyes water. “Holy crap, they’re delicious.”

“Told you,” Alexis said with a smug face. “Now try the Mars bar.”

“It’s just a thick slab of chocolate,” I said, looking at the bar and calculating if I’d be able to eat it all or not.

“Don’t think too much about it. Just close your eyes, take a bite, and then let me know what you think,” Alexis said.

I complied. This was all her idea. I had trusted her this far and was not let down. And by golly, she was absolutely right. The caramel, the chocolate, the nuts, and the thick texture of the whole bar made for an excellent amalgamation of velvety

flavor that filled my mouth immediately. Before I knew it, I was ravenously chomping down on the rest of the bar.

I couldn't remember the last time I had enjoyed myself like this.

"Hey, thanks for this," I said, feeling completely satiated and quenched.

"Oh, this is nothing," Alexis said, waving her hand at me. "Don't mention it."

"No. I should mention it. No one's ever taken the time out of their day to spend an entire morning with me doing nothing but shenanigans. It makes me feel like a child again. So innocent. So pure. And it was all so fun," I said.

"I just figured it would be a nice change of pace for you. If you want, we can always go back to my apartment and start surveilling Maurice on the emulator phone. But I'd rather we didn't do that. Out here, in this rink, there's no danger. No vampires, no two-faced werewolves, and no vengeful heirs seeking to poison you. It's just you and me and all the skaters in the rink," she said while sucking the chocolate off her fingers.

"It's like Buddhism," I said. "You know, finding Zen in doing nothing."

"I wouldn't say we've done nothing. We've just devoured thousands of calories each. And you're due for a sugar high any second now."

Now that she mentioned it, I did notice my fingertips buzzing with a current. I could see brighter, too. All the colors around me became deeper and more vivid. I turned to face Alexis.

She looked like a dream.

“Sugar crash aside, this is the most normal I’ve ever felt in my entire life,” I said, noticing for the first time how magnificently her hair blew in the wind, how her cheeks reflected the light of the sun, and how her eyes glinted every time she looked in my direction.

“I bet I can do you one better.” Alexis was positively grinning now. “Come on. I have a surprise for you.”

“Why are you being so nice to me? I haven’t earned it,” I said, feeling ashamed upon remembering how I’d been to her in the beginning.

Alexis sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. Then she tilted her head sideways, looking me straight in the eyes, and said, “Because we all fuck up. But that doesn’t mean we don’t deserve a second chance. Life is all about second chances. You know, it’s not entirely your fault that you’re having nightmares, are suffering from PTSD, and are prone to outbursts of anger. Your suffering was long, and it takes time to detox from all that. I’m just helping you get back to normal. Detox, so to speak. We all deserve peace, some more than others, and you look like you need it. Happy?”

I was happy. I just did not know how to tell her. At least not in words.

Chapter 15: Alexis

In Stephen King's magnum opus, The Dark Tower series, the term used for fate was ka. In his fantasy series that fabled the life of a lone gunslinger in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, ka was described as a wind. Ka was magical. Even though I didn't live in a world created by Stephen King, I adhered to the principles of fate. And sometimes, fate has a way of blowing like the wind and guiding you to the right place at the right time.

Such as what happened earlier today. Yesterday, when Will had spoken so kindly to me about me being smart and talented, I took his words to heart. Later, when he had left for his home after we'd shared that undefinable kiss, I stayed up all night for several reasons that included speculating on what I'd do for a living, checking on Maurice's emulated phone to see if he was talking to Ralph or Blair again, wondering what my kiss with Will meant, and trying to sleep but being unable to because of the wild energy coursing through my body.

It dawned on me that I was not going to go back to the diner. At least not now. Sooner or later, I'd have to face some of the pack members. It was kind of hard not to when you lived in the same city. So why not sooner?

At the start of the day, I got into my truck and headed down to the wharf, where Mallory, one of the pack members, was just getting set up in her office. Back when I used to work data entry shifts at the wharf, Mallory was my supervisor. As far as people go, Mallory was a stone-cold, disaffected, calculating

person, but that didn't mean that she didn't extend the odd helping hand every now and then.

"I see your plight, and I raise you one of my own," Mallory had said at around six in the morning when I'd gone to ask her if there was a job opening that would be worthy of my time and effort. "More and more fishermen are leaving this place. That means what? Deserted ships. We can't have deserted ships on an active wharf. The harbor becomes overpopulated. We can't decommission those ships either. Where do they go?"

"I'm guessing some sort of warehouse?" I'd replied, not really in the mood for her riddles.

"Right you are!" Mallory said. "But here's my plight. The warehouse has been nonfunctional for years now. Yeah, I agree; the fault lies with me. I could have been a better manager, but when your resources are stretched as thin as mine, you can't spare any men or women to go handle the warehouse."

"I'll do it," I said. "Does it pay more?"

"You mean, does it pay more than the mindless data entry stuff you used to do? Of course! But have you ever managed inventory before? Do you know the first thing about warehouses? Can you make sure that all the decommissioned ships go in there and are stacked atop each other? Will you take responsibility for the biannual maintenance of those ships? Kid, it pays almost two thousand dollars more than your last job, but it's a ton of responsibility." Malloy had made sure to make the job as unappealing as she could with her eloquent verbal description, but I knew her better than she knew me.

She was dissuading me. She didn't know how desperate I was for a job.

"I'll do it. All of what you've said. It's gonna keep me busy and away from people. Right? I'll be the only one there? I won't have to interact with the wharfmen and the fishermen and all the rest of the pack members?" I asked.

"There's an automated crane in the warehouse that picks up all the ships and places them on the shelves. All you gotta do is feed the coordinates and watch the thing do its robot magic. What more do you need? There ain't gonna be anybody there with you. The job gets kinda lonely at times. But you get to pick your hours as long as you do all the work within the week."

I agreed to the job, and as soon as I got the keys to the warehouse, I went down there with my first assignment. The warehouse was at the far-left end of the wharf. It had an indoor harbor from where the crane could pick up moored ships. The crane wasn't as big as I was expecting. It was a relief that it was automated. I didn't know the first thing about working a manual crane, but these automated ones were just a YouTube tutorial away from understanding.

The fated moment came when I was making my way through the warehouse, tallying the inventory, and making sure that all the old ships were accounted for. That's when I saw it.

That's when I saw Will.

"Can I open my eyes now?" The floor is slippery and wet!" Will protested.

“Oh, just trust me,” I said, holding his hand and guiding him inside the warehouse, positioning him right in front of the harbor, where his surprise bobbed up and down in the water. “Okay, now! Open your eyes.”

I was staring at Will, who was staring at his surprise. His face had turned long, and his mouth hung open, his eyes round, and his cheeks stretched to their limits.

“Is this...”

“The Grimm Reaper!” I squealed.

Although its wood was old, with its polish chipped off at most places, and although it could use a couple of coats of paint, Will’s old ship that he’d sailed across Europe to America was still reflecting its old resplendence through its size, its sails, and its massive hull. It was bigger than your average sailboat but smaller than a yacht. I hadn’t gotten the chance to go inside it or climb above deck. I wanted to surprise Will first.

“This is my ship,” Will whispered, his mouth covered by his hands. “I thought it was destroyed or lost or sold or worse. I thought it had sunk to the bottom of the sea!”

“I was checking inventory in the warehouse when I first saw it. At first, I thought I was hallucinating,” I said, unable to hold my excitement. “But then I saw the name painted on the side. It doesn’t look exactly like it does in the old pictures, but it’s the same ship, right?”

“Oh, God in heaven, it’s the same ship. The same one that I captained across the ocean with my entire pack inside it.”

“How’s that even possible? How did you fit around twenty or so people in it? I mean, it’s big, but it’s not that big,” I said as

we walked closer to the harbor to take a good look at it.

“We were packed under the deck, body against body. It wasn’t about comfort. It was about voyaging to safety. This is the vessel that saved all our lives,” Will said.

“And now it’s yours again,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Hell yeah. I checked the archives in the record room. The ownership document still has your name on it.”

Will was still in disbelief. It was evident in the way he kept walking around the harbor, looking at the Grimm Reaper. He squinted and stared at every part of the ship for ten whole minutes while I stood there in complete silence, watching the gentle waves come inside the warehouse harbor.

Then Will suddenly jumped aboard, touching the handles on the wheel, walking to the capstan, then to the main deck, and then eventually down the hatch. After he did not appear for a long time, I got worried and jumped aboard the ship as well. From there, I went down the stairs into the cabin.

“Will?”

“Look,” Will said, pointing to a notch in the wooden wall of the cabin. I went closer to take a better look at it. It was dark in the cabin, with the only light coming from the dusty windows. But I could still make out the W.G. carved with a knife on the wood. “It really is my ship.”

“What are you going to do with it?” I asked. “Does it make you happy, being reunited with it?”

“Happy? Happy doesn’t even begin to cover it. I feel as if I’ve been made whole again. This ship, for the longest part, was an extension of me. I trusted this vessel with my life and the lives of all my pack members. It feels like I’ve reconnected with an old friend,” Will said.

Then he turned to me, standing close enough that I could feel his breath on my face.

“How can I ever thank you for this?” He whispered.

“Will, come on, it’s not a big deal,” I said, but these words came out of my mouth on their own. There I was, entranced again, captivated by his presence so close to me. My body was tingling, and my extremities were jittery.

“Your capacity to be kind to me continues to amaze me,” he said. Then he lifted his hand and placed it under my chin. He tilted my face up till both our faces were perfectly aligned. “How can someone be so kind to someone who has treated them so badly?”

“Will...” I pleaded, unable to foresee what was going to happen.

“You are not like any person I have ever met,” Will said. “You are—”

He never finished his thought. Instead, he grabbed me by my waist and pulled me closer to him. I pressed myself against him, and our lips touched.

This time, there was no inhibition in our kiss. I kissed him fiercely, and he returned the favor, running his hands over my body, my lips in his mouth, and sucking on them.

A moan escaped me as the pleasure started blooming all over my body. I raised my hands to his face, cupping his cheeks, feeling his hair, grabbing the nape of his neck, my body burning with desire.

He cupped my breasts gently in his hands, caressing them as he glided his grip from my chest to my waist, from my waist to my hips, and then he lifted me by my hips, pressing my body against his.

I could feel him stiffen. His hard shaft bulged against my inner thigh. I wound my arms around his neck and hoisted myself up till he was lifting me in his arms. He passionately pinned my body against the wall of the cabin, making the entire boat swoon as he pressed me harder against the wall, burying his face in the small of my neck, kissing, licking, sucking, cherishing the taste of my skin on his tongue.

“Will!” I moaned.

This sudden utterance broke our sexual reverie. He looked at me with concern, then whispered, “What?”

“I have never done this before,” I panted.

“Neither have I,” he said, then kissed me on my mouth, and our tongues clashed. I could still taste the Slurpee on his tongue, and the sudden introduction of that flavor in my mouth turned me on even more than I already was.

I was back on my feet now. Will was gazing at me with a look that I had never seen before. It was a look of love. Unmistakably. Being with him here felt right. I could feel myself forgiving his previous lapses in the wake of this new

persona that had awoken inside him. All I wanted to do was to accept him and for him to accept me.

But so much was left unspoken as we embraced each other again, smothering the other with our kisses.

I could feel wetness emerging between my legs. Underneath my shirt and my bra, my nipples were getting hard. The primal part of me, the part that was on autopilot, guiding my intuition, wanted me to take off my shirt and my bra and show him my breasts.

I took off my shirt and flung it across the cabin. Will held my body in his hands as I took off my bra. He lowered his face to my breasts, kissing them first, then playing with my nipples, gently licking them, taking them in his mouth, and pressing his lips firmly against them.

Pleasure throbbed in my chest as he handled my breasts with his warm hands. But it wasn't enough. I needed more. As if he was reading my mind, he took off his shirt, revealing a toned body riddled with scars. Right now, I wasn't fixating on the scars. My mouth was becoming wet looking at his pecs, his ripped abs, and his muscular arms. I let myself loose on him, kissing his body with a ferocity that would leave hickeys later.

In the midst of all this, our pants came off till we were lying next to each other on the wooden floor of the swaying ship, only in our underpants. Even in the little light, I could make out the shape of his erection bulging in his underpants. I wanted to touch it.

I wrapped my hand around his cock, gently squeezing it and gasping audibly when it twitched in my hand. Will slid off his underpants, now lying next to me entirely nude.

I promptly responded in kind, taking off my panties and throwing them on top of the pile of clothes.

Skin to skin, we lay onto each other, feeling every part of each other's body that our hands could reach, kissing each other with a deepening intensity that left us hoarse.

Out of the periphery of my vision, I saw his penis twitching wildly as my nude body slid over his. It was fascinating and also the first actual dick I'd ever seen. When I slid down between his knees to take a closer look at his glistening member, his immaculate shaft, and the shiny tip, my mouth became wetter than it already was.

I kissed his cock, slobbering it with spit, then gently wrapped my lips around the tip, feeling it fill my mouth. Above me, Will moaned loudly as I let his cock go further into my mouth. My tongue slid against his shaft, and my lips wound tight around the tip. My mouth was filled with his scent and the salty taste of his throbbing penis.

Will wasn't lying idly as I sucked him; his fingers found their way between my legs, touching me where I yearned to be touched. His gentle prodding and fingering unleashed a carnal pleasure unlike I had ever felt before. My eyes welled up with tears of pure pleasure as I moaned louder and louder, my voice echoing in the empty chamber.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on my back, my eyes closed, my hands on my breasts, and Will's head between my legs, kissing my pussy, gently licking away at its wetness, sending waves upon waves of cresting pleasure up my vagina and into the rest of my body.

In yet another haze of fleeting motions, he was lying on top of me. My legs were parted open, and his cock was on the brink of penetration. I grabbed his head and lowered it till our lips were locked again and our tongues swirling around in each other's mouths.

Then he slid in me slowly. At first, there was pain, sharp enough to draw a small yelp. But as he thrust himself deeper into me, the pain gave way to a profound sexual pleasure deep within my body. I lifted my legs and wrapped them around his hips, trapping him in this position so his only recourse would be to thrust and thrust.

His bulging cock slid in and out of my warm, tight, soft, wet pussy, sending quivers up my pelvis, making my thighs shiver, and turning my whole body hot.

Louder and louder, I moaned, unable to stifle myself, as he fucked me steadily. I could not take it anymore. My nails dug into his back and tugged at his skin as he slid into me.

The crescendo of our mutual movement was a bright, intense, and powerful burst of orgasm that rocked my entire body and left me lying there, panting, moaning, and sweating.

As he came, he collapsed on me, breathing hot air on my face, then slid off me and lay beside me, panting just as loudly as I was.

As if to remind us of the act that we had just performed, the ship swayed and swayed on the otherwise still harbor water and kept ebbing till it swayed no more, leaving us lying in each other's arms, tired and sated.

Chapter 16: Will

I lay there with my heart beating fast, my breath barely caught up, and my body drenched in sweat. Next to me, Alexis lay, with the beams of light coming from the windows lighting up her elegant body. Even now, spent of all energy, I became aroused again just by looking at her heaving breasts, her porcelain belly, and her slender legs.

The worst part was I was at a total loss for what to say.

“So...that happened,” Alexis spoke once she had caught her breath.

“What do you know? On a long enough timeline, even ninety-something years old werewolves can lose their virginites,” I said, immediately regretting that those were the first post-coital words out of my mouth.

“Allow me a little disbelief here, if you will, Will,” Alexis said in a high-pitched voice that was a prelude to her breaking out into a fit of laughter. “Were you really a virgin?”

“Of course,” I said, turning to my side and facing her. “Why do you ask?”

“Because let’s just say your technique was not amateurish,” she said, blushing deeply.

“Neither was yours, if I may say so,” I said. Even now, almost half an hour after it had happened, I could not forget the sensation of her warm and wet mouth on my member.

“I know what it is,” Alexis said, propping herself on her elbows. “Neither of us has done it before, so we don’t have prior experience to compare it to, which effectively makes it both the best and the worst sex we’ve ever had.”

I threw my head back and laughed freely. She joined in. It was a beautiful moment, both of us laughing, lying against each other, and recovering our collective strengths.

“But was it enjoyable for you?” I asked after our laughter had subsided.

“Yes. And for you? Did you experience release?”

“I believe I did.”

“Well, we broke the rules we set at the start of the day. About nothing sexual transpiring.”

“Oops,” I said. “It’s all your fault.”

Alexis sat up and looked at me in shock. “How the fuck is it my fault?”

“You just up and out of nowhere decided to give me the biggest gift anyone could ever give me. You gave me a part of my old life back. This ship. It symbolizes so much—struggle, perseverance, strength, and courage in the face of the unknown. You don’t even know how much it means to me,” I said.

“You’re saying I seduced you with your ship?” The bottom half of Alexis’s face was trying hard to suppress laughter, while the top half of her face was scowling uninhibitedly at me.

“I’m only jesting,” I said. “I guess now’s as good a time as any to state that the force that binds us together is stronger than either of us had imagined.”

“Fate is strange. The more you fight it, the more obstinately it shows that it’s not something meant to be trifled with. You push; it pushes back. You lance it, and it pierces a hole in your reality. It’s for this reason that no one can change the past, and no one can truly control the future.”

I was not expecting this high-brow answer from her. It left me speechless momentarily as I digested this platitude and simultaneously applied it to my life. Perhaps fate deemed it that I was to be imprisoned for seventy-six years because I had stubbornly pursued a woman who was never meant to be my mate. A punishment doled by destiny. Maybe it was ironic that I only realized how much I needed Alexis after I had criticized and rejected her. This frame of reference humbled me, making me realize something that I could not say to her right away: Given the turn of events, fate had rejected my rejection of Alexis as my mate.

How else could I explain the fact that I had just made love to her? That my heart had somehow softened to her? Had fate guided her actions, bringing her closer to me?

“Did you get lost there somewhere in your thoughts, Will?”

“Shouldn’t we check in on Maurice’s phone?” I asked.

“Maliha taught me how to record all outgoing and incoming calls on that phone. We’ll see what he’s been up to,” Alexis said. She got up and started putting her clothes back on. “I’ll let you know if there’s a new development. Okay? In the meantime, you are not to go looking for danger.”

“Oh, things have changed now that I have my ship. I’m going to start repairing it so I can take it out to the sea. And don’t worry, I’ll keep out of danger,” I said, half-heartedly putting my clothes back on.

“All right, then, you better go now. I work here, and if the wharf manager drops by, she’s going to have a fit if she sees me and you in the warehouse,” Alexis said.

That was my cue to leave. It was better that we didn’t stick around to talk about the implications of our love-making. It was a completely unexpected thing, and we needed some time before we could talk about it or what all of this meant for us, if it meant anything at all.

I watched her climb up the stairs and exit the ship, and although I didn’t call out to her, I wished I had.

I wanted her to stay.

But this, this was good enough too. I had my ship back. If this didn’t give me a new lease on life, I didn’t know what would. All it needed was a little bit of paint, some grease in the gears and joints, a nice polish on the wood, and a new set of sails.

For one glorious moment, there was not a single thought of the horrors that I had been through, the vampires that were looming around town, the treachery that Maurice had performed, and the impending danger in the form of Blair Beckett.

For one glorious moment, it was just me, my ship, and the memory of the time I had spent with Alexis.

The boat came as a blessing in my life. It brought back knowledge that had been buried deep within the recesses of my mind. In another life, I had a strong tie to ships. I would engineer them, work on their engines, maintain their bodies, and when all was said and done, I would sail them. A time before the war had broken out. I earned enough money to buy my own ship.

I wanted to restore the Grimm Reaper to its original splendor.

I sailed it out of the warehouse and moored it near the harbor, far enough from the main wharf so that it would not disturb other ships but close enough that I could run back and forth to the maintenance department and get all the supplies I needed.

Even back in Germany, whenever I was working on a ship, people would gather around to watch, chime in with their advice, and talk to each other. Just men being men. There was something woven into our DNA that when a man worked, others were drawn to him. Thus what would have been a rather boring ordeal became a communal effort, all the men talking, helping around, drinking beers, and smoking cigarettes.

As soon as I had moored my boat and started working on it, the same thing happened. Idle men from the wharf, workers on their breaks, sailors, and fishermen saw me from afar and gradually huddled around, offering to help, handing me paintbrushes, buckets of paint, a cold beer, and a funny-smelling cigarette that I refused.

Only some of them were my pack members. The rest of them were complete strangers treating me as if I had always been one of them.

I worked on my ship, painting over the chipped paint, replacing worn wooden boards, and nailing in loose pieces. Those who were around me kept helping, asking me all sorts of questions about the ship and where I had gotten such a fine specimen. I knew better than to tell them the plain old truth, so I just led them on with a far-fetched story.

This routine repeated itself the next day and the day after that. I was glad that I got a chance to work on the Grimm Reaper, not just because of the communal nature of the activity but also because I was quite close to Alexis. Even if I didn't see her, I knew that she was in the warehouse, safe.

By the fourth day, not only was I finished with the reparations, but I also knew everyone who gathered around by their first names, which was saying something, considering there were almost a dozen men.

"You're gonna have to keep up with tradition," Tony, a mechanic who worked on engines, said. "You finished the job; now you gotta buy us all beers at the bar."

"Is that so? Is that why you louts have been standing around here for four days?" I said, wiping off the sweat from my face with a dirty cloth. Then I slapped Tony on the shoulder and laughed loudly. "What the hell! Why not?"

"Ah, good man you are, Will Grimm. A good man," Tony said and clapped me on the back. Ronny, Marty, Sid, Simon, Albert, and Theo, who were all independent fishermen, cheered loudly and lifted their fists in the air.

"To the Grimm Reaper and her captain!" Martel, a janitor at the wharf, exclaimed, making the others join in. Soon they were all chanting "Grimm Reaper!" over and over again.

“Come now, fella, it’s gonna be curfew in a couple of hours,” Hanson, a security guard who made rounds around the wharf during the day, said impatiently.

“As if you need another beer, Hanson, you old drunk. I bet you can’t tell how many fingers I’m holding up,” I said, holding up two fingers in front of him, giggling as he squinted in concentration.

“Come on, man. I painted the starboard!” Hanson said.

“All right, all right. Let’s go to the bar. I’m buying,” I said, finally giving in. At this, the men cheered louder than ever. I felt so at peace here, with my work on the ship finished, around friendly folk who humored me and told me tales from their lives. Above everything, I felt normal. These men were simpler, more my pace, and did not talk in terms I did not understand. Their faces were creased with lines, their heads mostly bald thanks to the salty sea air, and their hands bore calluses—all of which were signs of hard work.

So we went to the bar, and I ordered a round of drinks for the folks. We sang old sea shanties, told each other dirty jokes, talked about women, and bet each other how many shots we could drink without throwing up. I had fun, to say the least. So much fun that I lost track of time. When I looked at the clock again, it was nine at night.

I excused myself from the company, bidding goodbye to them and making a superfluous promise that we’ll do it again sometime. It was late enough as it was, and I had promised Alexis that I would stay out of danger.

If experience told me anything, it was that danger lurked around at night.

I stuck to the main road, relying on the arc-sodium lamp lights to guide me back to the commune. I had learned that from here to Grimm Abode, the single road was lit with arc-sodium lamps. It was the only good thing that the mayor and previous alpha had accomplished, or so the pack members told me.

Just then, as I was about to head up the road, I heard rustling noises behind me. Thinking that it was probably a cat or stray dog, I ignored it and kept walking. Then the rustling changed into an altogether different sound: footsteps.

“You’re a lot taller than they tell me,” a voice said. A voice I had heard once before.

“And who is going about telling you things about me?” I asked, turning to face Ralph, the leader of the vampires.

Ralph laughed a laugh that was tense with menace. He approached me casually, whistling, hands in his pockets and a strut in his steps. He held out his hand. I could not believe his audacity. When I did not shake it, he put it back in his pocket.

“Ralph Emerson, named after the great Ralph Waldo Emerson. I don’t think we’ve met,” he said. “You must be the new talk of the town, Will Grimm.”

“What do you want?”

“Oh, I just wanted to size you up, see for myself what the hoopla was all about. Apparently, you’ve been giving some people, including my people, a run for their money. I can’t have that, Will. I have a business to run, you see. Mouths to feed. Well, you know what I mean. If I stopped my business today, could you imagine what all the vampires across the state would do if they didn’t get their daily fix of blood? There

would be unchecked chaos. People would die.” As Ralph said this, he took out a cigarette and lit it. “May I offer you a Pall Mall?”

“You have drawn a dark curtain over this town. Your goons patrol the streets. You are smuggling not just blood but dangerous drugs into the country. On top of that, you threatened my pack when your men came to attack the commune. You treat this town as your hunting grounds. Tell me one good reason why I shouldn’t just kill you right now?” There was that rage again, making my veins throb, making me see red.

“You appear out of nowhere, attack my patrollers in the forest, kill many of my men outside your commune, disrupt my business, and force my hand. Why don’t you give me a reason why I shouldn’t kill you right now?”

It was a good thing that I was outside of town limits. A drunken werewolf was powerful and capable of immense destruction and bloodshed. I shifted into my wolf form and growled at Ralph.

“Now we’re talking,” Ralph said, grinning. He threw his cigarette away and lifted his fists in the air. He bared his fangs and hissed at me.

He was fast, but I was faster. Every time he moved swiftly to attack me, I attacked him first. I tore through his leather jacket with my claws, ripped open his skin, and threw him in the air.

He resiliently got up and took a pistol out of his jacket, aiming it at me. I swerved, barely dodging the first shot, then ducked, narrowly avoiding the second bullet. As he kept shooting, I

kept running toward him. I reached him just as his clip emptied and slashed the gun out of his hands.

Enough was enough. I tackled him and pinned him to the ground.

“If I die, my people will rebel. Do you want the blood of the people of Fiddler’s Green on your hands?”

I shifted back, now standing over him with my foot on his chest.

“I’m not afraid of you or your people,” I said.

“Fine! I surrender, then,” Ralph said. “You won. Are you going to kill some defenseless old vermin such as me? Wouldn’t that go against your principles?”

I lifted him by his collar, holding his face close to mine so he could see the hatred seething through me. “I have no principles when it comes to vampires.”

“Good, and I don’t have any principles when it comes to werewolves either. Which is why I hope you understand why I’m doing this.” He cackled like a madman, then suddenly brought a dagger out from one of his pockets. I let him go just in time to miss what would have been otherwise a lethal stab.

But now Ralph stood free and far away, out of my reach.

“It would have been so simple if I’d killed you just then,” Ralph said. “But it’s not very courteous to murder your foes on the first meeting, is it?” To my surprise, he walked over to me, stowing his dagger away back in his pocket. “Here’s what would have happened if you’d gone through with killing me.”

Ralph snapped his fingers.

I saw around fifty red dots appear on my body at once.

“Oh, yeah,” Ralph smirked. “We’ve upgraded. And we’ll be keeping an eye on you. This was a warning call. Next time there won’t be one. Stay out of our way, and we’ll stay out of yours.”

He snapped again, making all the laser dots disappear.

“Au Revoir, Wilhelm Grimm,” Ralph said, waving his hand as he walked back into the wilderness. “You’ve been warned.”

Chapter 17: Alexis

“The audacity of that fucking asshole!” I yelled and angrily threw a huge rock into the shallow depths of the warehouse harbor. My body quivered as Will finished telling me of his confrontation with Ralph.

“I was outnumbered and with snipers, apparently,” Will said. “I don’t know anyone who’s gotten shot with around fifty snipers and lived to tell the tale. A single sniper bullet is bigger than my index finger and thicker than my thumb. Now imagine if you’re shot with fifty of them at the same time. Your body would explode. For the briefest moment, you’d be alive to experience all of that pain, and then you’d die an agonizing death.”

“I wouldn’t put it past those fucking vampires to do something like that,” I said. “Every time they do something like this, I’m reminded of the night they killed my parents. I was young, but I remember every second of it. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of that horrible night.”

“Perhaps if you share with me, it will take some of the pain away,” Will said.

“Fine.” I took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. It was my break time anyway. Today there was nothing much to do at the warehouse. “Maybe it will help.”

Dad was the pack’s alpha, which meant that we didn’t get many chances to enjoy a family holiday. He was a very hands-

on person, concerned for every single member of the pack. Mom never minded that. She loved him for who he was, and she loved the fact that he cared so fiercely for the pack.

Mom spent most of her time recording songs in the home studio. By popular demand of the townsfolk, she'd visit the town on the weekends to perform her music. Bars, clubs, restaurants, small-time gigs like that. Mother never had her eyes on achieving fame or anything like that. Music was her singular passion. It wasn't as if she didn't get the chance to become famous. Some of her songs made it to the big labels, and they even offered to sign her up, but mom always said the same thing to them. That she was not doing it for the money. She did not want to taint her love for music with something as fickle as money.

I grew up in the most harmonious household. Mom would always be humming, and dad would always be dancing to her tunes. It was a perfect life. Dad taught history at the community college every alternate day. He had a degree in history from the University of Maine. Given that he was the alpha, he could only spare a few hours every day to go teach a lecture at the college.

The day they died was special. It was my birthday. Mom wanted to do something big, and dad agreed with her. They took me to the Derry Carnival in Maine. For me, it was everything I had ever wanted. Roller-coasters, clown cars, merry-go-rounds, and hundreds of stalls where I could play games, buy food, or watch the performers do tricks. I still remember how it all smelled. It smelled of roasted peanuts and cotton candy.

We had a nice family dinner at a quaint little restaurant on our way back. Then, to my surprise, mom got up on the stage and even performed a special song of hers, earning much applause from the crowd.

While returning to Fiddler's Green, I was sitting in the back seat, a conical birthday hat on my head, party streamers in my hands, and my eyes on the big pile of gifts wrapped and bowed. I couldn't wait to go home and tear each of these boxes open and see what my parents had gifted me.

But that never happened. At the entrance of Fiddler's Green, our truck's tires gave out. Dad got out to fix it. Mom turned around and looked at me with her eyes filled with love.

"Did my baby have fun today?"

I nodded at her and smiled a big toothless grin.

"We love you, Lexi," mom said, ruffling my hair and taking off my birthday hat. "Always remember that."

The next thing I knew, my dad was in a verbal altercation with two men wearing long trench coats. As I peeked from behind the window, I saw the two guys jump him with a crowbar, never even giving him a chance to shift and fight them. They bludgeoned him to death in front of my eyes.

"All right there, love?" one of them said in an unmistakable accent as he poked his head through the window and grabbed my mom by the throat. "I'm afraid it's lights out for you and your hubby, dearie."

As mom began to shift, the vampire let her go and backed away, taking out his gun and aiming it at her. Mom leaped out of the car and slashed at the vampire, tearing away at his face.

But before she could do much more, the sound of a gunshot rang through the silent night, leaving my mom lying in a pool of her own blood, whimpering weakly as life escaped her.

“What do we do, bruv?” One of the vampires asked the other.

“We leave. Your face’s all ripped up, innit?”

“Bollocks. What do we do about the kid?”

“Ah, leave her be. You don’t kill a kid on their birthday. It’s bad karma.”

Then the vampires surrounded my car and peeped in through the window at me.

“It’s a pity you had to see that, kid,” the one with the slashes ripped across his face said, grinning with a bloody face.

“It’s not personal, little pup. We were following orders,” the other one said and then burst into hysterical laughter.

I did not know how long I stayed in the backseat, crying, petrified, and unable to move. I didn’t dare to look out of the window. I couldn’t perceive what had happened. How could it be that a day could be as magical as it was an hour ago and then turn into the worst nightmare just moments later?

My parents, dead?

“It was early in the morning when some people from the pack came looking for us. They took me out of the car and brought me back to the commune. I don’t remember the funeral. I was too mortified to leave my home,” I said. “Even to this day, I can’t bring myself to go to the cemetery where they’re buried. It’s just too painful.”

“I am so sorry to hear that,” Will said, putting his hand on my shoulder and squeezing it. “You never got to say goodbye to your parents.”

“What do you mean?”

“When my parents died, they did so because of old age. Even though it was still painful to see them go, we exchanged our final words. It was oddly poetic. I buried them myself. I got to say goodbye. You never got the chance to say goodbye,” Will said.

“It’s a little too late to do that, isn’t it?”

“You can always say goodbye to them. Come with me.” Will held his hand out. I took it and hoisted myself to my feet.

“Where are we going?”

“To the cemetery. I think it’s going to be good for you. You can bid them farewell, get to say what you never got a chance to say to them.”

“Will, I don’t think I’m ready for that,” I said. I was still feeling emotionally raw from recounting that horrific story.

“They’re never really gone, you know,” Will said, taking my hand in his hands. “They’re here with us. In here,” he put my hand on my heart. “And in here.” He guided my hand to my head.

The cemetery was in a part of town I had never visited before. It was to the left of the Grimm Abode, cradled between the commune and the town. It was surrounded by Fiddler’s Forest on two sides.

It was a beautiful place. Long green grass waved in the wind. Flowers grew out of the graves of those buried below. Many wreaths were hung from the tombstones of the dead. But the most beautiful thing here was the giant ash tree at the center of the cemetery, its branches extending so far and wide that it was almost covering the entire place in its shadow. Nearby, a stream of water babbled as it wove through the cemetery.

Other than the sound of running water, birds chirping, and the gentle rustle of leaves and grass in the wind, the place was utterly quiet.

Wordlessly, we sifted through the graves, reading names that we didn't recognize, pondering what kind of lives these people had lived. Will came to a halt and pointed to two graves adjacent to each other.

"Look, Alexis. Nina Simone. Simon Richards. Your parents," he whispered.

I didn't have any words to describe what I was experiencing. It wasn't sadness. I had been sad over the death of my parents for years. This was a different feeling. I didn't know what it was. Just looking at their graves, covered with green grass, made me feel like they were here. And that they were letting me know that wherever they were, they were okay and thinking about me. I felt as if they were trying to tell me that they were looking over me.

I understood then that I was experiencing closure in one of its many forms. Seeing their graves conjured a mental image of them lying together, hand in hand, their faces smiling, their eyes closed. It was as if they were resting in some

metaphysical plain where things like pain and sadness didn't exist. They were resting.

"Can I have some moments to myself, please?" I asked Will. He nodded solemnly and backed off a few steps.

"Hey, mom. Hey dad," I said, kneeling beside their graves. "I'm sorry it took such a long time for me to come here. I hope you understand that I was still going through grief. Not a day goes by that I don't miss you. Your singing, mom. Your dancing, dad. It's like whenever I close my eyes, I can see you two singing and dancing with each other, and it makes me jealous that I'm not there with you, wherever you are. I wish you were here. Your little girl is all grown up now, but she still needs her parents."

At that moment, a strong, cool wind blew around me, rustling the fallen leaves and making the grass whisper. If I had needed a sign, this was it. It was good enough for me.

"My...err...Will told me that I should come to say goodbye to you, but now that I'm here, it feels like I've come here to say hello. I hope your souls are at peace." Then I kissed my hands and placed them on each grave.

I stood there for a long time, looking at their graves and reading the words on their tombstones. Mom's tombstone said: "Nina Simone. Loving Mother, Caring Wife, and an Exceptional Singer. May your voice join those of the angels."

Dad's tombstone said: "Simon Richards. Loving Father, Devoted Husband, and Brave Leader. May you feast in the halls of your forefathers."

When I turned around, Will wasn't there. He was standing on the other side of the cemetery. When I walked over to him, I found him looking at my grandmother's grave.

"Sometimes I imagine how it would have been if I had never been imprisoned," Will whispered, looking at Ariana's tombstone intently. "This could have been me."

"Huh?"

"Ariana is dead. Look at all the graves around her. All of these belong to the people who came with me from Germany to America. All of my pack members. If Edward Beckett hadn't experimented upon me, I would have still been a regular old werewolf, and I would have died. I would have missed out on so much."

"Will, can we go?" I asked. "I know you said that this would bring me some sort of closure, but the longer I linger here, the more unnerved I'm getting."

"What do you think would make you feel better? You made me feel better. The least I can do is repay that favor," Will said.

I did not want to say it. I knew that uttering something so dark would forever change the way Will would think about me. It would go against most of the principles I stood for.

"Tell me," he insisted.

"You're gonna hate me for suggesting it," I said, afraid of what I was about to say.

"Judgement-free zone. Lay it on me," Will said.

“The thought that the vampires who killed my parents are still out there...it’s tearing me apart. Do I not deserve the right to take revenge?” My heart was palpitating now, and my mouth was completely dry. How would he respond to this?

To my surprise, he said, “You’re perfectly within your right to do that. I’ll even help you,” Will said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

Will had spoken so many times of the uncontrollable metaphorical beast of rage that he wasn’t able to control. I understood him now. As I stood there, imagining the two vampires who had murdered my parents in front of me, I felt the same beast stir inside me.

Chapter 18: Will

It was not going to be like searching for a needle in a haystack. From Alexis's account, I already knew two key details about the vampires who had killed her parents. One:

They spoke in thick British accents. Two: One of them had slash scars on his face.

I was a little apprehensive about how I would go about finding two particular vampires, but then it struck me. I was the alpha. All I had to do was issue a command to my pack, and they would do as I wished. So I did exactly that. I issued the order to the entire pack to keep an eye out for two particular vampires, describing them as best as I could.

Alexis felt like a changed person after the visit to the cemetery. While we did not meet all that much after that, I checked in on her every now and then at the warehouse. Not too much as to appear clingy and not too little as to make her think I was disaffected. Despite her opening up to me and getting some sort of closure by visiting the cemetery, I could still feel that she was in pain.

I know how I would have felt if Edward, the man responsible for my misery, had still been alive, and I would have been incapable of taking revenge. I was no stranger to revenge. Contrary to popular opinion, it did change things. At the very least, it doled out justice. At best, it evened the karmic scales of the universe.

I trusted my pack. In the brief time that I had spent as their alpha, I had trained them well. I could trust that they'd be able

to hold their own if they got into a fight. Lately, it seemed that they had started accepting me as their leader. They were friendlier to me now. Sometimes, they'd invite me to their homes for tea or dinner. People were warmer towards me than when I had first assumed the role. The most probable explanation for that was that I'd kept a lid on my anger and my outbursts for long enough for people to overlook or forget it.

In the meantime, Alexis told me that she was keeping a tab on what Maurice was doing through the emulator phone. Mostly he was concerned with winning the next mayoral election. For the most part, he was lying low. I recalled the night when I had spied on him meeting Ralph in person. Alexis corroborated it and told me that she had seen him come out of Beckett Pharma's building. Both of us concluded that the man, as deceptive as he was, played things close to the chest and did most of his dealings in real life rather than on the phone. That would explain his sparse cellular activity.

Eventually, it turned out to be Vincent who tracked down the two vampires. I hadn't said this to anyone, but I knew deep in my heart that if there was someone in the pack who could accomplish this task, it was Vincent. That boy was the smartest kid I had ever met. Other than Maliha, who was smart but in an extremely twisted way. Vincent was more along the lines of wholesome.

"So I did a little spying, but don't worry, I was careful enough not to get seen or caught," Vincent said to me on the eve he made his discovery. We were in my home's living room, sitting at the table, drinking beers.

"So, how did you find them?" I asked. "Was it difficult?"

“It was rather difficult now that you mention it. There are hundreds of vampires roaming around, and almost any two of them could match the description that you gave us. At night, they spread all over Fiddler’s Green, across the forest, and everywhere in between, ensuring their trucks make it out of the cove safely onto the highway. I figured it was going to be impossible to track all of them at night. But then, the best idea came to my mind,” Vincent said, barely able to hold himself back with excitement. His eyes were lit with fascination, and his face kept curling into a grin. “They all leave from the same place. The cove! That’s their only entrance and exit point.”

“That does make sense. They live there, after all,” I agreed. “Their ships go into the cove, and their trucks come out of it.”

“Exactly! So, if there was ever going to be a time to identify two vampires from a sea of hundreds of them, it was at the entrance. And I did that. I found them.”

“How?”

“Well, in the morning, when the vampires can’t come out into the sun, when they’re hiding deep within the darkness of the cove, I snuck around to the entrance and hid a long-range wireless mic there. Then I stayed put and waited for the night while listening to the mic’s audio. When the vampires started coming out, most of them were talking in your standard American accent, except for two chatty fellows who were talking in a cockney accent. I tagged them using binoculars and even confirmed that one of them had scars on his face. Here’s the best part, though: I know exactly where they are!”

“Good man, how do you know that?”

“Well, I followed them all night. They don’t just patrol the roads.”

“Go on, then. What is it that they do?”

Vincent grinned harder. “I guess they’re supposed to be on patrol shifts, but they take a detour in the forest and shack up in an abandoned building. I guess it was a forest ranger’s station. But that’s not even the interesting part. They’re apparently dealing some methamphetamine on the side. I peeked in through the window and saw them messing around with stolen high school laboratory equipment, making crystal meth.”

“Is that a drug?”

“They call it poor man’s cocaine. It’s quite dangerous and bad for your health. It rots your teeth. You can overdose on it and die,” Vince said. “I figure they’re dealing on the side.”

“And they gather there every night?”

“I’ve been following them for two nights and found them in there both times,” Vince said.

“One last thing,” I said. “When the vampires were leaving the cove, did any of them carry sniper rifles with them?”

“Not a single one of them had a rifle,” Vincent said. “Why?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, feeling a bit dumb for being played like that. But that would change tonight. More importantly, I had to break the news to Alexis.

It was not a look that I had ever seen on her face before. I was suddenly apprehensive, thinking that I had made a huge

mistake bringing her to where the two vampires hung around. This could get ugly. Alexis did not move nor scowl or quiver. She simply stared as a predator does while stalking its prey.

“All this time, I have been tortured with the recurring image of these two assholes killing my parents, and this is what they’ve been doing? Dealing drugs?” Alexis whispered. Then she stared at me, saying, “I am glad you brought me here. I needed to see this. It’s going to make killing them all the more satisfying.”

“Wait, kill them?”

But Alexis was not listening to me. In the bleakness of the forest, she shifted into her wolf form and crashed through the window, landing atop the two vampires and pinning them to the ground. She yawed at them, howling at the top of her voice.

I jumped in after her and yelled, “Wait!”

Alexis glared at me while still pinning the vampires under her.

“Before we do anything rash, shouldn’t we find out why they killed your parents?” I asked, gently approaching Alexis.

“Oi, bruv, what’s all this about, then?” The vampire with the scars on his face spat. “You can’t come barging in here, threatening to kill us like that!”

Alexis roared at him, making him cower and whimper in a fetal position, but then promptly stepped back.

I took charge before things could get out of hand, fishing the rope out of my backpack and tying the vampires together with their backs to each other.

“We’re innocent vampires, mate. We ain’t got no quarrel with you,” the other one said.

“I know that’s a lie,” I said, ensuring that their bounds would hold. Then I stepped back, waiting for Alexis to shift back into her form so she could do the interrogation herself.

“Remember me?” she asked once she had shifted back.

“Sorry, love, you’re going to have to be more specific,” the scarred-faced vampire said, then burst into giggles.

Alexis took a crowbar lying in the room and slammed it against the vampire’s head.

“Now, if I were sober, I’d have felt that and would have gone ‘ow!’ But we make the best meth around here. Not even Heisenberg can come close,” he said, spitting out a broken tooth.

“You killed my parents,” Alexis said, seething with fury. “That night, in the car, you and your friend here came out of nowhere and killed both my mom and dad. How can you forget something like that?”

“Oh,” Scarface sighed. “That. Well, we ain’t forgotten that, have we, Campbell?”

The other vampire said, “Right you are, Elliot. We’ve not forgotten that night. We don’t forget any nights. We’re vampires, for fuck’s sake. Hell, Elliot and I even remember when we came to the States from good old Great Britain by ferry almost a century ago. Budding young vampires, we were, aye.”

“I’m not interested in your life story,” Alexis spat, holding the crowbar threateningly in her grip. “Why did you kill my

parents?

“It was nothing personal. I swear!” Elliot pleaded. “We were under orders.”

“Whose orders!?” I yelled. It wasn’t fair that she had to do this alone. I grabbed Elliot by the collar and shook him fiercely.

“Fine!” Elliot yelled. “It was Ralph, our leader. He said he wanted the alpha and his mate gone, and we were the ones who got picked to do that.”

“But there’s more,” Campbell said. “Which we’ll only tell you if you free us.”

Alexis knelt on her knee and faced Campbell, her eyes red. “Neither you nor your friend are going to make it out of here alive. I will kill you both for what you did to my parents. If you tell me who was behind it, I’ll make sure you get a swift death. Otherwise, your torture will be stretched from now till the end of eternity. You’ll wish you were dead, but you’ll be worse off.”

“Don’t kill us, please,” Campbell burst out crying. “If I remember correctly, we did let you live that night. Won’t you show us some mercy in return?”

“Tell me who gave the order!” Alexis said, ramming the crowbar into Campbell’s midriff.

I could hear the sound of bones breaking as the crowbar made contact with Campbell’s body.

“It was the bloody wolves, all right? The two of you run around thinking that you’ve been wronged by the vampires. You don’t even know that there are wolves within your

precious pack who have been working with the vampires for ages!” Campbell yelled, partly in agitation, partly in pain.

I grabbed him again and held his face up, asking, “What the fuck do you mean by that?”

“The order to have her parents killed came from the werewolves. Between us, we figured out the wolves wanted to plant someone new as the alpha, someone who’d be up for a little symbiotic relationship between the two races. We don’t know who gave the order,” Campbell said. “All we know is, after her dad bit the dust, your new alpha Maurice has been working with us from the first day. He gets a share out of every single shipment we sell.”

“Who ordered the hit?” I asked again.

“We don’t know!” Elliot yelled out. “We don’t know. But the same person who ordered the hit on her parents ordered your kidnapping too!”

If I wasn’t shocked already, this revelation was enough to suck the life out of me.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

“We’ve been around for a long time. You don’t think we don’t remember Wilhelm Grimm? You haven’t changed a day since you disappeared,” Elliot said. “Someone’s been working against you for a long time from within your pack. Yep. We had a hand in making you disappear all that time ago. Do you think some eccentric occultist can get the drop on a werewolf just like that? No, sir. We helped him. We were there in the forest that night as a contingency. Someone has had it in for

you from day one. And they've done a good job of maintaining their anonymity.”

Whatever drug-fueled story these two idiots were concocting was simply not possible. Who had been conspiring against me back then? Everyone from my pack was like family to me. But if there was even a sliver of truth to what these two were saying, then who was this mysterious person within my pack working against me? Why? What had I done to them?

“Enough chatter,” Alexis said. “I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to barter for your life with these half-assed stories.”

“We can prove everything we just said. From your parents' murder to his kidnapping,” Campbell said. “Please, just let us go.”

“One last thing,” I said, trying to regain my mental footing. “The other night when I was fighting with your leader, Ralph, were there really rifles aimed at me?”

Elliot started howling with laughter. Campbell joined him. “Rifles? You think we're Blackwater or something? We ain't got no rifles, mister. It was a scare tactic, and it worked. We were just pointing fucking lasers at you,” Elliot said.

I didn't get a chance to confront them any further. Alexis had shifted into her wolf self again, and before I could stop her, she was tearing away at the two vampires. It was too gratuitous, making me look away.

All I could hear were the sounds of limbs coming off and the vampires screaming in pure agony in their final moments.

I didn't dare turn around. I had been through this before. It was not a pretty sight when I escaped and murdered Edward and his men in the manor. I had no heart to see what carnage Alexis had wrought. Revenge was a messy business.

"I think I'm ready to go home," Alexis said from behind me.

"Did it help?" I asked, not turning around.

"Avenging my parents? Yes. It helped," Alexis said slowly.

"Then I think you should come home now," I said. "Your real home."

"I would like that very much," she said.

I held her hand and squeezed it. She squeezed mine back.

"Thank you for this, Will," Alexis said. "For all of it."

Late at night, troubled by all the information the vampires had shared with me, I went to Fred's little cottage. I was surprised to find him still awake at that hour, watching some war documentaries on an old TV set, smoking a pipe, and drinking his tea.

He poured me some tea, and we got to talking. I shared everything that I had learned that day. I wanted to know if he knew of any such conspiracies. After all, apart from me, he was the only member of the original pack that had survived so far.

"Pay no heed to all that talk," Fred said at long last when I had finished speaking. "Let sleeping dogs lie."

"You think so?"

“All I know is, I knew nothing of all this conspiracy before you mentioned it tonight. I think that a vampire, when cornered, will say just about anything to try and get out alive. You said so yourself; they deceived you with that whole sniper and laser bit. Who is to say they weren’t trying to deceive you again?” Fred said between taking puffs of his pipe. “We loved you, all of us. When you brought us to Fiddler’s Green, we came here without so much as a question. All of us were loyal to you. Don’t tell me you’d take the word of those bloodsuckers over that of your literal blood.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said, though still not satisfied. “Maybe I’m being paranoid.”

“Look not at the past but what the future holds,” Fred said. “Think of what you can do with the time you’re given. The opportunities that you have now that you didn’t have back then. Long after I’m gone, you’ll still be here, it seems. Live. For me, for all those who are gone and all the billions who came before you. Live. Don’t dwell on something that you can’t do anything about.”

I bid him farewell and went back to my home, pondering over everything that had happened today. It depressed me to think that someone had been working against me, that someone had a hand in my kidnapping, and that someone was—

I forgot what I was feeling gloomy about.

As I parted the curtains from my bedroom, I could see Alexis’s house. For the first time since I had been here, the lights inside her house were on.

And just like that, my sadness fled away, giving birth to hope.

Maybe there was some truth to what Freddie had said. It might be good to live a little.

Chapter 19: Alexis

“It’s great to see you back,” Vincent said, smiling slyly at me as he stood there in the doorway, hands tucked in his pockets.

“Oh, shut up,” I said, rolling my eyes at him, grinning back. “You’re all assholes. When I went away, no one came and checked on me.”

“Well, that’s not true, is it?” Vincent grinned, coming inside the house. “I heard there was a very furtive and frequent gentleman from the pack who couldn’t stay away from you.”

“You’re so bad!” I slapped Vincent on the shoulder. “How do you even know that? Did he tell you this?”

“No!” Vincent lifted his hands and shook them. “No. He’s not like that. It’s just whenever he’d come back from one of his mysterious trips, he’d come back in a good mood. You don’t have to be a genius to put two and two together.”

“Yeah, well, here’s the thing, though. Two and two are not together. I don’t know what we are, and it’s freaking me out,” I said, putting my supplies back in the kitchen cabinet. It didn’t take a lot of convincing on my part to get the place back. I had the money for rent now that I was making good bank at the warehouse. And since it didn’t make sense to have two places, I emptied my apartment and brought back my supplies here. It felt good to be back here. Yes, technically, this was just a rental property, but for me, this was the place where I had grown up, and my parents had sung and danced and cooked

and lived. It might be a rental, but this was all the home I ever knew.

“I would go easy on Will if I were you,” Vince said as he helped me put my clothes back in my closet. “That man’s been through some serious trauma.”

“I know. That’s why when he said sorry, I forgave him. We’re okay-ish in general, but things have happened, Vince. Romantic things. Like...”

“Oh my God, you guys kissed, didn’t you?” Vince gasped.

“Well...”

“Get out! Seriously? Oh my God!” Vince clapped his hands together and then punched the air.

“It happened so spontaneously,” I said. “It was like; I didn’t even have time to consider what we were doing. And now, it’s weird. We are stuck in this undefinable phase where we’re neither friends nor mates. Where does a person go from there?”

“Kintsugi,” Vince said, smiling wryly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Kintsugi. It’s this Japanese art where they take broken bowls, trays, plates, and other kitchenware and put the pieces back together with gold as glue. Fixing the unfixable. And when they’re done fixing it, it’s a beautiful thing. What was once a broken bowl is now an amazing piece of art, its cracks filled with gold. Not only is it repaired, but it’s also more beautiful, not to mention spiritual and symbolic,” Vincent said, putting the last of my shirts back in the closet. Then he started taking out my jeans and began piling them in the shelf space.

“I’m a little lost. It’s only eight in the morning, and I’m not equipped to deal with metaphors until I’ve had my coffee. You gotta be clearer than this,” I said.

“Fine,” Vince said, sitting beside me, staring out the window. “The metaphorical bowl of your and Will’s relationship shattered when he rejected you in front of everyone. You thought it was beyond repair. He probably thought that as well. But now, it would seem that fate is smearing some molten gold on the cracks and putting the bowl together, shaping it into something stronger and more beautiful than before.”

“You gotta stop watching all that anime. It’s turning you into a dweeb.” I threw a pillow in his face.

“That’s okay; you don’t have to believe me,” Vincent said as he left the room. In the doorway, he turned around and said, “I believe someone is waiting at the door. Kintsugi!”

I pushed Vincent out of my home and came face to face with Will standing there solemnly, hands behind his back. He looked tired.

“Hey,” I said.

“I see you’re back,” Will said.

“I am.”

“You’re adjusting okay?”

“Actually, I have one last run to make to my old place. Gotta get all my stuff back. Half of it is still there. It wouldn’t fit in my truck,” I said, averting his gaze.

“Are you feeling better after last night?” Will asked.

I hadn't stopped thinking about the events of last night. "I feel less vulnerable. I feel as if I've got things in my control now. Does that make sense?"

"It does. When we take an action, we are not passive anymore. It allows us to feel in control."

"Well, I felt in control enough to decide to come back. I just feel closer to my parents. They would have wanted me to live with the commune. In our old home," I said.

"I'll see you later. I've gotta train the troops," Will said, ducking out.

You could cut the awkwardness in the air with a knife. When would it go back to normal between us? I couldn't help but feel that, by kissing and having sex with each other, we had somehow turned a bitter rejection into a complicated calculus equation.

"I'm gonna go get my stuff." What I wanted to ask him was, *Hey, what does this mean for us? Are we something? What's our dynamic?* I was too afraid to ask this question and get an answer I didn't want to hear. What if he were to tap into his rage and snap at me and repeat this cycle all over again? I couldn't afford to get humiliated again.

After I'd filled my truck with the leftover stuff, including my new mattress, I decided to take a break and stop for a coffee and donuts. It was a Sunday. I had earned a fancy cappuccino and a couple of blueberry glazed donuts.

There was only one Starbucks in Fiddler's Green. In downtown. I decided to make a detour and stop for a

gluttonous breakfast.

Meanwhile, I couldn't figure out why I didn't feel as good as I thought I would after killing the two vampires who had murdered my parents. Perhaps they had knowingly gaslit me so I wouldn't get the satisfaction of killing them.

But if what they had said was true, whom did they mean? Maurice was barely in his twenties when my parents were killed. He could not have been plotting with the vampires. True, he became a very young alpha of the pack after my dad's death, and soon after, he decided to run as mayor, but that would be giving him too much credit. Hadn't the vampires said something about them being involved in Will's kidnapping all that time ago?

It baffled me as to who it was. I'd have thought it was Fred, but Fred was practically Will's own brother. Not to mention how glad Fred had been when Will had reappeared. After my parents' death, Fred was one of the few people around the commune who had been kind to me. He had a fatherly way about him. It couldn't have been anyone else from the original pack as well. My grandmother and grandfather, they'd been dead for quite some time.

On the other hand, they were meth-heads.

"My, my, you're so deep in thought. You look like a baroque Rembrandt portrait."

It was a voice that petrified me. A chill ran down my spine as Blair Beckett casually came and sat across from me in Starbucks, holding his coffee.

“Their pumpkin spice latte, mmm, so good,” Blair said, kissing his fingers. “Ooh, those donuts look delicious. Mind if I have one?” He took one of my donuts and put it in his mouth.

Every instinct in my body told me to run for the door and keep running until I’d reached Grimm Abode. But I stayed put. I was not going to let this man see that I was afraid.

“What are you doing here, Blair? Didn’t you catch enough of a beating last time? Want some more?” My face was stone, my voice monotonous. It was a good thing I was wearing sunglasses. I didn’t want to reveal any emotions to him whatsoever.

“Ooh, so feisty. You know, I almost regret that day. Almost. Other than the whole me kidnapping you to lure your boyfriend out thing, the interview went super well. I would have hired you were you not related to him. Hell, I’m still thinking about it. What do you say?” Blair had that disconcerting quality where he could laugh without so much as moving his lips. Back in community college, Maliha and I used to call these the yuppie laughs because all the wall-street jerks used to laugh like this.

“I should take you out back and kill you for what you did,” I said, my voice low, my tone calculated. I had to remind myself that under no circumstance was I to let him know that I’d spied on the call between him and Maurice and that I knew he was making something called the Wolf’s Bane.

“Look, I’m a businessman above everything. That thing with your boyfriend—”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“That thing with Will, it’s somewhat like a business transaction. He took away my family. I’m seeking restitution. It’s just good old-fashioned revenge. I’m sure you can understand. As far as we’re concerned, I don’t see a reason why there should be bad blood between us. Seriously, do come over sometime. For old time’s sake,” Blair said and then took my second donut from my plate. He stuffed it in his mouth, got up, and said, “All right, lovely seeing ya as always. I’ve got a ten o’clock appointment with some guys in Tokyo, and I don’t wanna miss it. Think about it.”

“I’ll get back to you. One of these days, I’m gonna get back at you,” I said.

“That’s the spirit,” Blair smirked. “While I have you, I wanted to tell you to enjoy your boyfriend-not-boyfriend while he’s still alive.”

I stood up so fast that my chair collapsed, causing everyone around me to look up and stare at me.

“I swear to God,” I began, but he held his finger to his lips, beckoning me to be quiet.

“Would you rather be standing here bickering with me? For all we know, something might have already happened to him. That would be such a shame, wouldn’t it?”

Even though he had not touched a single hair on my body, I had never felt so violated before.

As I watched his car drive off into downtown, I sent Maliha a text, asking her to hack into Blair Beckett’s phone and every known profile so that I could make sure he didn’t do anything to Will. That was if he hadn’t done something already.

I was thoroughly rattled as I left the coffee shop. My legs were shivering, and my breath felt shallow. I had to go back to the commune immediately. I needed to see if Will was okay.

Guys like Blair didn't make empty threats just like that.

Chapter 20: Will

There was so much subtext, and so many things left unsaid that when I saw Alexis for the first time back in her place, it made for an awkward encounter where I could feel neither of us could say what we wanted.

It wasn't like I was deaf or something. I had been hearing whispers around Grimm Abode all morning. People whispering in each other's ears, asking if they'd seen Alexis come back, wondering not so subtly why she had come back, and pondering ever so whimsically as to what the implications of her return were.

I chose to ignore that. There would have to be a better way to let the pack know that things between me and my as-of-now still rejected mate were improving. Besides, I was their alpha. I did not owe them any explanation. If anything, I should have grilled them harder in the training exercises in the morning.

Once the whispering and the muttering got worse, I decided on enacting the tough regimen. It was eleven in the morning on a hot day when the sun felt extremely generous in emanating its heat. Everybody was sweating from the heat and the exertion, all hundred-something of them standing on the training grounds, looking up at me.

"For the last exercise of the day, suicides!" I said.

"Hey, Will, that's not the politically correct term for the exercise anymore," Vincent said from below.

"Fine. I didn't know. What's it called now?" I asked, agitated.

“They’re just called lines,” Vincent said.

“Everyone, give me a hundred lines!” I yelled.

Several people groaned from the crowd, but I wasn’t bothered. If they could whisper and gossip, they could surely do a hundred lines.

And then something happened so suddenly that the entire pack looked up in shock.

Alexis appeared from behind.

“Will?”

Even though I knew her to be a woman of a brave demeanor, I could see that her face had lost all color, and her eyes were red. This was the first time I was seeing her like this.

“What happened to you?” I asked, a bit worried. I could feel all the eyes of the hundreds of pack members boring into my skin.

“I was...I was just coming back from my apartment when I met Blair,” Alexis said. Her voice exhibited signs of both petrification and fear. “He said something about doing something to you, and I thought...I thought...”

“Tell me everything,” I said, taking hold of her arm and beckoning her to follow me. I did not want the entire pack listening to what she had to say. We walked over to her home while she recounted her encounter with Blair.

“And at the end, the way he was being all elusive, it made me think that he had already deployed his whole Wolf’s Bane plan. For the rest of my ride home, and until I saw you, I thought he’d killed you,” Alexis said.

“Alexis,” I said, holding her arms. “As you can see, I am fine. And you are too. You are back home.”

Rather than respond verbally to my consoling, Alexis hugged me tightly, her hair cascading down my chest, and her arms wound around my shoulders.

I hugged her back, gently holding her body in my arms while trying to fathom this spontaneous burst of mutual intimacy.

“I’m sorry,” Alexis said when we finally broke off the hug. “He just got into my head, and given everything we’ve been through, for a moment...”

“Hey,” I said, “It’s all right. You have nothing to apologize for. I would have done the same.”

“Well, you’ve already done the same once,” Alexis said, smiling a bit. It made me feel lighter, watching her break into a smile.

“Ah. I did,” I said, reciprocating her smile. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes. Knowing that you’re safe and okay, I am feeling better,” Alexis nodded. “Do you wanna get out of here for a little bit, maybe?”

“Clear our heads, so to speak?” I asked. Besides training the pack, there wasn’t anything else on my docket today.

“Among other things,” Alexis said. “We haven’t really gotten a chance to talk about the things that have happened. Seems like we’ve been assisting each other on journeys that lead to closure. I might have something that could help you the same way you helped me yesterday.”

The way she had propositioned her premise was enough to color me intrigued. “Surprise me,” I said, grinning at her.

“Oh, you’re in for a good one,” Alexis grinned back.

“What are we doing here?” I asked her as she led me deep into Fiddler’s Forest. I was not particularly fond of the forest, given that my memories of it involved me being kidnapped, attacked, and tortured there.

“Yesterday, when you helped me get my revenge, I realized something. Hell, it’s probably the reason why I decided to come back. I realized that you never got your share of closure. Yes, you escaped from the manor and everything, but you never got a chance to go back there and see what you had managed to escape,” Alexis said.

Fear took hold of my body for a brief period as it dawned on me that we were heading in the manor’s direction. I didn’t think I was ready to face the horrors and the ghosts of my violent memories that haunted that place. Even if that place was abandoned. Weren’t the abandoned places where ghosts thrived best?

“Alexis, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said, stopping dead in my tracks.

“Come with me. You do not have to be afraid anymore,” Alexis said, holding out her hand. I hesitated for a second, thinking about what holding her hand would mean.

“Take my hand, Will,” Alexis insisted.

A familiar electricity possessed my body, subduing the wildness in me. In the wake of our shattered bond trying to

find a way to fix itself, I forgot about the horror that I was about to confront.

We walked through the thicket of trees that surrounded the manor. The wrought iron fences seemed to have fallen in disrepair since I had been here last. Vines grew unchecked. Rust had started eating away at the main gate, turning the Beckett insignia a bright orange.

It wasn't just Edward who had died when I had secured my freedom; it was this entire place.

Alexis kicked the door open. It shrieked in protest as it swung open.

My hand was still in Alexis's, and I was following her lead rather than leading. I could see the scenes play out as if it was just yesterday they had taken place.

Here, by the entrance of the manor, I was thrown out of the cage in which the mercenaries had bound me.

From those morbid doors, Edward had appeared, looking like an ethereal spirit.

Those were the windows to the basement that had been boarded shut from both outside and inside to block all sunlight from coming in. My prison was a prison of pure darkness.

And now we were inside. I had only seen this place twice. Once when I was brought in and once when I was breaking free.

Despite the disrepair, the place maintained its regality. All those arcane symbols and Celtic emblems plastered over the walls, some hung in frames, others dangling from the roof, gave this place authenticity with regard to its eccentric nature.

It had been the dwelling place of an occultist. Even after his death, it remained the dwelling of an occultist.

I could see dried blood splattered on the walls, curtains, and the checkered floor. This had been my doing. When I had set myself free, I had shifted into my werewolf form and killed everyone in sight. In my mind, there were no innocents here. Everyone who was residing here knew that I was trapped below. They were all guilty of that crime.

“It doesn’t seem like Blair’s been here,” Alexis said. It was only because she had said something after so long that I was reminded she was with me. I had otherwise escaped into a deep recess within my mind, a place where Edward loomed larger than life.

“Come,” Alexis beckoned me to the basement.

“I do not want to go in there,” I said. Being down in that basement would remind me of one of the biggest failures in my life. It would make me recall the brutal acts of torture that I had to bear.

“This time, I am with you. This is exposure therapy, Will. You’re coming face to face with the horrors of your past. I am here to remind you that you appeared victorious. You survived this hell. You do not have to let it haunt you any longer,” Alexis said, squeezing my hand.

I sighed and allowed myself to be led down into the basement.

The cage was still here, its door ajar.

Here, the smell of blood was more pungent. A carnage had taken place here, of course. When the mercenaries came to kill me, there were dozens of them. Their bodies were gone; God

knew where—maybe Blair had been here after all—but the stench of their death lingered thickly in the air.

“Will?”

I turned to where Alexis was. It was a shelf containing empty test tubes, beakers, pipettes, and other lab equipment. I recognized the thick needle syringes that they had used on my body, the syringes that had hurt like hell when they pierced me. I grabbed a handful of them and threw them across the room.

“Do more,” Alexis said, her eyes wild. “Let’s do this.”

She grabbed a bunch of beakers and started flinging them at the cage.

“Let this stupid act be a metaphor for you becoming free from this place,” she said, throwing more beakers into the air, creating a cacophony of crashing sounds and shattered glass.

I liked the idea of letting loose. I grabbed the entire shelf, uprooted it from the ground, and threw it at the cage.

The cage broke in half when the shelf collapsed into it. It felt good.

“Here. This cabinet,” Alexis said, laughing.

I paused for a moment to notice how beautiful she looked, standing there in the semi-darkness, her hair undone, her eyes luminescent.

Then I dug my nails into the medicine cabinet and tore it free from the wall. It created the loudest bang as it crashed on the floor, its contents leaking out, permeating the smell of sulfur and ammonia in the air.

“Will, go long!” Alexis said, handing me a long piece of wood that had come loose from the broken cabinet.

I complied, running to the far end of the basement.

Alexis chucked a huge blue canister at me.

I instinctively rammed my makeshift bat into it.

The canister exploded upon coming into contact with the bat, throwing salt into the air.

“That was fun!”

“Hey, we’ve got all day. We can burn this place down to the ground if you want,” Alexis said.

Suddenly, the image of Beckett Manor in flames conjured itself in front of my eyes, and at that moment, I knew it was the only thing I wanted to do right now.

“Will?” Alexis was bent over the broken cabinet. “There’s something here.”

I walked over to her and found her holding a diary.

I took it from her hands and opened it.

“The Journal of Lord Edward Beckett” was written across the first page in cursive.

“What’s this journal doing here?” Alexis asked.

“Beckett, in all the time I knew him, was a notoriously precarious person. Sometimes he would conduct an experiment on me five times in a row just to get the results exactly right. He would starve me so that my body would be more receptive to the chemicals in my body. He was the devil himself, but he was also a detail-oriented devil. I don’t doubt

that this is just one of the many journals he left in this place,” I said, rifling through the pages.

I needed more light. I excused myself from the basement and went outside of the manor to read the contents of the journal. It was like talking to Edward one last time. I was shivering as I read each word.

Alexis wasn't here. She was still inside the house. I guess she realized that I needed my privacy while I read the final words of my captor.

After going through page after page, it dawned on me that these were not just lab notes of his experiments. These were diary entries detailing his life. I turned the journal to the last page to see what he had written before he died.

It read:

This is to be my final journal entry.

I can feel it in my bones. At the age of a hundred and twenty-six, I no longer have it in me to fight death anymore. I set out on this journey, built my manor in this place, to study the more fascinating life forms to divine the secrets that nature held. I wanted to create a masterpiece of my own. Play God. I wanted to cheat death. I wanted a miracle. That creature I have trapped in my basement, a werewolf of all things, has been an interesting subject, to say the least. In all my experiments with supernatural creatures, none have survived the harshness of my methods. Except for him. His body has taken to every single chemical I injected into him.

I am afraid at this point, given all the strange concoctions that are running wild into his body, he is no longer man or

werewolf. He is another creature entirely. I seem to have rendered him perpetually youthful, stronger than the strongest of beasts, and more powerful in resolve than even myself. That's why I must kill him before I die. I cannot let loose a being such as himself into this world. And what would be the point of it? All whom he knew are probably dead.

I have created a strange breed. I, Frankenstein. Will, my monster. May Lord have mercy upon any soul who comes across him if he escapes. There is simply no hope for him.

He took the best parts of my life. I was a mere man of fifty when I first found him, barely able to cast a spell, unable to scry. For seventy-six years, I conducted my studies, doing my experiments, trying to create a serum from his blood, his lymph, and his ether that would make me immortal.

While the experiment has not failed entirely, it has not succeeded either.

I have outlived every person I ever knew. I have been periodically injecting myself with the serums that I crafted from wolf blood and wolf lymph, and I have prolonged my age. At the age of ninety, I was a spritely fellow when others my age dwindled in old homes. At a hundred, I could run a hundred miles without breaking a sweat. I knew this was because of the serums. I also knew that this was not a permanent fix.

Now it's time to pay the piper.

I cannot inject myself any longer.

My body has rotted from the inside.

At the age of a hundred and twenty-six, I feel the scythe of death slithering across my bedroom window. I leave it to my son to finish my work if it can ever be finished.

And I am doing this mercy upon Wilhelm Grimm. I am ordering my men to kill him swiftly. The world is not ready for him, and he is not ready for the world that awaits him.

All in all, one of my greatest failures.

I know for certain that an eternity in hell awaits me for all the sins I have committed. I have made my peace with that. I have transgressed against God and nature and man and beast in only the most fiendish way. Was I given another chance, I would do it all again.

My fingers trembled as I held the journal.

“Will?” Alexis stood with a red canister in her hands. “What did you read?”

“He knew. The son of a bitch knew what he was doing was wrong, and he didn’t care. He confesses in the final pages that he’s created a monster. I’m his monster! Says right here. Look!” I threw the journal at her.

Alexis read the final page with a shocked face and then stayed quiet for a long time.

“You know what, fuck him. He’s dead. Despite using your blood and lymph or whatever to prolong his life to live for more than a hundred years, he couldn’t outrun fate. He’s dead. That’s what matters. And we’re going to make sure that this place goes to hell with him!” Alexis yelled.

She threw the journal into the house.

I walked up to her and took the canister from her. It was empty.

“I doused the whole place while you were reading,” she said, looking up at me. Alexis procured a lighter from her pocket and handed it to me. “Will you do the honors?”

I lit the lighter and threw it into the house.

The place caught in flames immediately. At first, there was a sound akin to a loud implosion. A loud whoosh. Then the windows exploded, throwing painted glass in every direction.

Alexis and I stood far from the burning house, hand in hand, watching as the flames leaped into the air, enveloping the entire manor. Black fumes billowed from within the burning manor, reaching the afternoon sky.

“Fuck you, Edward Beckett!” Alexis yelled. “Now you try.”

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and yelled, “Fuck you, Edward Beckett!”

“Now tell me that didn’t feel good,” Alexis said, smiling at me.

“I feel as if a part of me has been set free in those flames. As if my spirit was still trapped in that prison, and the only way to release it was by burning this place to the ground,” I said, looking deep into Alexis’s eyes.

“I am glad. Hi, Free Will. Nice to meet you,” she said, holding her hand out and smiling at me.

“No. I am serious,” I said, taking her extended hand and placing it on my chest. “I made a mistake. I can see it clear as day now. I know now why fate bonded us together. You are the

balm of all my pain. You are the cool rain to the fire that burns within me. You were meant to heal me. You have been doing that ever since I met you, even after I rejected you. I was a fucking fool to do that. Feel my heart.”

I pressed her hand harder against my beating heart.

“I am sorry, Alexis. For rejecting you. For treating you in that uncouth manner. You are the most special person I have ever met. I regret that it took me this long to see that. You are winter fire, you are monsoon rain, and you are the sweet release of all the best emotions. None of the excuses that I made for rejecting you were legitimate. They were all folly. I was blinded. You helped me see. I was enraged. You soothed me. I was lost. You found me,” I said, drawing her closer to me.

“Will. I am so afraid,” Alexis whispered. “My emotional faculties are not equipped for more heartbreak. The pain would be too unbearable. Having lost people close to me before, I know what it feels like, and the thought that it could occur again terrifies me. But the thought of being mistreated terrifies me more, Will...” Her hand still rested on my chest. Her body, so close to mine, beckoned temptation, but I held back. There would be a time to give in to temptation. Right now, there was a need for something else. Reassure. Promise. Consolation.

“For as long as I am alive, and if you will have me, I will make you this promise right here. I will not break your heart again,” I said, wrapping my arms around hers. “Everything that you have done for me is so great a debt that I know I can

never repay it. But I can try. Let me begin by apologizing for the way I have been.”

“It’s okay, Will,” Alexis said, her cheek brushing against mine, her hand still on my chest, undoubtedly picking up my elevated heart rate. “I forgave you then. It’s forgotten now.”

“Then let me be your mate,” I said, holding her by her shoulders, our faces just an inch apart. “Would you be my mate?”

“Will...” Alexis whispered, then kissed me on my lips. I embraced her fiercely, lifting her in my arms, and kissed her furiously back, our tongues clashing, our lips pressing, our mouths warm and wet with each other’s passion.

“Please be my mate again,” I said one last time before our kiss could turn into something more.

“Kintsugi,” Alexis whispered.

“Kintsugi?”

She placed her soft palm on my coarse cheeks and held my face in her gentle hands.

“I will be your mate, Will Grimm. Will you be mine?”

“Yes,” I spoke softly and kissed her again, this time letting the electricity of fate surge through my body.

Chapter 21: Alexis

Blair was like an obstinate blot on the otherwise squeaky-clean windscreen of my life. The more I tried to scrape him off my mind, the more messily he stuck there. I was not one to stay rattled after a confrontation. I was someone who devised an action plan and acted upon it.

My life was finally at a place where all the calamity and negativity had broken even, and now, I was starting to get some profitable returns in the form of emotional stability, peace, and love. Most of it was thanks to Will, who had just a few days ago professed his love for me and asked me to be his mate.

But Blair stuck around like some stubborn overhead cost that refused to go away.

Ever since he had come across me that day, I could not get the thought of him harming Will out of my mind. Men like Blair operated on a sociopathic level, a level where the law did not exist, and everything was theirs to do as they wished. To them, people were like playthings.

However, what Blair did not know was that two could play this game of shadows. He had underestimated me twice now. Once when he so brazenly kidnapped me in the middle of the day and once when he decided to taunt me in that crowded Starbucks.

One of the perks of picking my own hours at my new job was that I could allot myself a twelve-hour shift on Mondays and

Tuesdays and get the entire day of Wednesday off. The minimum hours per week requirement for the job was forty. The way I saw it, I was putting in twelve hours on Mondays and Tuesdays, no hours on Wednesdays, and then eight hours each on Thursday and Friday, amounting to a total of forty. I had even made up my mind to put in some overtime over the weekends. It was like my dad used to say whenever we drove by the beach. “The ocean doesn’t take a day off.”

This was my first Wednesday off, and I was having a great time walking around the commune while most everyone was at work. The kids were at school, and the soccer moms with their minivans and PTA meet-and-greets were busy planning something down at the school. The men were at the docks, in the city, and wherever it was that they worked. I was surprised to recently learn that some of the men had restarted the lumber trade ever since the forest had become safer now that there weren’t as many vampires roaming about.

I roamed about the Grimm Abode, a cup of coffee in hand, worries on my mind, and a nervous spring in my step as a result of both. Will was nowhere to be found. This was good news. When Will was not around the commune, he was down at the docks, surrounded by members of his pack who could keep an eye on him as he worked on the Grimm Reaper. No one would be foolish enough to come near him while he was working in the daylight with his pack members close by. Not even Blair.

I took my nearly-finished cup of coffee and headed over to my truck. After a while, the aloofness of the empty commune became monotonous. There was a reason I chose this

Wednesday as my off day. I put the cup on my truck's roof and fished my phone out of my jacket. I dialed Maliha's number.

"Is it done?" I asked.

"It's done. I've set up a remote access point. Since it's more than just a phone or a laptop that you're surveilling, the remote access point is relatively bigger. You're gonna wanna come by the apartment," Maliha said.

"It's not something remote? Like what we did with Maurice?" I asked. This was troubling. As of yet, I didn't know the extent of Maliha's hack. How deep had she penetrated Blair's network?

"It's not remotely anywhere near as remote as what we did with Maurice, girl," Maliha said. Her voice gave away no expression. Usually, whenever she was this stoic, it meant only one thing: She had done something serious and was possibly scared. And when she was scared, God help the rest of us.

"What are you not telling me?" I asked, making no attempt to hide the fear in my tone.

"I think it's best if you just come here. I can't say anything more over the phone," Maliha said, then abruptly cut the call.

This was not a good sign. All of a sudden, the solitude of the commune shifted from being comely to downright haunting. The sun seemed to glare at me mockingly from its perch in the sky.

I hurriedly got in my truck and reversed it, forgetting that the cup of coffee was resting on the roof. The cup crashed on the pavement and broke into a dozen pieces, spilling black joe everywhere.

Damn. That was my favorite cup.

But I had bigger fish to fry than to worry about my Dora the Explorer cup. I had an impulse to alert Will and let him know about this new development, but given that he still hadn't understood how to use a smartphone, it would be a futile attempt. Besides, there wasn't exactly a concrete development as of yet. I'd tell him when I'd have something tangible to report.

I held my breath as I stood at the transom of Maliha's apartment. Right now, this was a Schrödinger's cat sort of situation. If I didn't knock, nothing bad would happen. If I knocked, Maliha would alert me to something either terribly good or terribly bad.

Before I could rap my knuckles on her door, Maliha opened it herself. The girl had deep circles under her eyes. Her hair was all wild and unkempt. And she was grinning like a maniac.

"I went big, Lexi. Holy Mary, I went big," she whispered. I had barely registered the glee in her tone before she grabbed me by the arms and pulled me into her room. I had lost count of how many times she had done that.

As many times as I had been here, I had never actually been inside her bedroom. Maliha had made it clear that her bedroom was her Fortress of Solitude. It had piqued my interest several different times to find out what exactly was in there. We made a guessing game where I had to guess what was in her bedroom, and she'd say warmer or colder based on my answers. I'd guessed if there was a BDSM dungeon in there or maybe a slaughter room. So far, I was as cold as one could be.

“Come in,” Maliha said, beckoning me to that very same bedroom.

“You cannot be serious,” I said. “No one’s allowed in there.”

“Yeah. I was up all night about it. But given the scale of the thing, I gotta let you in. I mean, if you want to see what I’ve been up to. You see, baby girl, last night, I had an epiphany. Hacking Blair wasn’t hard, but the thing that you’ve got to understand with hacking is that you don’t exactly hack someone once, and you unlock everything about them. Blair’s a man who knows how important and secure his digital footprint has to be. He’s like a ninja, leaving no clues about his online activity. When I hacked into his phone, it didn’t offer me much insight. So, for the past twelve hours, I’ve been busy hacking into Beckett Pharma’s enterprise-level security. There’s no coming back from something as big as this. I’m officially a cybercriminal now. See for yourself.” Maliha then opened the door to her bedroom, allowing me to see inside for the first time in my life.

A loud gasp escaped me.

If her living room was any indication of the kind of tech freak she was, her bedroom was like the heaven those tech freaks went to after they died. It wasn’t even a bedroom. There was no bed, to begin with. All four of the walls were covered with sixty-five-inch LED TVs, all of them showing Linux interfaces with commands running in the terminal. All along the walls were shelves with PCs, keyboards, computer mice, and a ton of equipment that I didn’t even know the names of. Well, some of them I could understand as routers. But others

were more complex, with antennas jutting out of whirring machinery.

“This is madness,” I whispered as I entered the room, surrounded by blinking lights, blaring screens, and RGB keyboards.

“You see, this is what the inside of my mind looks like. For me, this is the most sacred place on the planet. My sanctum sanctorum. I have done things from here that would be undetectable to the common mind,” Maliha said. As she walked through the room, armed raised grandiosely, I followed her meekly, not knowing what to expect.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Oh, let’s just say that I hacked through Beckett Pharma’s entire security. If they so much as a whisper in that building, I’ll know. But I think your aspirations are a bit higher than mere whispers in corridors. Tell me what you want,” she said.

“I want to know what Blair’s doing,” I said. “And I want to see what he’s been working on in the lab.”

“We can totally do that. I hope you cleared your schedule. Unlike what they show in the movies, hacking takes a lot of time. And spying on someone using your hacks and exploits takes an even longer time,” Maliha said.

“I’m yours for the entire day,” I said.

She wasn’t kidding about the process being time-consuming. When she meant everything, it was indeed everything. From simple clerical company records detailing the attendance of everyone entering and leaving the building to hours of audio and video logs that the pharmacists had made while

experimenting with the drugs they were manufacturing, the extent of Maliha's hacking was as thorough as it could get, begging the question: How do I get through this much data in a single day?

"I have a solution for that as soon as you tell me what you're looking for," Maliha said, smiling slyly at me. "Compression-based AI search-bots can scour through the entire data within hours and come up with key phrases, search terms, and anything related to the query that we input."

"Like a search engine, basically," I said, nodding slowly. All this time spent with Maliha, and now I was finally getting the hang of all her tech jargon.

"Exactly like a search engine," Maliha said, clapping me on the shoulder. "So tell me what we should search for. Or, if you'd rather do it alone for the sake of privacy, I'm cool with that too. I'll leave you to it."

"Really? Isn't this your Fortress of Solitude?" I asked. "You'd trust me to be alone in your bedroom with all this stuff?"

"This may be the Fortress of Solitude, but you're my sister," Maliha gleamed at me. "Now, do what you've got to do." With that brief farewell, she left me to my own devices, sitting in front of one of the giant screens, looking at the search bar.

First, I typed in "Maurice." Blair's chat records, call history, and emails came up in a matter of minutes, allowing me to go through all the records one by one. It was mostly very banal stuff that they were talking about. Politics, the next election, Maurice accepted bribes for some illegal Beckett Pharma expansion within the city, and so on. But the one thing that

stuck out was a fifteen-minute-long call session between Maurice and Blair.

I clicked on the call recording and played it. Halfway through the call, Maurice said something that caught my attention.

“As for our canine friend,” Maurice said.

“You’re my canine friend,” Blair said, then burst into his sociopathic laughter.

“I meant the other canine friend, the pain in my ass, the bane of your existence. Have I made myself clearer, or do you need me to elaborate further?”

“Don’t worry, don’t get your fur all tangled up in a knot,” Blair said. “I told you, my best scientists are on it as we speak. The minute Wolf’s Bane serum finalizes, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Any timeline for when that is going to be?”

“These things take time. You don’t want me to inject him with a prototype and later discover that we’ve just mildly sedated him. Patience, Mr. Mayor, patience.”

“Fine. A month?”

“A month seems too optimistic. Even two months sounds like a tall leap,” Blair said. “But I’ll keep you posted.”

The rest of the call recording was just them busting each other’s balls, talking about baseball, and wondering if the Red Sox will bring in the World Series trophy this season or not.

I had expected this to take the entire day, but my work was miraculously cut short. I continued searching up different terms, including “Wolf’s Bane” in the AI search engine, but

most of what I needed to know, I had already learned through the call recording between Maurice and Blair. I even downloaded the lab reports detailing the recipe for Wolf's Bane and transferred them to my phone. I may not be a Linux tech genius, but a simple data transfer was not above me.

The looming sense of dreadful anticipation that had vexed me since my last confrontation with Blair was finally put to rest.

“He’s grasping at straws,” Will said, staring longingly into the sea. He seemed to be half-present now, but he had listened intently to my findings. “The Beckett men seem to be attracted to futile endeavors. His father spent all his life trying to create something that would grant him immortality and power. He failed. And now, it seems that Blair is giving in to that same madness.”

“He wants you dead, Will. Are you not concerned just a little bit?” I asked. I couldn’t help but follow his line of sight, given how intently he was staring into the distance. He seemed to be looking at a couple of yachts on the horizon. The sun was idyllically setting behind them, creating a picturesque scene.

“Why would I worry? I have you now. I was the loneliest soul for the longest time. It feels good for a change to have a mate. All my troubles are sawn in half. All my worries are now resting upon four shoulders instead of two. Your presence in my life has made me realize that an alpha is stronger with his mate. Never weaker. For as long as I have you, I’m never worried,” Will said. With that, he placed his hand under my chin and lifted my face. “I want to confess something.”

“Oh...” My heartbeat suddenly quickened its pace, and my mouth became dry all of a sudden. Words seemed to elude me as his face came closer to mine. I could see his irises. His eyes reflected the sun and the sea behind me, and I could smell his minty breath coolly wafting across my face.

“I have fallen in love with you,” Will said, now holding my cheeks in his hands. “You don’t even know how much I appreciate all that you’ve done for me. I feel sorry for the way that I treated you in the past. It has taken me this long to see you as the divine creature you are. I love you, Alexis.”

Butterflies in my stomach. A jackhammer for a heart. My legs turned to jelly. My mouth was utterly parched.

“Will” was all I managed to say, hoping that my utterance of his name would let him know everything I was feeling. The joy, the relief, the anticipation of every goodness coming our way, and desire. So much desire.

Will’s face was so close to mine now. I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I closed my eyes and let him kiss me. At once, the parchedness of my mouth disappeared in the wake of this moist and deep kiss. His lips on my lips, his tongue caressing the inside of my cheeks, and his hands exploring my body freely. I knew then that I was fated to this man. As his hands closed around me in a loving embrace, I realized that I loved this man just as much.

“I love you too, Will,” I said, finally, and then kissed him again. I did not want this pleasure to be over.

It was a good thing we were in the abandoned warehouse. I did not want prying eyes to witness this sweet moment of intimacy.

Will passionately took off my shirt and looked at me lovingly as he unhooked my bra. I slid his shirt off and then worked on unbuckling his pants. He was already hard down there when I put my hand in his boxers. I gently took his bulging dick out of his pants. The next thing I knew, I was on my knees, my mouth watering at the sight of the glistening, erect penis.

I opened my mouth and took his cock in, letting my spit slurp down his shaft, wetting his member. I sucked gently on his tip, reveling in the moaning sounds he made as I sucked deeply. I held on to his hips for support and then deepened the reach of his cock in my mouth, letting it slide into my throat. My lips wound around the base as I let him fill my mouth.

Before I could fully have my way, Will lifted me in his arms and lay me down on a stack of plywood. He promptly took off my jeans and then yanked my panties to the side. I closed my eyes as his face disappeared between my thighs. His warm lips cradled my clit as he sucked, licked, flicked, and fingered down there. I arched my back as waves of pleasure erupted from my vagina. Loud moans escaped from my mouth as Will licked my pussy and sucked on my clit. I was on the brink of orgasm when he stopped.

I opened my eyes to find him atop me. His face was next to my face, his throbbing cock rubbing against my thigh. I let him hold me by my waist as he eased himself upon me. We kissed each other, our naked bodies entwined in a sexual embrace. He thrust himself inside me, filling my vagina with his thick, long, hard cock.

I moaned, "Will!" as the orgasm that had been building up finally came, sending tremors of pleasure all over my body.

Will thrust again, and immediately, I could feel yet another orgasm succeeding the last one. My body crested the wave of pure sensuality as Will came inside me, his cock gushing his manhood deep within me.

I wrapped my arms and legs around him as we lay panting, our bodies a miasma of sensations, sweat, and serenity.

“I love you,” Will uttered again, this time breathlessly.

“I love you, too,” I said once I had caught my breath.

Who knows for how long we lay there, arm in arm, our bodies wrapped around each other. I never wanted this moment to end.

Chapter 22: Will

How does one show gratitude and appreciation to a woman who has given you everything? How does one atone by way of action for his past behavior? These thoughts had given me pause. It was a dead-end of thoughts that I could not resolve.

Until finally, it struck me.

After confessing my love and then making love to Alexis, my most imminent desire was to take her out on a date. But an ordinary date would not do. Nothing about Alexis was ordinary, so it did not make sense that I just take her out for dinner and a movie. Besides, there weren't all that many places where one could take his significant other in this small town.

The Grimm Reaper, as it had once come to my rescue all those long years ago, came to my rescue now. Earlier today, I had put the finishing touches on it. It was while I was staring at it in all its splendor in the sunlight that my brain fog lifted and allowed me to see this finished ship for the opportunity it was.

This world and so much of what it contained were beyond my understanding. But on this ship, time had stood still. Thanks to my repairs, it looked as beautiful as it did a hundred years ago. The ocean knew no concept of time as well. On that boat, I would be in my element, no longer a man who knew nothing of the world but a man who knew how to captain a ship across continents.

As far as I knew, Alexis hadn't been on a boat before. The wonders of the sea were still hers to behold. It would mean the world to me if I got to show her the magical wonders that the sea kept shrouded under its surface.

I did not exhibit this to her, but I knew how worried she was because of the whole Blair thing. She was a woman of fortitude and grit. Even when something troubled her, she never let it show. But the fact remained that we shared a bond and that bond had been strengthened ever since we had professed our love for each other and had accepted each other as mates. Now, if I focused, I could sense how she was feeling.

It would do her good to let go of her stress and worries for some time. Not to mention, an outing such as the one that I had planned would do wonders for our new relationship.

With that in mind, I began making the necessary preparations.

"Will, I work at the warehouse. I see your ship every night. I know it's been repaired," Alexis said, but I still did not remove my hands from her eyes. Even if what she had said was true, I still wanted to show her the surprise. What she did not know was that I had spent last night repainting the ship to create a new theme. The Grimm Reaper was now in a navy blue and ash white theme, which suited it far better than the original brown and maroon one.

I had also stocked it with the necessary things for the date that I had planned. Vintage wines, smorgasbords of cheese, grapes, marinated meats for a barbeque, and so forth.

"You may see now," I said, lifting my hands.

“Holy shit,” Alexis exclaimed as she saw the newly painted and polished ship. “You changed the entire color scheme? It wasn’t like this yesterday.”

“I told you I wanted to surprise you, but that’s not all. I have planned something. You see, I wanted to wait for your day off. Well, make that two days,” I said, smiling at her from behind as she looked at the ship and admired its new coat of paint.

“What’s happening?” Alexis turned.

“I’m taking you on a getaway,” I said, now unable to hold back my smile in front of her. “Our first romantic getaway as a couple.”

“Oh my god. For real? Where are we going?” Alexis asked. Watching a smile break across her face was priceless. It made all my efforts feel worth it.

“Let’s see. A romantic cruise across the sea. We’ll set sail from Fiddler’s Green to the open sea and explore to your heart’s desire.”

“No one’s ever done something like this for me before,” Alexis said. She ran up to me and wrapped her arms around me. “I would love to do that.”

I hugged her back with glee and then planted a quick kiss on her cheek.

“Ready when you are, my lady.”

“You mean we can go right now?”

“Of course. I put Vincent in charge for two days. I figured, given everything we’ve been through, we’ve earned some time off for rest and recreation.”

“Come here,” Alexis beckoned, prompting me to lower my face. Then she kissed me on my lips. I could taste the hot chocolate she’d drunk earlier today. I deepened my kiss and let the feeling of affection and belonging flood through my body, spreading its wholesome warmth to my extremities.

This sudden arousal inspired me to suddenly lift her off her feet.

“Will!” Alexis laughed as I slung her over my shoulder and began climbing up the ship’s stairs.

“What? It’s customary to carry your mate across the threshold for the first time,” I said, putting her down on the deck.

“That’s only for bedrooms,” Alexis said. “And that’s only applicable for newlyweds.”

“Well, this is maritime law, and it applies to all couples, not just newlyweds,” I said.

“My captain,” Alexis said, batting her eyelashes and clasping her hands. “For you, the bugle trills.”

“Avast!” I said, feeling the surge of the sea that captains get when they first get behind the wheel of their ship.

“How does it feel, being back on your ship, getting to sail it again?” Alexis asked. “Also, I’ve never been on a boat before. Am I going to get seasick?”

“It feels tremendous. I feel like I’m back to my original self. As for your getting seasick, you don’t have to worry. The sky’s clear. The sea is very tideless today. It’s all very idyllic. You’ll have a heck of a great time.”

“Let’s do this then!” Alexis gleamed and clapped her hands. She even jumped up and down in excitement, making the entire ship bob with her.

I loosened the rope tying the ship to the dock and lifted the anchor. The engine roared to life and propelled the craft out of the harbor. Alexis immediately steadied herself by holding on to the rails on the side.

“Engines?” Alexis asked.

“It’s got both sails and engines, depending upon the captain’s choice. On windy days, the sails suffice. But when it’s pretty stagnant in the sea, or when we need to maneuver the ship, we make use of its engines,” I said while guiding the ship out of the harbor and into the open sea.

“All this time tending to ships in the warehouse, and I didn’t even know that,” Alexis said, then whistled slowly to exhibit her astonishment.

“Back when I was in Germany, I was, among other things, a naval engineer. Sailing out to the sea was one of my favorite hobbies. There was a little seaside town named Wilhelmshaven. My father named me after that town. I remember there was a bridge known as the Kaiser Wilhelm Bridge. It spanned across the Grosser Hafen port. Whenever I’d sail the Grimm Reaper under it, it would make for an excellent sight. The sea below me, the bridge above me, and the horizon in front of me waiting for me to venture into the unknown.” There was no use stopping me now. I was already deep into nostalgia country, reminiscing to Alexis about the good old days in Germany.

“I bet you were just as handsome back then. Didn’t the German frauleins flirt with you? Even though those hypothetical German dames are all dead, I’m still getting jealous thinking about the fact that they might have flirted with you,” Alexis said. I sensed right away that she was jesting, as her face was on the brink of a sly smile.

“Ah, yes, the port city of Wilhelmshaven was infamous for its wenches and ladies of the night who would woo sailors coming from far-off voyages,” I said. It felt good to jest with her.

“Shut up,” Alexis grinned harder, slapping me on my shoulder. “Be serious. We’re mates now. Hell, shipmates as well. Was there someone who struck your fancy back when you were like a little teenager or in your early twenties?”

“You must understand that back in those days, people did not flirt with each other. It was considered the height of indecency to ogle at women or to catcall after them. The Germany of that time was very conservative. Women wore loose and long dresses. Men were still getting used to coming out of the Victorian era, hence dressed in coats, hats, and carried canes. Even the younger ones wore caps and were always dressed in suits. Flirtation was limited to a lady accidentally throwing her handkerchief and a gentleman picking it up and passing it back to her. The two would share a gaze, and that was it. But none of that happened to me because, well, I knew that deep down, I was different. I was a werewolf, and all these were humans. Back then, I hadn’t controlled my beastly self as well as I have now. I was always afraid that any act of intimacy with anyone would result in me shifting into a wolf. Thus, I kept my distance.” Funnily enough, now that we were on the ship and

out in the open sea, reminiscing about that time made me feel like I was reliving it. After all, here was Alexis, a spitting image of her grandmother. The same yet so different.

“If you don’t mind my asking, did you have any romantic endeavors of that sort with Ariana?” Alexis asked, her tone cautious.

I shook my head. I was far too good in a mood to be concerned by her spontaneous inquiry. I was already thinking about it as it was. It only made sense that she was thinking about it too.

“Ariana and I barely ever verbally communicated, let alone go on a romantic adventure. The most she had ever done was look in my direction and smile once or twice. But even that was just a formal acknowledgment. Not a confession of affection. Compared to what we have, she and I had nothing but the faintest infatuation,” I said. It was the truth.

“I’m glad to know that I’m the first woman in your life in that sense,” Alexis said.

“Am I? The first man in your life in any sense?” I asked.

“Of course. Up till a few months ago, I thought I was asexual, having no feelings for any person whatsoever. It wasn’t until I met you that I started feeling things that I’d never felt before,” Alexis said.

“What’s asexual?”

Alexis took a deep breath and said, “So, modern science has understood that sexuality is sort of like a spectrum. You can be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and even asexual. Asexuality is where one doesn’t feel sexual feelings of any

kind. I used to identify as an asexual because I never felt sexual towards anyone.”

“But you do like me, right?” There was some insecurity in my question, which I was not ashamed to show.

“I love you, silly,” Alexis said, squeezing my hand.

“I love you, too,” I said.

We shared our first kiss on the open sea, the ship in the direction of the setting sun, bobbing idly as the ocean engulfed the red sun. I kissed her gently and warmly, holding her body close to mine, our heartbeats loud and rhythmic.

This officially kicked off our romantic getaway. Alexis wanted to be at the wheel, which gave me the perfect opportunity to go below deck and prepare some wine, cheese, and charcuterie for a nice evening drinking session.

I headed downstairs and fixed a tray filled with the fixings of a nice, romantic evening of drinking.

When I went above deck, I opened the lights I had fixed to create a nice ambiance. Alexis was already sitting by the deck-side table, staring into the sea and the darkening sky. Upon seeing me holding the tray, she lifted her hands to her face in shock.

“Is that a bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape? Will! Those are extremely expensive!”

I couldn't help but feel a little smug. I smiled at her and set the tray on the table. “I found a crate of those in the storage of my ship. Those were vintages when I bought them in Germany. This one's from 1855. We have eleven more bottles below.”

“Jesus Christ!” Alexis said. “Do you realize how expensive these would be?”

“Ah, yes, but they’re not for sale. I want to drink them with you. There’s no price to be put on enjoying a nice vintage with a woman you love,” I said.

“You’re killing me,” Alexis said, putting her hands over her heart. “How on earth did you get those?”

“So, before the First World War, a lot of the Châteauneuf-du-Pape was sent to Burgundy in France to help with their wine-making. They would add this wine to their mixes to make the alcohol level stronger and to make the color redder. However, some of those bottles were never opened. So, a few years before the war, I happened to be in Burgundy when a fellow werewolf friend of mine gifted me these in return for me fixing his ship,” I said, taking the cork off the bottle to aerate the wine and letting the tannins mix.

“You know what amazes me about you? You’re filled with stories. Everything you do or say has a story behind it. That’s so enriching. I can’t even tell you. Sometimes I feel inadequate in the face of all your stories. I don’t even have any stories yet,” Alexis said.

“Together, we’ll write newer stories, stories that are better than the ones I have told you,” I said, pouring the wine into our glasses. “Meanwhile, help yourself to the assortments.” I pointed at the charcuterie tray.

“You went above and beyond,” Alexis said, helping herself to some cured meats. “Did you cook these yourself?”

“Kroeger’s,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed. “I was buying cheese when one of the shopkeepers said that they had cured meats too.”

“Kroeger’s is the best,” Alexis said.

“They really do have the best variety of things, don’t they? I spent two hours in that store last night,” I said. “They even half-convincing me to buy a smartphone.”

“One of these days, you’re going to have to get over your tech-phobia,” Alexis said, pairing the wine with the cheese.

We clinked glasses and drank together. The wine was exquisite. As it entered my mouth, an aroma gushed through me, and the mellowest flavor with earthy undertones greeted my palette. I drank it slowly to savor each sip.

“Tell me more about your life in Germany,” Alexis said. “In the movies, they show the German countryside to be so serene. Was it like that?”

“Plump cows used to graze in those meadows. Windmills turned in the slow wind. As far as the eye could see, there were green pastures studded with the oldest of trees. It’s no wonder that so many fantasy stories came out of Germany. It was truly one of the most beautiful places in the world. On the rural roads, horse-drawn carriages would deliver milk, hay, beer, and meats to the villages. People were kinder back then. Apolitical people, specifically. The Germany I remember was not yet permeated by Hitler’s sordid philosophy. Berlin and Munich might have fallen to the Nazi Propaganda, but the villages, where people’s hearts were pure, and they bore no ill will, thrived in secluded harmony. It was only until things took the most harrowing turn and things came to an abrupt change

that we had to leave that country like so many other people who did not care for the war and the politics,” I said. Alexis had poured me another glass of wine while I talked, and I had been drinking it while talking. I now poured myself another glass and did the same for Alexis.

“Tell me what it was like being a werewolf back in those days,” Alexis asked, nibbling on cheese.

“The wolves...”

Chapter 23: Alexis

“were ferocious,” Will said. At once, his eyes lit up with fervor, and he gestured grandly in the air, describing that ferocity with more than words.

I could not get enough of this wine. Never in my life had I ever tasted something so delicious. It made the inside of my mouth melt in an explosion of rich flavor. After all the time it had spent aging in the ship, it had become more potent than any liquor I had tried. Three glasses, and I was already quite tipsy.

“Ferocious?” I asked, my voice slurring slightly as I struggled to stay within the limits of sobriety. I could not help myself as I poured another glass of wine. The scenery of the evening sea, the company of my mate, and the delectable taste of the vintage wine were nothing short of heavenly. The cool air blew in my face as I relaxed my back against the comfortable chair. I was already feeling full, having eaten half the cured meats on the charcuterie board along with the cheese.

“Ah, yes,” Will continued. “The villagers told tales about the werewolves running across the countryside. But we were not dangerous. There’s a marked difference between ferocity and being dangerous. Aye, we would hunt. We’d mark our prey and give it a chase through the forests. Don’t fret. We did not hunt humans. We only preyed upon animals that made us stretch our limbs. Deer, rabbits, and other fast creatures that raced through the woods. We also stuck close to each other. There were many packs in Germany, and sometimes they

would clash with each other. But it was all in good fun. As a species, we werewolves were very united in our creed.”

“Will, I think I’m drunk,” I said, barely able to hold on to his words. The world was swimming in front of my eyes. “How strong was that wine anyway?”

“Strong enough to make me drunk as well,” Will said. “May we retire to the bedroom below deck? Get some rest? I have something awesome planned for tomorrow.”

“We can go below deck, but I don’t think there’s going to be much sleeping,” I said, surprising myself at my boldness. Being out here was so freeing. It was just me, him, the moon, and the ocean. The slight sound of the gentle sea and the occasional creaking of the ship’s wood created the perfect atmosphere. I didn’t want to go below deck just yet. The dim yellow bulbs shone in the night sky, accompanied by the moon, and created a warm halo of light around our ship. The ocean underneath the ship was clear, allowing me to see the reefs, corals, and fish swimming in the shallow water.

“Look, Alexis, the stars,” Will said, pointing upwards. It did not occur to me that we were so far away from the city and all its pollution that the night sky was completely unadulterated. As I lifted my head up, I saw the constellations in all their glory. They shone brightly across the sky, like gems studded in the ceiling of the world. In the shimmering starlight, I felt like a character in a fantasy setting.

By now, the drunkenness was taking a deep hold of my senses, lulling me into a sense of warmth and drowsiness. I struggled to keep my eyes open, but it was a futile attempt. Wordlessly, I

went to Will and hugged him. He enveloped me in his muscular arms.

We slunk to the deck, lying in each other's arms, looking at the stars, the moon, and the glimmering sea. And this is how I fell asleep.

I did not know when Will took me downstairs and tucked me in the bed. I did not even know for how long I slept. All I knew was that when I woke up, Will was lying beside me, fast asleep, and the morning sun was shining through the windows. Surprisingly, my head wasn't heavy, and there were no signs of a hangover, even though Will and I had emptied a bottle of very strong wine.

From where I lay, I eyed a bag of coffee on the kitchenette counter across the room. My body yearned for some coffee. It took me a few seconds to realize, once the bed began bobbing just a little, that I was on a boat.

I looked at my mate lovingly and watched him sleep soundly. He snored a few times, which I found extremely adorable. For the life of me, I'd never understood why some people found their partner's snoring irritating. For me, it was like a soothing sound that validated the fact that someone was in bed with me, sharing this space, sleeping soundly. Nothing could be more intimate.

The last time I was in this boat, there wasn't a bed in here or a kitchenette, for that matter. The extent to which Will had renovated his boat was nothing short of impressive.

Not only was the stovetop functional, but there was a coffeemaker on the counter as well. I made some coffee in the

coffeemaker and rummaged about in the cupboard to see what I could fix for some breakfast.

It was fifteen minutes later that Will woke up with a loud yawn. He shifted himself in the bed, then sat upright, looking at me dreamily. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“Good morning yourself. I must say, you’ve done the work on the boat. Color me impressed,” I said, pointing at the well-crafted kitchenette.

“How are you so up and about? I took you in my arms and tucked you in bed,” Will said, rubbing his eyes. He then got up from the bed and came over.

“I slept well,” I said, presenting the tray with the coffee, pancakes, and toast. “Did you sleep well?”

“Oh, like a baby,” Will said, gratefully taking one of the steaming coffee mugs. “Damn, this coffee is excellent.”

“Hey, you bought it,” I winked at him.

“Yeah, but you made it,” he winked back.

We stood by the counter for a couple of minutes, silently relishing the warmth of the coffee, enjoying the flavor of the pancakes, and indulging in the crunchy buttered toast. As far as breakfasts go, it was perfect.

“I’m having breakfast on a boat with my mate,” I said. “Never thought I’d say those words out loud.”

“And I am a free man after countless years, enjoying the best time of my life with my mate,” Will said. “When I was in that prison, I never thought that I’d taste freedom again. So that

makes two of us. I never thought I'd say those words out loud either."

"To us, the dreamers," I said, clinking my coffee cup with his.

"I'll drink to that."

Once our coffee was finished and breakfast had rejuvenated us enough to go back above deck and resume our recreation, I looked out from the railing in the morning light. It was a different sight entirely. I could see colorful coral reefs below. It was like standing over a multi-dimensional Avant Garde art piece. The more I stared at the sea, the clearer the reefs became, allowing me to make out the anemone idly swaying in the water, with clownfish coming out of it. Schools of tiny, colorful fish swam out from under the rocks and became part of a larger school. In the morning light, the water was clear blue, looking peaceful.

"How are we at the same spot?" I asked Will while still looking below.

"I anchored us to the reef. I didn't want us to move away from such a great location," Will said.

"Great location for what?" I asked.

Will broke into a good-natured smile. "I wanted us to do something adventurous. What could be more adventurous than scuba diving?"

Did he somehow know that scuba diving had been on my bucket list since I was a teenager? I hadn't mentioned it to him. In fact, this had been such a secret wish of mine that I had never mentioned it to anyone.

“Will, how did you know?” I asked. I was a little scared to know the answer.

“How did I know that my mate harbors a secret love for scuba diving? In the same way, I know that you’re left-handed, but in school, they forced you to become right-handed, so now you’re ambidextrous. Just as I know that your favorite vacation spot in the world is Mount Fuji. It’s also how I know that you hate admitting that you love reading Stephen King novels because he’s gone mainstream, but you always read him back when his works were not enjoyed by everyone in the form of movies,” he said. The sincerity on his face made me feel something deep within my body. It was a movement that felt like a tectonic shift within my soul. As if my spiritual body was making room for his soul to reside within mine. A body sharing two souls.

“How?” I asked. I was never one to cry. It always felt like a weakness to exhibit one’s emotions in the form of tears, especially in a moment of weakness. But these were not tears of weakness. These were tears of joy that suddenly cascaded down my face. This was a relief. Someone knew the real me. My mate knew who I really was.

“We are bonded, Alexis. We have been since we met the first time. It’s how we’ve found our way back to each other. What do you think gave you the idea that I’d love seeing my old ship? How did you perceive that taking me out to the skate rink with some of the strangest snacks that 7-Eleven offered would make me jubilant? There’s a deeper reason for why you knew that taking me to that abandoned manor and setting it ablaze would help me resolve my emotional issues. It’s because we are fated to be each other’s mates. And with that

territory comes unconditional love, mutual understanding, and communication that transcends words and gestures. That's how I know that you love scuba diving. And it is because of that same bond that I know deep within my bones that I love you," Will spoke in the gentlest voice as he approached me. I quivered with emotion as he came close to me. Even though he was just inches away from me, I yearned for him.

I coiled my arms around his neck as I reached up to kiss him. I did not want to let him go. A profound sensation had taken hold of me. Will lifted me in his arms, holding my entire body and putting it on the railing as he kissed me. My legs closed around his waist as our lips met, as our breaths became one.

I puckered my lips and sucked on his tongue. He bit on my lower lip. I moaned ecstatically as he bit slowly, my nails digging into the skin of his back. Will touched my breasts, gently caressing them, squeezing them lightly as he kissed the nape of my neck. Then his face was upon my chest, sucking, kissing, licking.

All these clothes I was wearing felt a little too much all of a sudden. I took off my shirt and threw it on the deck. My bra, pants, and panties were gone just as quickly. Will stood in front of me, stark naked in the light of the glaring sun, his erection jutting out like an exclamation mark.

Our naked bodies merged on the deck's floor, our hands finding purchase on each other's shoulders, waist, buttocks, and thighs. The more I touched him, the more ravenous I felt. I stared at the glistening tip of his cock and wanted nothing more than to take it in my mouth.

I pushed Will onto the floor, letting him lie down completely, as I jerked his dick with my hand. The more I stroked, the harder it got. Suddenly, pre-cum came out of the tip of his penis. I reached down to lick it, then promptly took his entire tip in my mouth, letting it bulge against my cheek as I sucked and licked his shaft. His penis throbbed in my mouth as I pleased it. I wanted to taste him more than I had already tasted him. I wanted him to cum in my mouth. I sucked harder and then took his whole cock in my mouth till I could feel it bulging against my throat. I could feel my spit slobbering it up as I blew him.

I was so focused on what I was doing that I didn't notice that my pussy had become wet all of a sudden. Will moaned louder and louder, uninhibited by the freedom and seclusion of the open sea. He writhed as I pleased him, his thighs twitched, and the muscles on his pelvis became taut.

I took his cock out of my mouth for a breather. Once I had my breath back, I put the tip back in my mouth and began licking the under the shaft. His penis started twitching uncontrollably as I quickened my pace.

Suddenly, warm liquid gushed into my throat as Will came into my mouth. I loved the sweet, salty, and sticky sensation that dripped down my throat. My body was charged with arousal, yearning for his touch.

As if he had telepathically inferred it, Will got up, his semi-hard dick slinging between his thighs, and laid me down in front of him, parting my legs open. I closed my eyes in anticipation of what was to come.

He was slow at first, gently rubbing his fingers on my clit, then swapping his fingers for his tongue. Given how aroused I already was, I came within seconds as his warm mouth sucked and licked its way past my wetness and into my pussy. I throbbed with pleasure and moaned while I orgasmed with Will's head between my thighs.

Will grabbed my thighs forcefully and pulled me closer to his mouth, picking up the pace. Not gentle anymore now, but just forceful enough that I found it sexy. He cradled my clit on the tip of his tongue and sucked on it with his lips, releasing a second pent-up orgasm in my body. This time, my moan was so loud it was practically a scream. A few seagulls cawed in response.

With my naked, sweaty, and pulsating body now lying sated in the sun, Will climbed on top of me and kissed me on my mouth, both of us tasting a little bit of ourselves in each other's mouths. My tongue clashed with his, soaking in the wetness and the flavor his mouth had to offer. Will held my back in his hands as he ground against my thighs. I could feel him getting hard again. I could feel myself on the brink of another orgasm.

Will cushioned his body on my breasts as he entered me. My body welcomed his hard, throbbing, long dick. I thrust my hips up to take more of him inside me. As he fucked me hard, I bit on his neck and dug my nails into his skin wherever I could get my hands on. Will stared intently into my eyes as our bodies moved in perfect rhythm.

And it was while we both stared into each other's eyes that we came together.

Whatever happened afterward was merely an epilogue to the wonderful chapter that this lovemaking had been. Nothing came close to the feeling of being with my mate in such a carnal and primal manner. Not the mid-noon barbeque that we enjoyed. Not the second bottle of Châteauneuf-du-Pape that we emptied in the evening.

Scuba diving came a second close. Just before sunset, Will procured two scuba suits from under the deck. We dove underwater and swam around each other as we admired the underwater sights that the reef had to offer. But by far, the highlight of that cruise was that hot and heavy lovemaking session that we enjoyed on the sea.

For me, the vacation ended on a high note when we came across sea turtles swimming in a neat formation around the reef. We followed them as we swam, and they led us to a bioluminescent cave lit with jellyfish and strange plants that looked like they were out of a James Cameron movie.

It was a moment of pure serenity. Will and I hung suspended in the deep blue water, lit up by the light of the underwater flora, admiring the fish, the crabs, the turtles, and one particularly docile shark as we swam side by side, hand in hand.

Nothing could top that.

Well, at least I thought nothing could.

On our way back, Will taught me how to steer the ship and how to accelerate it. Under his guidance, I captained the ship and parked it in the harbor, feeling the confidence and satisfaction of commandeering a naval vehicle for the first time in my life.

At the end of our cruise, I had never felt closer to Will than I did now.

Chapter 24: Will

The rage that flowed through me initially, the same anger that prompted me to be rude to Alexis, was not gone. I could feel it bubbling under the surface, lingering, waiting to reappear. However, the more time I spent with Alexis, and the more time I spent doing things I loved—including taking care of my ship and occasionally sailing it out into the shallows, training the troops at the commune, and catching up on the events of the world that took place while I was imprisoned—the more normal I felt.

Yet the rage still lurked. Although I had promised Alexis I would never be rude to her like that again, it was a Herculean task on my behalf to ensure that the rage did not consume me enough to make me snap at her ever again.

But anger was not really a big component of my life at this immediate moment. For once, I was relieved. As my pack strengthened, the vampires became more cautious and started avoiding the main roads even at night. There were fewer and fewer vampire lurkers now that Alexis and I had killed two of their important men. The sniper thing was a complete sham, as the two vampires had confessed before dying, which meant that Ralph had no legs to stand on.

Blair was just a tiny blip in my mind. He could try all he wanted to create the Wolf's Bane, but I knew that he wouldn't be able to do so, just like his father hadn't been able to.

Like all alphas before me and all alphas who will succeed me, I was tasked with the role of strengthening my pack. It was my

job to make them strong enough to fend off any attack. There were going to be many dangers, not just vampires, corrupt mayors, or eccentric billionaires with a revenge agenda. I knew it. Werewolves, by dint of their strength, invited challenges. This had always been the way. Our foes seemed to find us. It was not our job to worry about them finding us. It was our responsibility and honor to engage them in battle and show them that we were not meant to be trifled with. That's how a werewolf demarcated his territory. And that is exactly what I was doing by preparing my pack members.

“You have all been very valiant today,” I said, my body drenched in sweat. It did not matter that today was as a cold winter day. When we worked out together on the training grounds, all of us sweated, no matter what the weather. Like me, most of the men standing below me on the ground were shirtless. The women wore fitting gym attire. Alexis was among them. “But this is not where we stop.”

One of the pleasant things I noticed gradually was that my pack members no longer groaned whenever I pushed them harder. Rather, under my leadership, they had begun inviting the challenge of a hard workout session. None of them groaned in protest now. I did not exhibit this outwardly, but I was very pleased.

“Today, we turn to our true nature. So far, you have trained your human bodies. That is good enough. But going forward, we are going to strengthen our wolf forms. Previously, I did not deem you strong enough. However, after so much time has elapsed since I first started training you, I am proud to say that you are all ready to train in your true forms.”

Upon hearing this, loud cheers erupted from the crowd of pack members assembled on the training grounds. Some of them whistled, others clapped, while the more enthusiastic of the bunch started howling. I allowed myself a little display of emotion and smiled at them benevolently from above. My eyes caught Alexis's, and we shared a brief glance during which we grinned at each other.

"I have pushed you hard these past days, but today, you have earned your keep. You may all stand at ease. We will commence training in our wolf forms in the night," I said.

Once the crowd started dispelling, Vincent came up to me as I was putting my shirt on.

"So, what was that all about?" he asked.

"It means we're all ready to properly start our training," I said. "You as well. You are a very brave werewolf, Vincent. One of the best of us."

"Hey, don't you go soft on me."

"As the teenagers these days say, I'm just spitting facts."

Vince threw his head back and started laughing loudly. "Man, you should never try to speak slang. It just throws off your entire alpha vibe."

"I agree," I said. "One does not spit facts. One states them. This whole generation has taken the spoken language and has shoved it up its own ass."

"See, that's a sentiment that I do agree with. No cap," Vince said. "But enough about verbal jousting. Tell me about the voyage. Did you and Alexis have a great time or what?"

“You are the closest thing I have to a best friend,” I said. “So I will confide in you. I have taken Alexis as my mate.”

“You mean you’ve re-accepted her as your mate after publicly rejecting her in the first place,” Vince said. “It’s not my place to say this, and I’m sorry if I’m overstepping my bounds, but you must understand that accepting someone as your mate should be made public knowledge. Right now, this knowledge is shared merely between you, me, and Alexis. The entire pack deserves to know this,” Vince said in all seriousness.

“You are right. It will make the matehood official. What do you have in mind?” I asked. His words did not anger me. Vince had a way of saying the right thing in the right tone. It was hard to get irrational in the face of his logic.

“A party. Throw a party. You’ve been spending all this time with Alexis. It only makes sense that you spend some time with your pack members. They are your family. All of them bear the Grimm name, live in the Grimm Abode, and are descendants of the original pack that you brought over from Germany. Throw a lively party. Let there be a bonfire. The people shall sing and dance and feast and drink. Plus, it would boost morale more than any of your pep talks ever have,” Vince said.

“Then it is decided. I entrust you with this task,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Vince groaned. “Oh, man. Don’t shoot the messenger. I was just the idea guy. Someone else has to be the execution guy.”

“I’m only suggesting that you arrange the party because I’m very confident in your abilities,” I said, coaxing him further.

“Fine. I shall bear this cross,” Vincent said, making an imaginary cross in the air with his hands.

“Finally, a reference that I understand,” I said, clapping Vince on the back once more.

A red bolt shot through the black sky and, seconds later, burst into a vibrant display of color. A few bolts followed suit, serenading rainbows through the night. Below, partygoers yelled in excitement as more fireworks got lined and lit and blew into the sky.

The festivities were in full form. Yellow bulbs hung from the walls and roofs of the commune houses, and at the center, a large bonfire leaped to the sky. Around this bonfire, the women and men danced, arm in arm. Little kids ran across the commune with party streamers in their hands. Some of the teenage girls and the teenage boys of the pack were sitting in the seats around the bonfire, sneaking cigarettes, flirting with each other, and laughing raucously. The entire Grimm Abode was reveling with boisterous sounds of cheer and laughter.

Revelers lined around the tankards of ale and beer, pouring each other cups of cool drinks, sloshing their cups as they cheered deeply from their bellies and slapped each other good-naturedly on the shoulders.

Alexis sat beside me, a glass of wine in one hand, my hand in her other hand. She was humming to herself and shaking her feet to the infectious rhythm of the music coming from the speakers that Vincent had installed. Apparently, some singer known as Katy Perry was a big deal and her song “Firework” was funky enough to make everyone dance.

From time to time, people came to us and greeted us, congratulating us on the officiating of our matchood. I politely addressed everyone, shook their hands, hugged a few of them, and high-fived the younger members of the crowd.

“Vincent really pulled all the stops,” Alexis said, squeezing my hand. “Never in my life has there been a party of this sort in the commune.”

“It’s all for you,” I said, squeezing her hand back.

My senses were flooded with the aroma of roasted pork. I shot a look to my right, where all the cooking was taking place. Some of the older men had taken out their grills and were cooking hamburgers, bacon, steaks, and chicken. A few of the more gastronomically inclined sort were roasting an entire pig above a fire. They turned the skewered animal slowly, letting all its sides cook.

Vincent, the manager of this lively party, ran from one end to the other, making sure everything was in order. Even the oldest members of the pack, such as Fred, were out in the open, sitting in a circle around the bonfire, talking of the good old days, smoking their pipes.

“Come dance with us, Will!” Edna, one of the sprightly ladies, gathered around the bonfire, beckoned me to join them. I looked at Alexis for approval. She solemnly nodded with a brief smile, letting me know it was okay.

So, I got up from my chair and joined the dancing ladies, albeit a bit hesitantly. We twirled and whirled around the dancing flames, clapping our hands, throwing our heads up, kneeling as we circled the fire, then jumping to complete the

circle. It was a beautiful form of dance that was inspired by the Vikings of old.

“Come, Alexis. Join us,” I said, calling out to her and extending my hand. She shook her head nervously. “Come on! It’s going to be fun.”

She gave in and joined me in the circle dancing around the fire. I lost track of time as I danced, whirled, twirled, jumped, and knelt around the burning flames, but by the time I was done, my entire body was drenched in sweat, and I had worked up a nice appetite.

Unable to stay on the dance floor any longer, I grabbed Alexis’s hand, and we raced through the party to where the cooking was happening. She giggled loudly as she ran alongside me.

The self-appointed chefs delegated to that area served us grilled meats, roasted pork, and sides of fresh vegetables. Alexis and I took our plates to our seats and watched the party unfold as we feasted ravenously, consuming copious amounts of mead to quench the spice.

“I am stuffed!” Alexis proclaimed after finishing her plate for a second time.

“I’m tapping out, too,” I said, groaning loudly as I struggled to put the empty plate back on the table. “Do you want to go for a walk, maybe?”

“A walk sounds lovely. Let’s go far from the madding crowd,” Alexis said, slowly getting to her feet. “I need to stretch my legs if I’m going to digest all this food.”

“I concur,” I said, feeling a little lightheaded after all the eating and drinking.

While the party went on in full force, Alexis and I snuck out the back, leaving the loudness and the lights, and the laughter behind.

“Did werewolves throw parties such as these back in the old days?” Alexis asked as we walked along the forest path.

“The Grimms trace their lineage back to the Vikings. They were the original Germanic people. Shapeshifting was a religious component of the Norse Pagan religion. Loki, Odin, Freya, and Frigg, all of them gods of the Norse pantheon, could shapeshift. Becoming a werewolf was never a matter of curse for us. It was a gift. Shapeshifting was our honor as given to us by the gods. There aren’t any written accounts of all of this, but this knowledge has been passed down the generations for more than a thousand years. Some of the greatest characters in Norse mythology were wolves. Fenrir, the wolf who would cause Ragnarök, was a wolf. Geri and Frekki, Odin’s loyal animals, were both wolves,” I said, feeling it fit to share some of the old wisdom with her. This was a good time as any. I wanted to impart this knowledge to her. If her parents had been alive, it would have been their role to tell her these things. But as her mate, it fell on my shoulders to teach her our customs and history.

“So the werewolves came from Vikings,” Alexis surmised.

“The Vikings were just one category of the Norse people. The warriors, the raiders, and the men in charge of the battle, government, and diplomacy. Those who weren’t Vikings were delegated other roles. But yes, in general, back in the day,

werewolves originated from the Vikings. It's where the term 'going berserk' comes from. Some of the werewolf Vikings could shapeshift in the middle of a battle and go berserk on their enemies," I said. "There were many Viking customs that we still adhere to. You asked if the werewolves used to throw parties like this in the old days. The answer is yes. They did. We keep the customs of our ancestors alive to honor them. In that way, this party is in honor of them as much as it is in honor of our matehood," I said, wrapping my arm around Alexis as we walked back to the commune.

"I want to acknowledge something," Alexis said. "I know you're struggling with your mental health. Your rage issues, to be specific. I know this the same way you know so many things about me. It's our bond. It has strengthened these past few days, allowing me to sense you more strongly, to perceive you more deeply. I just want to acknowledge that you're doing a brave job. I am so proud of you. You've come a long way, Will."

Such words of compassion served to kindle my emotions. I hugged Alexis while we were still far from the commune. This was an intimate moment I wanted to spend just with her.

"Thank you," I said, hugging her tightly. "I want to acknowledge that you have been very kind and compassionate towards me. I truly appreciate this."

"Aww, come, give me a kiss, then," Alexis said, pulling me closer by my collar. I obliged happily, kissing her warm cheeks, her flushed face, and her rosy lips in the faint light of the moon.

Our kiss was broken short by louder sounds erupting from the commune. Unmistakably, they were howls. Alexis and I ran to the commune, uncertain as to what had happened, and it was only when we turned the corner and saw the strange proceedings did we understand that it was not a matter of emergency but that of continued celebration.

The training grounds were lit up, probably for the first time in the night since I'd been here. On the grounds, dozens of people were surrounding a pair of wolves engaged in a friendly battle. The crowd cheered them on as the wolves fought each other.

“What the hell?” Alexis exclaimed.

“Ah, yet another one of our old customs. At the end of such celebrations, the werewolves customarily engage in a friendly battle with one another to commemorate the festivities in their way.” It appeared that my imparting of wisdom hadn't stopped for the night. Though, now, after so much, I wished it would.

“Are we expected to celebrate with them?” Alexis asked worriedly.

“Not at all. They can keep on with the festivities for as long as they please. But if you wish, and if you think that's okay, I would like for us to sleep in the same bed together,” I said. I was a little cautious as to what she would say.

Alexis blushed and averted her gaze. She fiddled with some loose hair and tucked them behind her hair, smiling as she looked away. “I would love to,” she said in a whisper.

“Then let us be part of this party no longer and part ways,” I said in a spontaneous burst of verbosity.

“Someone’s a little tipsier than they’re letting on,” Alexis chuckled.

I snuck Alexis into my home, eager to fall asleep with her in my arms. This would be the first time we’d share a bed on land. We would only sleep, I wagered, given how knackered we were to do anything else.

We retired into the bedroom and wrapped up in each other’s embrace, and we fell asleep within a moment’s notice, our tired bodies yearning for the rest that slumber offered.

Red.

Madness.

Rage.

Bloodlust.

I woke in my bed moments later, not a man but a beast. I could not recall who this stranger was sharing the bed with me. All I knew was agony, pain, and the unending deluge of insanity.

My vision was a sea of crimson.

Somewhere within the deep ravines of my thoughts, in the darkest of places, Edward Beckett laughed sinisterly. With that laughter rose the sheer anguish of the torture he had done to me.

In my deranged wolf form, I thrashed at the woman lying in my bed. Lashed out in the bedroom I was confined in. I hurtled, a hunkering wolfen body, through the house, laying wreck to everything in my path, and tore through the door as I raced to the only place which could restrain my psychosis.

The woods.

Chapter 25: Alexis

urry!” I called out to the search party behind me.

“H “Slow down, Lexi. You’re bleeding,” Vincent brought my attention to the obvious. My mate had just transformed into a wild version and had now escaped. God knew where. He had slashed at me, but I had brought up my arms in front of me just in time to save my face and my torso. As a result, my arms bore scratch marks that were bleeding, not profusely enough to warrant a stop to this search.

When he had shifted and attacked, destroying half his belongings as he raced out, some part of me knew what had happened. Those damn chemicals that Edward had injected in him were making him lose control. This was the only explanation. There was no other reason why he would go berserk in the middle of the night.

“Lexi, hold on!” Vincent yelled. I stopped dead in my tracks and wheeled around to face him.

“Every second we waste squabbling, he goes away further,” I said, feeling helpless about the plight that had suddenly befallen my mate. “He could be anywhere.”

“Let me patch you up first,” Vincent said.

“And as for finding him,” Morgan, one of the pack members who were still celebrating in the night when Will shifted and ran for the woods, said in a calm voice. He had accompanied Vince and me, along with a couple of other men who were still

awake to search for Will. “You can always use your bond with him. Sense where your mate is. Even maddened, he still remains your mate. The connection that you two share will guide you. Calm down. Breathe a little. Let Vincent bandage you up.”

“Thanks, Morgan,” I said, taking a deep breath as instructed, and allowed Vince to patch up my forearms with gauze and bandages.

“You take the North with Vincent, and we’ll search in the East and West. He could not have gone South,” Sutherland, another pack member who had been all too eager to accompany us on the search, said. Others present in the company, including Simon, Thomas, and Ronald, agreed with him and went off in their assigned directions.

“Tap into the bond, Alexis,” Vincent said. “He might be in an altered state, but you can still sense him.”

I tried. By God, I did. I closed my eyes and focused really hard on finding Will. All I could pick up was the noise of loud rage. It was like a black screen of deafening din that made it impossible for me to sense Will. His thoughts were there; I could feel them underneath the cacophony of madness.

Will! I called out. *I know you’re in there. You must not lose control.*

Instead of a reply, an earsplitting roar resounded from that telepathic darkness. Wherever Will was, he was not himself at all. Before I could give in to despair, I heard a faint sound.

Lexie!

This mere murmur was just vocal enough in my head for me to recognize it as Will's voice. The darkness began giving way to a singular beam of light shining through the forest. Whereas a few minutes ago, I was clueless, now I had a direction in which to head. It was North.

I ran through the forest, crashing through the branches and brambles, scuffing against the twigs that jutted out from the trees, stampeding across the wide gaps where small streams flowed, and veering on the verge of chasms to avoid falling into them. Vince was not far behind.

When I came into the clearing, my body was exhausted, and the various places where the forestry had grazed me during my sprint were sore. But at least the bond had guided me to where I needed to go.

Will was there, in his wolf form, recoiling across the clearing. He growled and snarled, unfurling his teeth. As I approached him, he howled loudly.

"Will, please. I know you're in there," I said, realizing that this was one of those clichés that I had laughed at in my real life when watching a movie where the hero suddenly turned into some uncontrollable monster. But this was not a moment for me to cringe at this realization. It struck me that the characters in those movies were telling the truth. That the real hero was underneath this façade of monstrosity. Will was in there. I knew it, and I needed him to know this too.

Will roared in response and slashed at the air. He stomped his feet on the ground, making the dirt fly in the air, and then prepared to pounce.

As an alpha wolf, his stature was taller than the rest of the wolves, his form broader, his visage more fearful. I stood no chance in a battle with him. But this was not supposed to be a battle of strength. This was a battle of wits. And right now, Will does not have any. He was consumed by the madness that had been haunting him since the moment he found freedom.

It hurt me deep in my heart to see my mate like this. This was the first time I was seeing the physical manifestation of the rage, madness, and the effect of the experimentation upon him. His eyes were bloodshot. His fangs were jutting out aggressively. Will looked less like a majestic werewolf and more like an abomination out of some horror novelist's fevered dream. Even as I stood there, far away from him, I became petrified at his frenzied form. Will's fur stood out haggardly, and his entire body seemed to be jittering and seizing in the wake of his frenzy.

I held my hand up and approached him just a little.

Will grunted and stepped back.

"Please let me help you," I said softly and came closer. As feral as he was, I hoped that some part of him would recognize me as his mate. I was counting on it. My heart raced rapidly as I approached him, hoping my trance-like hand gesture would hold long enough.

From the side, I could see Vincent trailing around the clearing and coming up behind Will. As he neared Will from behind, I closed in the distance between me and the feral wolf form my mate had taken, allowing myself to be vulnerable in front of him. If he wanted to hurt me now, he could. I stood in the shadow of death as I closed the distance between us.

“It’s me. Alexis. I am sorry it took me this long to realize the severity of the horrors you were dealing with,” I said, lowering my hands.

Will growled hostilely and bared his teeth once again.

“It’s too much for one person to deal with. All this rage, all this madness. The experiments that they conducted upon you, the chemicals in your system...Will, I finally understand. It was wrong of me to take your behavior personally. I should have realized back then that you were fending off this frenzy. I am sorry.”

The growling subsided. I could see the color coming back to his eyes, and his fur seemed less jagged.

“This is not you, Will. This is the poison that’s running through your body. You can fight it. I know you can. You’re strong. Stronger than all your enemies put together. Stronger than the bars of the prison that held you. You are more powerful than you imagine,” I said. “Please don’t hurt me. You promised you won’t hurt me.”

Will recoiled a little. A small whine escaped his mouth as he closed it.

“I’m going to help you,” I said. Then, looking behind him to see if Vince was in position, I yelled, “Now!”

The feral wolf was back, his eyes redder than ever, his claws out with the intent to kill. He opened his entire maw in my face and bellowed an unearthly howl. Vince leaped in the air with the tranquilizer in his hand and fell on top of Will. It all happened in a split second. Will slashed through the air. I rolled on my back to avoid his attack. Vince emptied the

tranquilizer syringe into Will's neck, causing him to collapse on the floor.

I was breathing heavily when I got back to my feet. Will's body was rapidly shifting back to his human form.

"That was some quick thinking," Vince said, panting loudly.

By now, the other members of the pack had found us. Morgan, Simon, Ronald, and the others hurriedly came into the clearing. Upon seeing Will's unconscious body, Morgan took off his jacket and threw it on top of Will. Simon lifted him in his arms.

"You could have died," Morgan said, looking at me with worry.

"A death for my mate would be a worthy death," I said. I did not show it, but I was mortified about his health. What did this mean? Would he turn like this again? How severe was the effect of the experimentation on him? How long had he been holding this back? More importantly, would he be able to completely overcome these symptoms in the future? Questions came to my mind, but they were questions without answers.

We silently headed back to the commune, the men taking turns holding Will while Vince led the way. I was in the back, keeping an eye out for anyone who might wish to harm us. This forest was deep within vampire territory. I hoped there were no more surprises waiting for me for the rest of the night.

"What do you think caused him to lose control?" Morgan asked after a long pause of silence.

"Do you realize, Morgan, what hell Will has been through? Do you really think that he would have come out of it unscathed?"

Things like this take a toll on a person. Even the bravest of people are affected by the harshest of atrocities. What Will had to bear was no small cruelty. Imprisoned for more than seventy years! Poisoned, injected, experimented upon!” I was barely able to hold myself back. It wasn’t anger that was making me say these things. It was a deep sense of worry that had made me feel this susceptible.

“I’m sorry, Alexis,” Morgan said. “I just meant...”

“I know what you meant,” I said. “I didn’t mean to be rude. Will is an alpha. He is stronger than all of us put together. As the Grimms, it is our responsibility to be there for him, come hell or high water. All of us are only here because he decided to save his family and move them from Germany. If he hadn’t done that, you wouldn’t have been born. We owe our existence to him. We owe him our allegiance.”

“Even the best need help sometimes,” Vince said, coming to my side. “And we’re here to help, aren’t we?”

“We are,” the men agreed in unison.

“Then help me take him to the commune healer,” I said.

While Dr. Morris took care of Will in the clinic, I sat outside with Vincent. The suspense of not knowing what was happening in the clinic was killing me. I turned to Vince to distract myself.

“So you just happen to be walking around with bandages and tranquilizers?” I asked.

“Uh, in case you didn’t realize, I was in charge of managing an entire party. I had emergency supplies on hand.” Vince said,

revealing his belt satchel filled with medical supplies. “It’s kind of the first step in organizing a party.”

“But tranquilizers?” I asked. “Why were they in your satchel?”

“Fine,” Vince sighed. “This happened before you came back to the commune. Before Will even started to take control of his anger and all those negative emotions. One of the first things he said to me was, ‘I don’t know if I will do something out of my control. May I trust you to be my contingency?’ If I think about that, that’s when Will and I became friends. He took the first step to trusting me. He confided in me early on that he was struggling with something terrible. I prayed that I’d never have to use those tranquilizers. But today, just as Will had foreseen, we needed them.”

“None of us truly understand how much he’s been dealing with,” I said, feeling remorseful for giving Will a hard time in the beginning.

“Alpha wolves tend to play things close to the chest. Don’t take it personally. Be glad, instead. Be happy that he’s okay and that you two are now bonded officially. You may not know this, but you’ve had a lot of effect on him,” Vince said. He patted my shoulder affectionately.

We stayed seated for another half hour, watching the empty commune. The party had died down after our arrival. The men who had accompanied me into the forest broke the news to the rest of the pack. They solemnly wound up the party and went back to their homes. Morgan and the rest of the men stayed at the clinic with me for a while, but after Dr. Morris said that it would take some time before he’d find something substantial, I excused the men to go back to their homes.

Now, gripped with anticipation, I waited.

Finally, after what seemed like another hour, Dr. Morris opened the door of his clinic and signaled us both to come inside.

Will lay there on the bed, dressed in clinical robes. He was sleeping soundly. There were some scratches on his body, but none of them were deep enough to leave scars. I cautiously walked up to him and took hold of his hand. Even though he was asleep, he wrapped his fingers around my hand.

“He muttered your name a few times while he was still under,” Dr. Morris said. “For the record, Vince, next time you decide to steal military-grade tranquilizers from my personal supply, be so courteous as to inform me beforehand. If you had injected him with another dose, it would have been lethal.”

“I’m sorry,” Vince said, shifting his feet embarrassingly. “I was only following orders.”

“Geez, where have we heard that before?” Dr. Morris said, rolling his eyes. He then brought up the chart he was holding and addressed me. “Upon conducting emergency bloodwork, I have some bad news. Will is stable for now. He’s going to wake up in a few hours when the tranquilizer’s effect wears off. I doubt he’s going to remember what happened to him. You must be very careful with him, Alexis. There’s no telling what’s going to happen next.”

My breath suddenly turned cold upon hearing the doctor’s remarks. All my extremities seemed to go numb. “What does this mean?”

“Will came to me a couple of times, wanting some reports on his bloodwork. I didn’t consider it right to share the findings with him right away until I had something concrete to tell him. However, this emergency bloodwork has confirmed my worst suspicion. The chemicals that are coursing through his body have poisoned him, leaving only two options for him. Either his body will succumb to the adverse effects of the experiments, or he’s going to morph into his feral form permanently. Given his latest results, I only see his condition worsening from here,” Dr. Morris said grimly. He put the chart down and looked at me with a mixture of kindness, pity, and sadness. “There’s nothing that I, as a doctor, can do to simply cleanse him of the poisons that are affecting him. There’s no such method of detox that exists in the medical science.”

“That can’t be it,” Vince said in a fierce voice. “Will is strong. He’s going to get through this. You can’t seriously expect me to buy your brand of pessimistic bullshit, doctor! You’re more than a doctor; you’re a werewolf of the Grimm pack. A healer, first and foremost. Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“I am afraid not. Traditional medicine has no solutions for him,” Dr. Morris said.

“What about alternative medicine? Native American herbalism? Old Nordic medicine from our ancestors?” I asked. “Will’s always going on about the magical ways of the Vikings, the old Norse people, and so on. Isn’t there some arcane knowledge in our books that we can use to our benefit?”

“There is a limit to my knowledge and methods, Ms. Richards, and this is where it ends,” Dr. Morris said. “Any further

experimentation with alternative medicine will yield results that I cannot guarantee the safety of.”

“You’re dooming him to a fate of death or madness,” Vince said.

“Why don’t you understand? The fact that he’s alive so far is miraculous in itself,” Dr. Morris said, shaking his head fervently. “He’s a medical anomaly. By no means should he be alive, given how many alterations have been made to his body as a result of decades of torture, experiments, mutations, and so forth!”

“You’re giving up, doctor. But that doesn’t mean that I’m going to!” Vincent snapped and stormed out of the clinic, leaving me alone in there with Will’s unconscious body and a very perplexed Dr. Morris.

I looked at Will and placed my hand on his heart. His heartbeat was feeble but stable.

“He’s not going to die,” I said. “We are bonded. I will lend him all my strength. Will shall live a long and happy life.”

“As much as I appreciate your sentiment, none of that is medically applicable,” Dr. Morris said. “My advice would be to spend the rest of your days with him while he’s still sane and alive. Cherish the time that you do have with him rather than mourn the time when he’s not going to be there. I’m sorry.”

“A man as valiant as Will does not brave the horrors of war, sail through the chaotic oceans, and survive years of torture and experiments just to die idly on his deathbed. Death will

have him when it has earned him. Not a second sooner,” I said, glaring into Dr. Morris’s spectacle-covered eyes.

“He’s going to be very weak when he wakes up. The feral shifting and the loss of control over his mental faculties have taken a lot out of him. Be there for him. I’m prescribing you some medication for him. Make sure he takes them. In the meantime, hope for the best and plan for the worst,” Dr. Morris said while scribbling a prescription on his pad.

As I heard Dr. Morris’s remarks, I wondered if all doctors were disaffected by the disasters their patients went through or if it was just Dr. Morris who was this unfeeling.

“You may think me a bit indifferent, Miss Richards. I understand. But in the interest of medical integrity, I must be honest. I know a lost cause when I see one. It’s better for you that you do, too,” he said.

That night which would have been a night of celebration, I did not sleep a wink. Vince had absconded in the night. I did not know where he was. I waited for him to show up, but in the end, Morgan and Simon had to take the stretcher with Will lying on it to his home. There, they helped me get him on his bed, then assisted just a bit with the mess he had made when he had gone berserk.

I spent the entire night by his side, watching him sleep, keeping an eye out for the slightest movement.

The most painful and difficult night in my life was when I was home alone for the first time after my parents’ death.

This night was a close second.

Chapter 26: Will

Pain glowed like embers throughout my body. Where there was no pain, there was numbness. I opened my eyes to the sight of Alexis on the sofa beside my bed. There were dark circles under her eyes. Her forearms were covered with bandages. When she saw me wake up, Alexis came over to the bed.

“You’re finally awake,” she said. “Thank God.”

“How long was I out for?” My head throbbed loudly. All the lights felt too bright. When I lifted myself upright, I became nauseous. “What happened to me?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Alexis. I don’t feel so good,” I said weakly. After failing to get out of bed, I slunk back into the mattress, wondering why all my muscles felt sore. The last thing I remembered was getting in bed with Alexis, happy that we’d be sleeping in the same bed for the first time.

“Something terrible happened last night,” Alexis said. I looked at her inquisitively for an explanation.

“What happened to your arms?” I could see blotches of blood on the bandages she was wearing.

“Will, promise me you are not going to freak out when I tell you,” Alexis said, digging her nails into her palms.

“I promise,” I said. I was far too weak to protest or argue, not that I intended to.

Alexis slowly filled me in on what had happened last night, how I had lost control while sleeping and shifted into my wolf form. She told me how I slashed at her arms while she was still in bed and how I wrecked the house. As she described how she and Vincent found me in my feral form in the woods, I realized why my body hurt. I must have been thrashing and crashing in the trees in my maddened state. She explained how Vincent tranquilized me and how the pack members brought me back to the commune clinic.

“That’s not all,” she said. “Dr. Morris...he said...”

I did not need to hear what he had said to know what was wrong with me. But when Alexis told me what the doctor had said, it confirmed my suspicion.

“Death or madness, huh?” I asked. “Those are my only two options? Are you sure he didn’t slip in a third?”

“How can you be so casual about this?” Alexis glared at me. “Your life is in danger. Something that has never happened before happened last night! You raged and frenzied. You could have killed someone or worse. You could have died. Why aren’t you worried?”

I took a deep breath and slowly sat up in bed. This time nausea did not intervene as badly. Alexis handed me a glass of water once I was upright. The cool water on my parched lips felt like a blessing. Once I’d drunk it and was feeling relatively refreshed, I said, “I will answer the same as before. I have you. I would have been petrified had I been going through this alone. But you’re here with me, in this room, in my life, and I cannot ask for a better mate to share this with. Mates are for life. They share in the best and the worst. Presumably, this is

the worst. But I am glad that you're here with me, even if it means the end of me."

"After all those long years of struggling, you're fine with dying?" Alexis asked.

"I am tired. I'm not going to give up, and I'm not going to run away from this. You know that I am not a coward," I said. "But long before the doctor told you any of that, I knew that the chemicals were working their way through my body, poisoning me, altering my DNA, and slowly killing me. I had my doubts, yes, but who wants to ponder over the likelihood of their death? In the brief time that I've had as a free man, I have enjoyed most of it. A lot of it is with you, in fact. If that's all I get, then I'm happy with it," I said.

"What about you and me writing new stories? Was that a lie? Did you already know you were going to die?" Alexis asked.

"That was not a lie. That was hope. I want that to be true. If there's some way that I can save myself, I'm going to try that. As I said, I'm not giving up," I said.

"Neither are we," Alexis said, holding my hand in hers. "We're going to fight this."

"Thank you for being with me. For everything," I said. Alexis kissed me on the cheek in response.

"Get some rest. I'm going to be here when you wake up. I'll make you some dinner," she said.

She didn't need to tell me twice. My body felt like it was breaking at multiple points. The moment she left the room, I reclined in my bed and closed my eyes. It was too difficult to

stay awake. My body was telling me by way of aches and pains that it was done.

Death or madness.

Those did not feel like the best two choices in the world.

I was not ready to die. Not that I feared death. All my life, I had known that death was just another part of my life. It was a transition to the next realm. Whether that was heaven, hell, Valhalla, or purgatory, it did not matter. It was a journey everyone was meant to take. There was no point in fearing the inevitable. But that was not why I was not ready to die. I had so much left to do. The pack still needed a lot of training. They still required leadership. Vampires were still a problem last time I checked. Then there was the matter of Blair Beckett.

But that was just the peripheral stuff. The real reason I was not ready to die was that I had only just started to live. It hadn't been that long ago that I bonded with my mate. I did not want to leave her alone.

Madness or death aside, my body needed the rest right now. I felt compromised. As if I could not trust myself anymore. This is what I had been fearing. By keeping a lid on my anger and my mania for so long, I had somehow unleashed an even worse beast last night.

Amidst all these thoughts, I fell asleep. Even that, I had to do cautiously now. There was no telling when I'd turn berserk again.

Thankfully, when I woke up this time, there were no signs that I had shifted or frenzied. I was in bed, tucked in like I was

when I fell asleep, and Alexis was sitting beside me. There was a tray laden with food on the bedside table and a vial of some strange elixir set on the table. We were not alone in this room. Vincent was also there.

“Vince,” I said.

“Hey there, Will. You gave us all quite the scare the other night,” Vince said, smiling compassionately. “But I had the tranquilizers, just like you asked.”

“There was always the possibility of this happening,” I said. “I am glad that you were there.”

“Well, then you’ll be gladder that I’m here now,” Vince said, his smile broadening into a full-blown gleam.

Whatever it was, Alexis also knew, as she was smiling just as much. “Vince just did the best thing ever.”

“What happened?” I asked. I groaned as I tried to sit upright. Alexis came to my side at once to help me up.

“When that asshole Dr. Morris was going on about how you were either going to die or go mad, it triggered me. Like, it was such a bleak outlook. I needed to go somewhere. I had to do something. And I have done something.” Vince picked up the vial from the bedside table and brought it over to me. “I call this Moon Presence.”

“A potion?” I looked at the purplish liquid with tiny white specks floating in it. It looked like jelly. The smell coming from the vial was very flowery.

“Not just a potion. It’s a concoction that a dear friend of mine made,” Vince said.

“Vince was just telling me that this concoction was made from ancient white magic recipes used by medieval witches,” Alexis said. “If traditional medicine fails us, we’re going the way of magic.”

“Vince, how do you know someone who has access to witchcraft?” I asked a little warily. In my experience, witches were some of the most powerful beings to walk this earth. Their magic was deep, ancient, and potent. If there was one thing that the people of Germany feared more than werewolves, it was witches.

“I am not going to go into details,” Vince said, shrouding his face. “But let’s just say that we’re not alone in Fiddler’s Green. Other beings reside in the forest. Some of them are our allies, others not so much. This potion came from someone quite close to me. That’s all I want to say on the matter. I explained your situation to them, and they made this concoction.”

“What does this concoction do?” I asked.

“My source tells me that in medieval times, the court alchemists used to imbibe soldiers with strong chemicals to make them more powerful in battle. In small doses, those chemicals were beneficial, but in the long term, they could cause madness, epilepsy, leprosy, and even death. To remedy those chemicals, the alchemists came up with a concoction that would detoxify the soldiers’ bodies after the battle was over. It’s a healing potion that restores your body to its optimal state. It also has a calming effect, from what I’ve been told,” Vince said.

“Do you trust your source?” Alexis asked.

“With my life,” Vince said.

I uncorked the vial, lifted it in the air, said, “Bottom’s up,” and then emptied its contents in my mouth. It tasted overly sweet as it flowed down my throat. I coughed a little as the potion made its way down.

“How are you feeling now?” Alexis asked, staring at me intently. She was also keeping her distance, just like Vince.

“Is the effect supposed to be spontaneous?” I asked Vince. He nodded.

It took a second, but then immediately, I felt the tiredness leaving my body. The veil of brain fog, the lurking rage, and the impulse to be violent were all gone. Just like that. In a manner of seconds.

I laughed loudly and freely for the first time, completely unhindered by any negative emotions. I looked up at Alexis and smiled at her profusely. As I helped myself off the bed, I could feel strength returning to my body. That tray of food had never looked more appetizing.

“Tell your witch friend thanks from me,” I said to Vince as I got up to my feet and stretched my body.

“I didn’t say I had a witch friend,” Vince stuttered, and his face turned red all of a sudden.

“I may not know much about witchcraft, but I know that there are only a handful of witches alive in the entire world who know the recipe to Morrigan’s Death Defying Tincture. That’s what the potion was. Not Moon Presence, although you may call it that if you like. Whoever your ally is and wherever they

live, whether in the forest or somewhere else, they're a very powerful witch."

"How do you know all this?" Vincent asked.

"I was raised on lore. Stories of Norse and Celtic origin. Morrigan was the Celtic goddess of death. Whoever she granted her tincture was saved from a terrible death. This potion is like a myth among the witchcraft circles. It's nigh impossible to make it. You've got a talented friend, Vince. Thank them for me," I said. "They have saved my life."

"I'll gladly pass on that message," Vince said, his face still flushed red. "I'll give you two lovebirds some space now."

"Much appreciated," I said. Then I gave him a strong hug and shook his hand. He passed me a solemn smile as he left. I waited for him to leave the house before I turned to Alexis.

She was massaging her temples. Her eyes were closed, and she was sitting on the sofa, breathing heavily.

"What happened to you?"

"Are you kidding me? The past day has been a fucking rollercoaster. One minute the doctor's telling me that you're going to die or go mad, and the next moment Vince suddenly comes out with some magical tincture and saves your life. I am having emotional whiplash. But mostly, I'm relieved. Thank God you're okay."

"In this particular instance, thank Morrigan," I said, pulling Alexis by her arms and embracing her in a fierce hug. "But before that, thank you. You saved me. Had you not found me in the forest last night, what would have become of me?"

“I’m just glad that you’re going to be all right,” Alexis said, wrapping her arms around me.

“Looks like neither death nor madness is in the cards for me,” I said. Perhaps it was the relief that I was going to be all right, or perhaps it was the newly rejuvenated vitality that the potion had granted me, but as I stood there, hugging Alexis, I was overcome with sexual desire. Her body was next to mine, her breasts against my chest. Her hair cascaded down my body.

I wanted her.

Alexis looked up at me, a playful look on her face. She reached up and bit my lower lip. She tugged at it with her teeth, then let it go. I sucked on her lips a little bit before fully opening my mouth and kissing her with unbridled passion, feeling every bit of her mouth, her tongue, and her cheeks.

I was getting hard the more I kissed her. With one fluid motion, I threw off my shirt across the room. With another, I took off Alexis’s. She moaned as I nuzzled her breasts and licked her nipples. I took both of them in my hands and kneaded them gently as I lowered my head between her thighs. I yanked her pants off and kissed her moist pussy before I pinned her to the wall and lifted her in my arms.

I unbuckled my pants and took my cock out, rubbing it against her wet pussy. She bit my neck and wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

Feeling quite aroused, I fucked her hard against the wall, moaning with her as our bodies collided and rode the wave of pleasure.

Then Alexis pushed me to the bed and lay on top of me, riding me, moving her hips, letting her hair fall on my face. I reached up to her body and hugged it tightly as I thrust my hips up and pushed my dick deeper inside her.

I let her slide on her stomach and climbed on her back, penetrating her from behind. Alexis moaned loudly and grabbed fistfuls of the sheet as I thrust my cock deep into her pussy, my thrusts cushioned by her supple buttocks.

I came inside her, gushing my hot manhood deep within her. As my cock slid out of her, Alexis lowered herself and licked my shaft.

I lay down beside her and kissed her again, running my fingers through her hair.

As we lay there next to each other, completely naked, I lowered my hand to her pussy and began fingering it slowly. One finger at first, then two, massaging her vulva and rubbing my thumb on her clit.

Upon touching her soft and wet pussy, I found myself getting hard again. Not that I ever had concerns about my libido, but such a small refractory period surprised me pleasantly.

“Oh, Will!” Alexis moaned as she straddled my hand. I could feel her getting wetter down there. Her vagina pulsed and throbbed around my fingers, yearning for something more substantial.

I eased myself on top of her, using my arms as support while I lay upon her, my dick nudging her inner thigh, asking to be let in. She gleamed from under me, her breasts splayed on either side, bouncing as I moved on top of her.

She reached below, guiding my cock inside her again. It slid into her with gentle friction. There it was, that warm, welcome, tight, wet feeling all over my shaft. I went slower, wanting to prolong this bout of pleasure for as long as I could. My movement was steady, gently thrusting inside her, then pulling out when she was on the brink of pleasure. I took my time as I made love to her, leaning to her face, kissing her lips, sucking on her breasts, and holding down her hands as I probed my cock deep into her vagina.

When the surge of pleasure started rising again, I brought my face close to hers, staring straight into her eyes as I began orgasming. Her hips buckled, and her walls constricted around my dick, inviting it to cum deeper inside.

I closed my eyes as I burst forth inside her, the pleasure cresting and troughing in gentle waves. Sweat dripped from my body on top of hers. Alexis held me by my neck and pulled me close, licking my lips. I felt wondrously exhausted after this sexual exertion and wanted nothing more than to lie beside my mate.

This time around, when we fell asleep naked, and in each other's arms, nothing bad happened.

Chapter 27: Alexis

It was three in the morning when I was woken up from my sleep by my phone. Usually, I made sure to keep it on silent whenever I was going to bed. If I didn't, all the hundreds of notifications on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram would drive me nuts. Tonight, though, after everything that had happened, I had completely forgotten about my phone and did not silence it.

I grabbed it and checked the time first. Then I checked the missed calls. Maliha had called me eight times in the past five minutes. What could be so urgent? I looked at Will and found him snoring deeply as he slept. The sex had tuckered us both out.

I didn't have a chance to process everything that had happened. From the depression upon hearing Will's presumably doomed fate from the doctor to the elation, I felt when Vince showed up with the potion, it was nothing short of an emotional rollercoaster. And to top it all off, we had passionate sex that culminated in us falling asleep before we could do anything else.

I was still naked when I got out of bed. As I dialed Maliha's number, I hurriedly put on my pajamas and went into the living room. He might be asleep, but he was not going to stay that way if I were to start talking loudly in the room.

"Maliha, there better be a really good reason why you're calling me at three in the fucking morning!" I whispered.

“There is; now shut up and listen to me,” Maliha said. “Remember that compression-based AI program that you used to search up terms on the Beckett Pharma server? Yeah, so apparently, neither of us actually shut it down, and it has been aggregating data ever since. I just checked while I was working on something in my room. It’s lighting up like fireworks. There’s been some sort of a phone call, and the people used one of the terms that you logged in to the program several times. I guess it was something called Wolf’s Bane? If you can get here within an hour before this program overtakes all of my computer’s processing power and fries up my circuits, that would be great. Otherwise, I’m going to have to pull the kill switch and end this task, or else my precious computers are gonna bite the dust!”

“Fuck!” I shot a look at the bedroom, then at the door. I’d have to do this alone. Will needed his rest. And according to Maliha, I had no time.

While still in my pajamas, I raced out of Will’s house and got into my pickup truck, my mind thinking in a dozen different directions as to what this latest development could mean. Had they perhaps made a breakthrough and somehow finished the production of Wolf’s Bane?

Fiddler’s Green turned into a veritable haunted town every winter. Now that we were on the brink of winter, the first of the foggy nights greeted the town at the most inopportune time. The entire town was covered in a dense layer of mist, making it extremely hard for me to get to Maliha’s place.

Half an hour and a few scraps on my pickup truck later, I reached Maliha’s apartment and knocked on her door.

I braced myself for the door to open and for her to yank me inside. It happened just as I had predicted. The door banged open, and Maliha grabbed me by the shoulders, pulling me inside.

“You’ve gotta stop doing that,” I said wearily. I yawned and stretched my arms as I walked behind Maliha.

“You look like you could have done with a few more hours of rest,” Maliha said.

“Couldn’t this have waited till the morning?”

“If it could have, I would not have disturbed you like that. But this whole program is overtaking my entire server, my computer power, and I barely have any RAM left to process my personal work,” she said. “I’ll make you some coffee while you go through the data. It’s all pulled up there; just point and click. Don’t worry; I haven’t seen any of it. Whatever it is, I don’t want to know. It’s against the principles of hacking. Let’s say you, and I end up in court. I’ll not know. Therefore, I won’t be convicted,” Maliha said.

“Yeah, but you hacked them for me,” I said. “You’re going to be complicit. These are your computers. This is your apartment.”

“Dammit,” Maliha said, slamming her fist on the computer table, rattling a bunch of keyboards. “I’m going to go make some coffee for you. Give me a second. I’ve got this new cappuccino that I want to try. It’s gonna take a while for me to get the machine going.

“Cool beans,” I said. Now that she was not in the room, I started combing through the data that her compression-based

AI had aggregated.

The first thing that came up was a conference call with three attendees. Blair, Ralph, and Maurice. The call log was highlighted in red in five different places, and there was a search term next to it: Wolf's Bane.

I clicked on it.

"Hello there, gents." This was Ralph's voice, undoubtedly. "You won't believe what our furry friend did last night."

"When you call him furry friend, it makes it sound like something in a porno for sick fucks," Maurice said. "Let's just call him by his name. At least give the fella that much courtesy. So what did Will do?"

"Will fucked up ten of my crew last night. I don't know why he attacked yesterday of all days, but the few who survived told me that he was nothing short of rabid. It must be done now, Blair. He has to be eliminated. I can't have any more casualties. Not after he killed two of my oldest men. It's him and his fucking bitch that are running this town now, not us," Ralph said. He sounded alarmed and afraid.

I had wondered where Will had gone when he had disappeared into the woods in his frenzy. Well, there was the answer to that riddle. He'd killed a couple of vampires. No big loss there.

"Relax, gentlemen. Remember Wolf's Bane? The serum that I was supposed to make?" Blair spoke for the first time.

"Yes, you kept promising that it would blow our pants off, but you've done nothing of the sort as of yet," Maurice said.

"Mr. Mayor, now don't you take that tone with me. If we're to do this, we're going to do this together. Operation Wolf's Bane

is a go. I finally cracked it. I've made the serum, and right now, it's in my lab in its final stages. It'll be done tomorrow, and as soon as it is finished, we're going to go on a wolf hunt. Let's slaughter those sons of bitches," Blair sneered.

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you figure it out?" Ralph asked. "From chemist to chemist. I'm interested in knowing the formula."

"If you're a chemist, Ralph, I'm the king of England," Blair said and started laughing.

"Laugh it up," Maurice said. "But do tell us what you did."

"Fine. I'll tell you. Wolf's Bane's original formula was devised by my father. What he could not figure out, and what I was not able to figure out until recently, was how to make all the chemicals adhesive enough to create the concoction. I tried all the chemicals on the Periodic Table to see which one would be most effective. All of them failed. All except one," Blair said.

"And which one is that?" Ralph snapped.

"Argentum," Blair said.

"You mean silver?" Maurice asked.

"Silver indeed, gentlemen. Now you may laugh it up. All those old tales that we heard. It turns out they're all true. Silver is going to be that werewolf's undoing. Well, silver and a bunch of million-dollar of my proprietary chemical compounds," Blair said.

"Fucking hell. Who would have thought?" Maurice asked.

"So, I gotta ask. The Wolf's Bane works with silver. But does silver alone do something to a wolf?"

“You know what, I never thought of it. Hey, Maurice. Why don’t you come around, and I’ll shoot you with a bunch of silver bullets, and we’ll see if you’ll live for the next midterms or not,” Blair said and then burst into snide cackles.

“Oh, please, you need me to run this town for you,” Maurice said.

“Tomorrow night, gentlemen. Mark it on your calendars. We’re going to hunt a wolf,” Blair stated.

“See you tomorrow,” Ralph said, then hung up. Maurice hung up after that.

The call may have ended, but my work was not. I immediately searched up other usages of the term Wolf’s Bane. The lab reports detailing the production of Wolf’s Bane version 19.1 came up, stating that the chemical was at 93% completion. The estimated time for completion was eighteen hours.

Will and I had an eighteen-hour window to stop the production of Wolf’s Bane.

My legs were shaking as I left the room. It had been one calamity after the other. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Out of the fire and into the lava pit.

“Hey, aren’t you going to drink this? I made it with love!” Maliha called after me from the kitchen.

“I don’t have time,” I said.

“I’m going to delete that program. Is that okay?” she asked.

“Delete it,” I said.

“If they catch us for this, plead the fifth!” Maliha called.

My heart was racing. How would we penetrate the security of that building and get to the lab where the serum was being finalized? Wouldn't Blair, Maurice, and Ralph be there, waiting?

I did not wait to wake Will up in the morning. It was thirty minutes past four when I reached his home. I went to him immediately and shook him awake.

"Did I do something again?" he asked nervously.

"No. But something happened while we were asleep," I said. I briefed him on everything I had learned and told him about the call between Ralph, Blair, and Maurice. When I shared the news that the Wolf's Bane would be done in less than eighteen hours, Will sprang out of bed.

"I can't have people playing dice with my life. This ends today," he said. He put on his clothes in a hurry as I told him everything else that I had seen on Maliha's computer.

"But Will, the lab," I said. "The lab's in the main building, and we can't seriously just infiltrate it in the middle of the day. Since last time, they're bound to have increased their security. They're probably going to expect us."

"Be that as it may, we have an absence of time on our hands. Had we a week to plan something, I would have engaged all the wolves of the pack, and we would have come up with an offensive strategy. But there's no time. It's just you and me," he said.

"So what do we do?" I asked. "The three of them are going to meet tomorrow at the lab. That's what they said."

“You’re not seeing this for the opportunity that it is. We get to kill four birds with one stone. Blair, Maurice, Ralph, and the serum—all of them will be in the same location tomorrow. If we play our cards right, we can eliminate all our problems in one fell swoop.”

It hadn’t struck me before he said it out loud. Now that he mentioned it, how could I have overlooked something so glaringly obvious?

The plan was not simple by any means. But as far as foolproof plans went, it was as ironclad as the two of us could come up with on such short notice.

We used Will’s dining table to hatch our scheme. At this moment, twelve hours before the serum would complete, the dining table was cluttered with charts, markers, and notes.

Although Will’s initial suggestion was to eliminate all three people and destroy the serum, the more we thought about it, the more obvious it became that none of them could do anything without the serum itself. Our first priority was to get our hands on the serum before they could. Provided that the serum was in their home territory, it would be a challenge. It would be even more of a challenge to break in there in the daytime.

“The elevator shaft goes all the way down to the second basement. That’s our way in,” Will said, looking at the schematics of the building on the dining table. Getting my hands on the blueprints of the building was as simple as giving Maliha a call and asking her to do it for me. She sent me the PDF, which I printed from the printer in my home.

“So we’re going to sneak into the second basement where all the cars are parked and break into the elevator shaft,” I said.

“Then what?”

“Then we shift and use our wolf forms’ litness to our advantage. Then, we can simply climb to the twentieth floor,” Will said, pointing to the blueprints, “where the main lab is.”

“After that, we’re going to pry open the elevator doors on that floor and prepare for the worst,” I added.

We agreed that we’d take action against any guards or goons they would have implanted around the lab and then brute-force our way past their defenses until we got to the serum.

“We destroy the serum,” Will said.

“And then?”

“And then we escape the same way we came. The elevator shaft,” he finished.

“But what about Blair, Ralph, and Maurice? Aren’t we going to do something about them?”

“If we encounter them, we’re going to take them on. You must realize that they work with deception. Ralph once tricked me into thinking that he had snipers pointing at me. Blair once tried to rattle you by pretending that he had already attacked me. And the most dangerous of them all, Maurice. He has been working with vampires from the beginning. They’re going to play dirty. We need to be prepared for that,” he said.

“They’re also going to have their reinforcements. Ralph will have his vampires in the building. Blair will have his security team prowling through the corridors,” I added.

“Even if we cannot attack them at all, we destroy the serum and escape. We live to fight another day,” Will said.

“It’s not good enough,” I said, shaking my head. “Blair already has the working recipe for the serum. He’s going to make it again, and we can’t just keep expecting him to show up at the lab and destroy the serum the next time he makes it. Something has to be done. Something final.”

Then, almost at the same time, we both spoke:

“Dibs on Maurice,” I said.

“I’ll take Ralph and Blair,” Will said. “It’s personal. Blair and I will finish the business his father and I started. Once Ralph is dead, his vampires will be leaderless. It’s going to be easy to eliminate the rest of them. You can handle Maurice.”

We went over the plan another time, memorizing the layout of the building and discussing the minutia with each other. It wasn’t until another hour later that we finalized everything.

“So we’re doing this,” I said, taking a deep breath. “It all happens today.”

“For better or worse,” Will nodded.

“And are you certain that you’re strong enough to fight?” It was not meant to be a patronizing question. It was sincere. He had been through a lot in the past few days.

“I’ve never felt stronger,” Will said. “Obviously, we’re going to leave Vincent in charge of the pack.”

“Hopefully, by this time tomorrow, all our troubles in Fiddler’s Green will come to an end,” I said. “I know I should be scared, but I’m excited.”

“For once, we’re going to take the first step in taking back what’s rightfully ours. I could never have imagined being able to pull something like this off without you. I mean it. You have been a constant source of courage for me all this time,” Will said, hugging me.

“I love you, Will,” I whispered, taking in his musk as his body wrapped around mine. He smelled amazing.

“I love you too, Alexis,” he said.

We patiently waited for the sun to set. This reduced our window, but it allowed us to work under the cover of darkness. It was going to be easier to break into the building when all the workers had left.

As Will said, there would be less collateral damage this way.

We waited on the rooftop across Beckett Pharma, watching as a thick layer of fog rolled over the sea and crept into the town. Tonight, it would all come to an end.

“I am glad to have you with me,” Will said, holding my hand.

“Stronger together,” I said, squeezing his hand as we watched the last of the workers leave the building.

Now, only the security guards patrolling the outside and the lobby remained.

“Shall we?” I asked, looking at Will.

“After you,” Will said.

I put my phone to my ear and said, “Maliha. Cut the power.”

“Going dark in 3...2...1,” Maliha said. She had truly outdone herself. She had hacked into the grid and had isolated the section providing power to this town. The moment she finished her countdown, all the lights on the building turned off.

Werewolves saw better in the dark anyway.

Chapter 28: Will

It was under cover of fog and darkness that Alexis and I descended from the building across the Beckett Pharma tower. As we crossed the road, our steps splashed in the puddles of water that had pooled on the road and sidewalks. Above, the dark clouds forebode another torrential bout of rain. The air was still, and the night was quiet except for our faint sounds as we crept up to the tower.

Even though we had robbed it of its electricity and stripped it of its lighting, the tower loomed like a malignant presence, its jet-black length rising in the air, piercing through the thick canopy of clouds. A sliver of lightning tore through the sky, followed by the low roar of thunder.

I put my arm up, barring Alexis from moving any further. She put her arm on my shoulder and turned me around to face her.

“There’s no going back now,” she whispered. “We are doing this.”

It wasn’t that I was hesitant or afraid—quite the opposite. The three men in there stood no chance against Alexis and me. She had evolved into a strong and fierce werewolf, one that I could count on in battle. As for me, the antidote that Vincent had procured for me was still working its magic, providing me with strength, detoxing my body of all the negative effects of the poison that had been running through my veins, and granting me a level of mental clarity that I had never known before. I was able to calculate the probabilities of potential actions and perceive their outcome within milliseconds. My

body and mind were as optimal as they could be. If there ever was a time to do something like this, it was now.

“We are,” I said, holding her hands. “I’m just checking in to see if you’re okay.”

“I feel alive like I’ve never felt before. It’s like I’ve been preparing for this moment all my life. A chance to do something good. This is going to be my redemption. And yours. We’re ridding this town of evil,” she said, her voice louder than a whisper this time. She stroked my hair, her other hand resting on my chest, feeling my steadily beating heart.

I wrapped my arms around her, lifted her body, and kissed her on her soft, moist, and warm lips. Alexis kissed me in return, then gave me a light peck on each cheek, making them flush with warmth and color.

“Let’s do this,” I said. “Let us rid Fiddler’s Green of evil.”

Wisps of mist wove like tendrils around us as we walked up to the building. I ducked behind a large fountain and peeked from between the plants in the flowerbed, scanning my surroundings. From the corner of my eye, I could see Alexis looking out from behind the fountain wall.

“Guards at the door,” she said, pointing at the main entrance. The main entrance was already a no-brainer. We were not going to use it unless we wanted to draw the attention of every single guard in the building and give up our entire position right at the beginning.

There was a metal barrier lowered over the garage. The few times I had seen the underground garage, it had been open. It

made sense that they closed it with a lowered mesh fence. There were two guards patrolling the garage entrance as well.

Unlike the last time when I had broken into the building to save Alexis, the guards this time around were sturdier, had firearms in their holsters, and were much more agile than the previous guards stationed at the entrances. The previous ones never stood a chance in catching up to me. I wasn't so sure about these new ones. They resembled soldiers in their gait and their actions. As the power was out, the guards walked with flashlights, casting their beams everywhere they walked. This made it especially easy for us to track where they were going.

"Two at the garage entrance," I confirmed with Alexis.

"They're not your average mall walker guards," Alexis said. "It makes sense that Blair upgraded. But we expected that, didn't we?"

"We did," I said. "Follow me."

As we had discussed, we flanked from each side, making use of the environment around us to conceal ourselves. I went for the guard on the right while Alexis crept up behind the guard on the left. In a perfectly synchronized moment, we both struck the guards on the back of their heads at the same time, knocking them out. Before they could fall, Alexis and I caught them and lowered them noiselessly onto the floor. Once I had confirmed that both of them were indeed passed out from our blows, we dragged them into the garage via the side panel in the fence and dumped their bodies in the entrance booth.

"So far, so good," Alexis said, panting lightly as she tucked away the legs of the guard she had knocked out and fitted in

the booth.

“Onwards and upwards,” I said, crouching against the booth as we carefully examined the layout of the garage in front of us. Ahead was a descending curve leading into the main underground garage. The curve gave way to wide parking with evenly spaced columns holding the entire weight of the building upon them. It always fascinated me how civil engineers and architects managed to raise monolithic structures out of brick and stone, structures capable of holding thousands of tons of weight. Despite that huge achievement in one arena of life, people lacked so disreputably in other arenas.

“Will!” Alexis grabbed me by my arm and yanked me back. In the midst of my musing, I had forgotten that this parking space was festering with guards wandering about with flashlights beaming in every direction. I tucked behind one of those new electric cars, the Tesla, and scoped my surroundings from there.

“There it is,” I pointed at the elevator shaft.

Nodding to acknowledge that she had heard me and had seen what I was showing her, Alexis quickly pointed in turn to something that she had just seen.

“Subbasement staircase.”

This was what we had been searching for. The diagrams, schematics, and blueprints were one thing, but it was another thing entirely to be present in the basement packed with guards, hiding from flashlights, and then sight the sub-basement staircase entrance. Theory vs. practical, as they were.

We crawled from car to car, sometimes ducking down to the point of lying down on our stomachs, as we made our way from the entrance of the basement parking lot to the sub-basement staircase. Midway, the thought occurred to me that it would be far easier to just shift and kill all the guards than to keep up the stealth charade. But I patiently persevered, and as with all things that are the rewards of patience and perseverance, our reward this time around was a clean entrance into the sub-basement staircase without any of the guards getting alerted of our presence.

At that same moment, though, one thing happened that neither of us had expected. The lights came back on.

“Must be the backup generator,” Alexis sighed. She stood at the stairwell, her gaze darting up and down to see if anyone was approaching. After a long while of both of us standing there and just biding our time in silence, feeling that our nocturnal advantage had been taken from us, we descended down to the sub-basement.

The first thing I noticed immediately once I stepped inside the sub-basement was how murky it smelled. Like something had died in there. As opposed to the rest of the building and the parking space, this place was completely unkempt and resembled an underground shelter bunker. It was dimly lit, dusty, and decrepit. At the center of this unseemly space was a cage that housed the elevator’s base.

Alexis was two steps ahead of me, already at the cage, pulling it open. It struggled just a bit, but when Alexis and I pulled it together, it swung cleanly open. I peeked inside the shaft and became immediately woozy. It was unending, dark, and cold.

As the gears, ropes, and wires moved, the elevators swung up and down on their tracks. There would be plenty of space for us to traverse upwards.

I shifted first. Immediately upon shifting, the coldness that had crept into my body gave way to a comfortable warmth that was always accompanied by the presence of fur. The elevator passage that had moments ago seemed quite dark now looked lit enough for me to make my way to the top.

Alexis shifted behind me silently. Our gradually honed telepathic communication in wolf form had matured gracefully, allowing us to talk without using words.

I'll go in there first, I said.

Remember, the laboratory location has been shifted. It's on floor twenty-three, Alexis said.

An elevator was descending. As it reached the ground floor, I leaped into the shaft and held on to it. Alexis followed soon after, also latching onto the same elevator. As we ascended, we began counting the floors. The elevator seemed to be going to the top. Both of us jumped off at the twenty-third floor, digging our claws into the framework lattice of the shaft for support. I was on the left of the elevator doors. Alexis was perched on the right. We both pierced each side of the door with our claws and pulled the doors open.

Alexis climbed into the floor. Once she had scouted the entrance, she beckoned me to follow. I climbed through the entrance just in time to avoid the elevator coming down into the shaft.

She was right. This was the floor for the new laboratory. Everything looked like it was recently renovated. The equipment even had a plastic covering on top of it. It made sense that the place was shifted from one floor to the other, given how much I had wrecked it when I was here last.

Shifting back, I saw that the place was a little too impeccable. Functional premises were not this spotless. Perhaps this was how modern labs were, and maybe I was being a little too paranoid. Alexis was speculating at everything on the other side of the floor, squinting, analyzing, and rifling through the files and folders on the shelves.

I made my way through the maze of glass walls and entered the main chamber where I suspected the Wolf's Bane was being kept. I could see something blue and luminescent in a glass tube at the center of the maze in the hermetically sealed room. Alexis followed behind, peeking over my shoulder at the ethereal blue liquid. In the otherwise dark laboratory, this shining vial looked otherworldly and haunting.

I breached the hermetically sealed room, letting the door open, and the air hissed as it escaped the locked room. The plastic curtains rustled as we slid them apart to make our way into the room.

"This doesn't feel right," Alexis said.

"Now that you mention it, there's something odd about the whole thing being a little too easy. Where are all the goons, the henchmen, the guards? There was practically no resistance," I said, unlocking the glass box containing Wolf's Bane and taking out the bottle of blue liquid.

“And the three culprits...they’re nowhere near the potion,” Alexis said warily. She retreated towards the door. “You don’t think this was a ruse, do you?”

My heart sank, and the earth seemed to sweep from under my feet. I could not fathom what had just happened.

In my hand, the vial containing the blue potion, instead of saying Wolf’s Bane, had a smiley face with a text written next to it: *Thanks for making it easy for us and walking right into our trap.*

“Get out,” I said. “Alexis. Get out. Right now!”

But it was too late.

The door slid shut, and the air hissed out, sealing us inside the tempered glass.

“What the fuck?”

“This isn’t the potion! They knew we were coming. We walked right into their trap!”

Alexis banged against the door but to no avail. It did not even budge, let alone shatter. What was a dark lab mere moments ago was now lit up with red flashing lights, often the prelude to an emergency or a security breach. Right on cue, alarms started blaring alongside the flashing lights.

I slammed my body against the glass walls, hoping that they would give in and break, but nothing of the sort happened. Instead, from the ceiling, green gas began billowing out and filling the small glass container we were trapped in.

“Well, well, well, would you look at that, kids?” This was the grimy voice of Blair issuing from the overhead speakers. Just

then, the elevator doors opened, and Ralph, Blair, and Maurice walked in. “It would appear I gave you more credit than you deserved. You really thought that I wouldn’t be alerted of someone hacking into my system? What do you think I’m running, some sort of a clown company?”

“Fuck you!” Alexis yelled and slammed her fist against the glass door.

“Mind your breath,” Maurice said. “Or don’t. I don’t care either way. In about three minutes, poisonous fumes are going to choke both your lungs and kill you where you stand.”

“Look at these two pups caught in a cage of their own making. You know, Wilhelm, I always thought that your imprisonment the first time around was a matter of luck. But as I see you here, so helpless, so weak, trapped a second time, I can’t help but think that you’re the dumbest werewolf that I’ve ever come across. To be trapped a second time so shortly after getting your freedom,” Ralph cackled.

The bottle of the fake potion slipped from my hands and crashed on the floor, spilling warm liquid everywhere. I held my breath and Alexis’s hand as I stared at the three despicable figures standing there. If this was not Wolf’s Bane, where was it? Why make such a fuss about that potion if their plan was to kill me with fumes instead? Did some part of them perhaps know that fumes alone were not enough to kill werewolves?

“You have been a pain in our collective asses ever since you set foot in Fiddler’s Green. What was otherwise a veritable paradise for us, you came and turned into a hellscape with your fucking idealism and your old values!” Maurice said. “It was all working perfectly, Will. You should have died in that

prison. Well, it's not too late. Death comes for all of us. Remember this."

"And why should we rob ourselves of the gratuitous sight of you two squirming in pain as your souls leave your bodies? Writhe for us, if you will," Ralph said. "I always like it when my victims squeal."

I cast a look at Alexis, hating myself for bringing her here, getting her caught in this trap, feeling remorseful that I had risked her life, all for nothing.

"I am sorry," I said. "I have made your life more challenging ever since I stepped foot in it."

"This is not on you, Will," Alexis said, holding my hands in her hands. She brought them up to her chest, allowing me to feel her rapidly beating heart.

"Oy! Hey! Lovebirds! Now's not the time to get fucking sappy with each other. Don't ignore the larger threat present in the room!" Ralph said, kicking the glass walls.

"What does it matter if we're dying anyways?" Alexis said. "Wouldn't I rather spend my last moments with him than be all resentful for something that's not within my control? You've got us. You won. What more do you want?"

"Well, I wanted to gloat and rub it in your faces," Blair said. "But seeing as how you two would rather talk it out amongst yourselves, I can be benevolent enough to grant you that wish. Go ahead. Take your time. Both of you only have a minute anyway. If you don't pass out from the gas, we've got the real Wolf's Bane with us to do the job."

Blair took out a syringe with blue fluid in it and swung it in the air.

“Will,” Alexis whispered. “If we make it out of here alive by some longshot.... get that syringe from him!”

“I have waded in darkness for the longest time, Alexis,” I said, unable to hold my breath any longer. The fumes were beginning to make their way down my throat and were suffocating me. “If I am going towards the light, I am glad that it is with you.”

Unable to breathe any longer, I staggered and crashed down.

“There he goes!” Ralph yelled. I wasn’t sure. At this point, all the sounds—the blaring alarms, the panicked noises coming from Alexis, and the mockery issuing from the three men—were jumbled up into nonsense.

“Hey! You do not get the mercy of dying while you’re passed out!” Blair kicked on the glass again, bringing me back to painful consciousness for a second. “Look me in the eyes as you die. Know that I’ve done what my father set out to do. This is revenge, motherfucker, served as cold as it gets.”

“Enough!” Alexis yelled, slamming hard against the glass. “You wouldn’t be so brave if those walls weren’t between you and me.”

By now, it was impossible to see outside of the room. The gas had completely filled the tiny container-sized room, turning its walls opaque and murky green. It stung me as it permeated my lungs and burned me as the fumes became part of my bloodstream.

The next thing I knew, amidst the pain and anguish, Alexis had collapsed beside me.

The laboratory rang with the jeers of Ralph the vampire, Maurice the betrayer, and Blair, heir to a madman.

Chapter 29: Alexis

This was not how my death was fated. I could feel it in my bones even as the fumes worked against me, paralyzing my body in a state of spasmodic agony. Despite the writhing and convulsing, I was unable to come to terms with the fact that my mate and I were to die like caged animals in a glass prison.

Caged animals.

It was odd how timely the analogy struck me. Weren't we, in truth, caged animals? Didn't each and every werewolf walk this earth with a beast caged within their human form? A beast of fearful proportions, remarkable strength?

A carnal roar escaped me as I shifted, exhaling the billowing fumes from my body and colliding against the glass walls. At first, they did not budge, but the more I collided, the more the walls began to sway. Upon my first strike, they just moved, but even that was enough to warrant worry on the faces of the three devious men standing on the other side of the glass.

Will! Shift! This glass does not stand a chance against us in our wolf forms! I called out to him in my mind, where I could see his spirit fleeing as his body tossed around in near-death convulsions. Even as I crashed against the walls, I sent out some of my strength to him through our sacred bond. My strength waned, but not before I tackled the glass one last time, sending cracks all across the surface.

Will got to his feet, shifting immediately, and then threw his wolf form into the glass with brute force, shattering it completely. Had it been my siphoned strength that had allowed him to wield such power?

I could feel myself returning to normal as the air cleared inside the little glass chamber. The foremost wall that we had shattered had provided a channel for the fumes to escape, allowing us both to breathe.

The plan, as we had devised it, had gone completely to shit, but this did not mean that there wasn't room to improvise. For whatever it was worth, our goal was right in front of us, across the room. The three men, and in their possession, the glass vial of Wolf's Bane.

Will growled loud enough to startle me and pounced forward, crashing through the less thick glass walls, breaking past barrier after barrier till he stood face to face with the men who had thought that they had vanquished him.

I leaped behind him, coming to his side, letting fear settle in the hearts and faces of the fickle vampire, the cowardly werewolf, and the trickster businessman.

Their expressions had contorted instantaneously from that of smug satisfaction to those of unbarred horror. Their worst fear had broken past their defenses and was now staring at them, claws unfurled, fangs snarled, eyes glaring. They were gazing at death.

It was downright comical how the three of them, strong as they might be, immediately turned on their heels and ran for the elevators. In my heart, I could feel Will's strength returning to him, making him more agile. With his newfound

speed, Will jumped in a trajectory that landed him in front of the elevators, blocking their way.

They scampered at the last minute, all three of them running for the stairwell. But this was my time to shine. I pounced just in time, hindering their passage to the stairs. They were truly trapped on this floor with two wild werewolves out for blood.

As they ran, thudding into each other, I gave them a chase, biting at their ankles, swiping my claws where their legs were a moment ago to let them know I had closed in on them and that there was nowhere to run.

Upon seeing me in such swift action, Will came running from behind and joined me as we chased Blair, Ralph, and Maurice across the laboratory.

Something happened then that neither Will nor I had anticipated. The trio broke up and headed in three different directions.

You take Ralph! Will spoke to me. *I'll see to the other two.*

Will knew it was personal between Ralph and me. Had he not orchestrated that car crash that night, my parents would still be alive. He had been under orders from someone. I intended to find out who had given that order. But before I'd do that, I would rend his flesh from his bones and make sure that he'd never do something like that ever again. After tonight, Ralph would not live to drink another person's blood.

"Stop chasing me, you manic bitch!" he yelled as he recklessly ran, breaking everything in his path, and making equipment topple over to hinder my path. I was in my wolf form, and

nothing was posing a hindrance to me. Each time I leaped into the air, I covered the distance that Ralph had gained from me.

Just before he was about to jump out of the window, I dug my claws into his heel and pulled him back, drawing blood from his foot, and creating deep gashes all the way up to his calves.

“Fuck!” Ralph yelled as he crawled on his back and put his arms up in self-defense. I clamped my jaw around his arms and yanked, slashing his forearms and bloodying his entire torso.

“Stop, stop! Please, listen to me. Stop. This fight, it’s not with me. You and I don’t have any qualms, do we? I didn’t even want to poison your mate. It was never about me. I was just in for the ride. Let me go, I beg of you, and you shall never hear from me again,” Ralph begged, holding his bleeding hands in front of me, his face all grotesque with blood, tears, and strain.

I shifted back into my human form and towered over his maimed body.

“You think this is about you being a minor nuisance for Will and me? No, Ralph. This goes all the way back to when you had my parents killed. You might not even remember doing that, but you changed my life for the worse that day when you issued the order. It’s time you paid for that. It’s time you paid back for all the times you haunted this town, controlled its roads, terrorized its people, feasted on the blood of the innocent, and plotted schemes against the werewolves,” I said, closing my fists and kneeling over his body.

“I didn’t know they were your parents! I’m sorry. Just... please...don’t kill me,” Ralph stuttered.

It did not matter to me that he begged. It only served to provoke me more. How dare he beg? How many lives had he played with? How many men and women were murdered? He did not deserve mercy in the slightest.

I grabbed him by the collar and punched him across the face. He groaned as my fist met his chin. As barbaric as this act was, it gave me a beastly pleasure in inflicting violence on him. Of all the people that deserved it, Ralph was on top of the list. I punched him again and again, bruising his face and bloodying his cheeks, and with the final punch, I broke off his vampiric fangs.

At this point, he yelled in pain.

“You broke my teeth, you bitch!” he spat, throwing up blood.

“At least you’re not going to be drinking some innocent human’s blood anymore,” I said, letting go of his collar. Once on my feet, I looked at the pathetic pile of whimpering limbs and bloodied torso and delivered another kick to his side, making him yelp even more.

“Curse you!” Ralph yelled. “I’m glad I had your parents killed!”

“Oh, if you think that by angering me, you’re going to make me kill you quickly, you’re in for some bad news. My parents are dead, and nothing can change that. But I can prolong your death, extending each moment of torture into infinity, making you feel pain like you’ve never felt before,” I said, picking up a piece of glass from the floor.

“You don’t understand, little one,” Ralph said, his tone turning deeper suddenly. He sat up and coughed out more blood. “I

have danced this dance a thousand times. One does not get to my age, and my age is in the hundreds, without having their fair share of brushes with death. Do you think that you're the first person to break my bones and my teeth and rip my flesh? Think again. Think very hard about your next step. What will happen when I am no more? Where do hundreds of vampires go when their leader dies? Who will be responsible for all the unchecked chaos? Me? Oh no, I'm dead. It's you. You who have decided to play with the scales of power as if they're toys, not knowing that the slightest tip can cause tremors and quakes."

"Feeling awfully chatty for someone on the brink of death, aren't you?" I said, kicking his side again. This time he didn't even flinch. Instead, he stared back at me, his face all maroon with blood, his mouth looking lopsided from the lack of teeth.

"Death and I are acquainted on a first-name basis by now. But you must understand that you're messing with forces you don't understand. And you're not going to kill me yet. I haven't told you who ordered your parents' death. Ah yes, your father, the honorable alpha, and your mother, the woman who could make the seraphim envious with her voice... tsk, tsk. Such a pity. Their love was fabled all over town. If they saw you like this, so needlessly violent, do you think they would be proud?"

"Don't talk about my parents with your filthy mouth!" I slashed the piece of glass across his face, cleaving his cheek open.

Rather than scream, he started howling with laughter. It was a deranged sight; Ralph, with his cheek split open, his teeth

missing, and blood all over his body, was laughing hysterically.

“Werewolves are so primitive. You’re nothing more than a fucking bitch in heat for her mate. An animal! You’re nothing more than an animal! An animal who does not know that blood, whether his own or another’s, strengthens a vampire. Look at the bloodbath you’ve provided me!” Ralph rose from the ground so quickly that I barely registered it.

He wrapped his hands around my neck and squeezed, staring viciously into my eyes, snarling with his blood-soaked mouth.

“I would rob your body of its last droplet of blood, but I do not drink tainted dog blood, and so, I must now do unto you what you willed unto me,” he said, squeezing my neck harder, making darkness dance in front of my eyes, and making my head feel light. He pushed me to my knees and began digging his nails into my skin.

Bulbous, red pain gorged from where his nails pierced into my neck. At the last second, I shifted, reveling in the feeling of his grasp getting weaker as my body grew, as fur took the place of skin, as fang replaced tooth, as fingers shaped themselves into claws.

There it was, that immense look of terror in his eyes. I showed no reserve the second time around, digging my claws into his body, aiming for his heart. Ralph yelled as I pounced on his body, my claws piercing deeper, my mouth closing around his neck.

I had played it out for this long for a reason. If Ralph had the Wolf’s Bane, he would have surely used it by now, but it was evident that he did not possess it. It became clear to me that

there was only one vial of the potion currently in this building, and it was with Blair.

As for Ralph, I felt that I had gotten in a good amount of slashes, cuts, gashes, and bites. Good enough for retribution for the horrors he had unleashed on the town, but not good enough for revenge for killing my parents.

I had to kill him. A life for a life.

Out of nowhere, Ralph brought up a shard of glass as I was pummeling him on the floor and stabbed it into my leg. I howled and recoiled as the glass went into my body, jutting out at a strange angle. Immediately, my focus went from torturing Ralph to taking out that glass from my body. I closed my jaw around it and tugged. A spurt of blood followed the glass as it came clean out, but by now, Ralph had taken advantage and had fled.

As my leg trembled from the pain, I waited for a little while for the gash to heal. In the meantime, I cast a look around the destroyed lab and saw that Will was still chasing the two men. But the men had gained some distance on him and were heading to the staircase.

Will! They're headed upstairs; I called out to him.

Tend to yourself, my mate; you're hurt. I will see to them, he said and glanced back at me, half with worry, half with love.

Don't you worry, I'm healing up, and when I do, it's game over for Ralph, I said. It was only after I had reassured him that he left in pursuit of Blair and Maurice.

My attention turned to my leg, which was now sealing itself up thanks to my rapid healing ability. But the downside to my

downtime was that Ralph was nowhere to be found. I could not sense him amidst the hullabaloo of the blaring alarm and the flashing lights. However, his scent was still with me, and if I just put my nose to the ground and followed it, I was sure that I'd find him. He had bled a lot. Enough for me to track him. But where was he? There was no presence of him on this floor, and as far as I knew, he had not escaped via the elevators or the staircase.

Could he even use the windows? That was impossible. There was no way someone like him would use the windows to escape without falling twenty floors below and breaking every bone in his body. Part of me wished that this had already happened and that he was down on the pavement, breathing his last few breaths as death took him. That way, I would avoid having to kill him, but he would still be resigned to the fate he deserved.

However, with my nose to the ground, I could almost make out the lingering path his scent had created. A dense red pathway floated through the air, curling around the corridors, twisting as it unfolded across the laboratory. I ran after it without a doubt in my mind that it was his trail. Werewolves could track their prey for over ten miles based just on the scent. Some could even track their prey for over a hundred miles, but those talented wolves were few and far between. I was not one of them, but I had a feeling that Will certainly was one. He had never explicitly told me that he could do that, but given how he had tracked me from the commune to Beckett Pharma's tower the first time I was kidnapped was a telling sign that he possessed the gift of tracking.

In this confined space, my gift of tracking was just as good as his. And the more I followed the trail, the more it became apparent that rather than run, Ralph had chosen to hide in plain sight. He was here somewhere amidst the false trails of his blood and the fake scent he had emanated to throw me off. He was hiding somewhere, biding his time, waiting for me to give up so he could come out. Come out when the coast was clear. Vampires were just as notorious for their tracking skills, and I knew one thing: He could track me in this lab. He could sense my presence wherever I went.

But it was not a stalemate situation, as I was the predator, and he was my prey. He could not move from where he had hidden himself, and I had all the liberty that mobility could offer.

The trail in the air stopped at the vents in the far corner of the laboratory. Just as in the rest of the laboratory, these vents were functional but had never been used, all a part of a ruse to let me and Will think that we had found the location where Wolf's Bane had been made.

I could feel air rattling through the vents into the rest of the air ducts spread throughout the floor and the building. But within these rhythmic rattles was one unmistakable and non-rhythmic sound of someone shaking.

He knew that I had found him. He was aware that there was nowhere left to run. Those sounds he was making were quivers of fear. And possibly blood-loss-induced shivering.

I wound my claws around the vent's entrance and tore it off, revealing Ralph cowering behind steel pipes. As the red light of blaring alarms fell on his face, he hissed at me, revealing his fangs, fangs that had miraculously regrown in the past few

minutes. His eyes were reduced to slits, like a cat's, and his nails were jutting out of his fingers like claws.

Ralph lurched at me, but I had the freedom of space, whereas he did not. He could only lunge forward. I sidestepped and avoided him but grabbed onto the back of his neck as he lunged forward. My teeth gripped him hard enough to choke him. He flailed limply as I held on to him, his hands thrashing in the air.

And it was at this moment that I knew that I had to kill him now.

Chapter 30: Will

I looked at Alexis balefully one last time before I pursued the chase of Blair and Maurice. The sight of her bleeding leg had shaken me and had made me rethink about this quickly falling apart plan of ours. Perhaps it was better to retreat, regroup, and come back with reinforcements. But that would risk the lives of hundreds of werewolves. By then, Blair will have made more of Wolf's Bane, and he'd have the means at his disposal to wipe out all the Grimm pack. It had to be now.

I had to end this tonight and make sure that the syringe containing Wolf's Bane was not used at all. Better yet that it was wasted somehow. Not that I was planning on letting Blair live after tonight, but even if he were to somehow survive, it would take him a long time to remake Wolf's Bane, if at all. I'd make sure to destroy this tower and all the information within it if that's what it'd take for something like Wolf's Bane to never exist again.

The staircase had hundreds of stairs, both leading up and down, but I could hear both Blair and Maurice heading upstairs rather than in separate directions. If only they'd gone in separate directions, the chase would have been much harder for me. But they had not thought of that, and that was good enough for me.

Good enough until I realized that the reason why Blair insisted Maurice assisted him was that Maurice was, like myself, a werewolf, and Blair was using him for his muscle. That would

not pose a problem, I thought. The last time I confronted Maurice, it had been clear that he stood no chance against me in a physical battle. But Blair was a twisted man, capable of malicious cunning.

But no thought was enough to deter me as I chased them up and up. I'd cross that bridge when I'd get to it. Right now, my rage drove me. I let it strengthen me. If there was ever a time when I needed to let it loose, it was now. So I allowed it to course through my veins, empowering my wolf form and granting me clarity as I tracked my quarry.

But my quarry, it seemed, was in a mood of mockery and jest. They quipped and jeered as they ran, and occasionally I could hear what they were saying, despite the sound of the building-wide alarm.

"Teamwork makes the dreamwork, hermano," Blair sneered. "Live to see another day."

"Backup's waiting," Maurice said, among other things that I could not decipher. I had expected backup to be there, and it had been a bit alarming for me that so far, there hadn't been any reinforcements. Had they really expected to kill us off with that gas chamber? If so, their planning skills were just a tad behind ours.

"Hold him back while I ready the chopper," Blair said between other garbled mumblings. "Hold him. You can hold him for a little while. For fuck's sake, you're a wolf. Don't forget that."

Floor thirty. That's where they finally stopped running. As they banged through the staircase door, I barged behind soon after, finding myself face-to-face with Maurice and Blair.

They were not running any longer.

All I could bring myself to see was the bulge in Blair's breast pocket. That's where he had tucked away the syringe containing my potential doom. Without getting close enough to Blair that he might inject me and without letting him run too far away for me to resume the chase, I had to somehow destroy the Wolf's Bane.

But with Maurice shifting into his wolf form, that seemed like a less likely possibility with each passing second. The minute Maurice began tearing out of his clothes and began morphing into the meek beast he was, Blair turned and ran in the opposite direction, leaving me to face off the werewolf who had betrayed the trust of his entire pack.

I could not let Blair get to the chopper any sooner than I could let Maurice roam freely. Both of them had to be taken care of. With that in mind, I made the first blow, a lethal lunge at Maurice's throat, immediately wrangling him by his neck and bringing him to the ground.

It appeared that Maurice had taken some fighting classes or perhaps used some manner of serum to enhance his strength, for if I had used this wrangling move on him earlier, he would surely have perished within a single blow, but instead of recoiling in pain or showing any sign that he was hurt, Maurice bore the blow and retaliated by lashing at my chest.

I could not swerve to avoid such a quick hit, and had it been a strong hit, I would have suffered some gashes or even bruises. But this was where Maurice's newfound dexterity's limit ended. His attacks were fast, and his reaction times were admirable, but his strength was lacking. The blow he landed

on my chest barely did anything. It did not even deter me from advancing on him and digging both claws into his sides, ripping out tufts of fur.

Maurice snarled as my claws descended into him, piercing past flesh and digging deep into his skin. Blood began spurting out as I pushed forward. We were locked in a bizarre stance, my claws deep into him, his body trying to wrestle free. It wasn't until Maurice threw himself back that I let go of him, not out of mercy but because I had run out of purchase in his skin, having torn a good amount of it with my claws.

As strong as I was, Maurice was just as fast. He recovered from the flurry of my attacks and circled around me, trying to find an opening to attack. In the flashing red alarm light, the notion of two wolves circling each other appeared macabre.

It was with sorrow that I realized that this was what the enemy had intended all along. Not to pitch wolf against vampire or wolf against some evil pharmacist, but to pitch brother against brother, wolf against wolf, to weaken the bond that existed between all pack members. It had never been my intention to seek out my own pack members and battle them. But here I was, forced to fight someone who had been twisted into a sick, depraved, greedy version of himself through the bribery of power and wealth.

And it was for this very reason that Maurice had to be rooted out like a weed. His existence was a blot on the good name of the Grimm pack, his actions tarnishing the reputation of werewolves worldwide. A betrayer in our midst, someone who would sell his own species for the sake of money.

How could he?

I stopped circling and paced across the room, tackling his bleeding torso and plummeting him against the wall. Maurice yelped out in pain as his body collided and fell against the wall. No glass walls on this floor. This was pure concrete that Maurice rammed into.

In the midst of all this, I was concerned about Blair. I could sense Alexis fighting Ralph and was not concerned about the two of them. Compared to her strength, Ralph stood no chance. Compared to mine, Maurice stood none either. But it was Blair who had orchestrated this entire thing, Blair who held Wolf's Bane in his possession, Blair who was escaping in the chopper waiting for him on the roof.

Maurice was just meant to be a distraction, and a means to stall me as Blair made off.

Through my keen sense of hearing, now heightened by the adrenaline racing through my body, I could pick out the faint sound of Blair climbing up a ladder hidden somewhere on this floor. But while Maurice was here, in wolf form, ready to fight me, I could not just ditch him and chase Blair. If left to his own devices, he would certainly go down and join Ralph, and the two would team up against Alexis, a werewolf and a vampire against my fated mate.

In the midst of my contemplation, Maurice had gotten back up and was now snarling at me. I could not help but commend his newfound bravado. As depraved and cowardly as he had been, his resilient stand against me without any backup or support was somewhat impressive. He was my foe, my opponent, but it was the mark of a good fighter to acknowledge the strengths of their foe.

Since he and I had no such bond linking our psyches, I could not communicate with him. I could only do that with Alexis and sometimes, on rare occasions, with Vincent. Part of me wanted to shift back and talk to him, tell him that there was still a way out of it if he were to only repent, realize the errors of his ways, pay the penalty for his crimes, and return to the Grimm Abode as a pack member. But then I recalled the crimes he had committed, the horrendous deeds he had done, and it brought me to the conclusion that a penalty for such perjury could only be his life.

This time, I let him attack first. Maurice gaped his maw and attempted to bite my neck. A wolf's weakest and most vulnerable point in battle was always his neck. It was why female wolves would stoop in front of their mates in battle, snarling as they'd do so, to protect their mate's necks. Even though my mate was not here, I made sure that my neck was protected. There was a reason for me to let him attack first. Just as his muzzle was within biting range, I slammed my paw into it, sending him hurtling across the floor a second time.

Maurice quivered where he lay, undoubtedly reeling from the brute blow he had just received. I gave him no quarter, and instead of letting him reel, I launched myself in the air, landing mere inches away from him, my face next to his neck, my teeth ready to pierce his trachea. It was my way of letting him know that the battle was over, that I had won the fight.

Maurice looked up at me and, instead of defending himself, presented his neck as a sign of surrender. The fight was over. I could see it, he could sense it, and there was nothing more left to be done other than kill him.

I left him there, still shivering in a tiny puddle of his blood coming out of various ruptured body parts, withering with tufts of fur falling out. Rather than take his life, I resumed the chase of Blair.

It was not because I had any feelings of sympathy for Maurice that I spared him. There was a brief moment where I was on the brink of biting down on his neck and ending his existence. But Alexis's face swam before my eyes as I was about to do that, her face imploring me to seek the less-trodden path of mercy. She had begged me to be merciful once, back when I was about to kill Blair. Had I not acquiesced to her request back then, our relationship would not have bloomed into what it is now. Blair would have died. There would have been no Wolf's Bane. I, however, would have been a wolf without a mate. A wolf driven by hate instead of mercy.

I did not want to be that wolf then, and I did not want to be that wolf now.

Besides, my objective was right there—in Blair's pocket. All I needed was to get there in time and make sure that he didn't get on the chopper. Even if that meant taking down the chopper somehow. I hadn't done something like that before, at least not in my wolf form, but if that was what it took, then that's what I'd do.

Five minutes after I had beaten Maurice, I found the secret entrance to the emergency ladders leading up to the rooftop. I could see the cloudy sky on the other side of this elusive tunnel. It only meant one thing: Blair had found his way to the roof, and at any given moment, he was about to escape.

Instantaneously, I shifted back as I was unable to climb those steep ladders with my wolf body. I began ascending the stairs, panting lightly as the built-up fatigue of the past hour's activity started getting to me. There were at least a hundred ladder steps leading up, and I was just at the start.

The long length of the ladder lent me some time to ponder why I had spared Maurice's life, other than the most obvious reason. Above everything, Maurice was Vincent's father and Fred's son. Both those relationships were extremely important to me. Fred was my brother, and Vincent was akin to a close friend. I could not soil the nature of either of those relationships by bringing about the death of a son and a father. The repercussions of such a deed would be too destructive. More importantly, Maurice was a werewolf. If word got around that werewolves were killing werewolves in Fiddler's Green, how would the rest of the packs perceive it? They would seek to admonish us. They would think of me beyond reason and instead resort to reprimanding me with actions. Perhaps imprison me after charging me with the crime of harming another werewolf. Maybe such a tribunal would even find me guilty enough to sentence me to death.

I had barely climbed to the top when I saw that this wasn't the roof. It was only a terrace midway along the length of the building. There were no signs of Blair on the terrace. But the door leading into the lobby of this floor was partly open.

Suddenly, from above, the whirring sound of the chopper's rotor blades coming to life boomed, increasing my sense of urgency. If the helicopter had turned on, it only meant that Blair's escape was imminent. Immediately after that, ropes slid down from the roof of the building, their ends dropping

into the terrace. I looked upward and saw soldiers descending from those ropes. Just as the ropes had come from above, grapples hooked to the terrace's wall from below. I shot a look down and saw more soldiers climbing up along the length of the building.

These soldiers bore no marks of military nor that of any militia. Their suits were black camo, and they had night vision goggles on. All of them had rifles hanging from their shoulders.

More soldiers swarmed from the corridor, the lasers of their guns aiming in my direction. I ducked immediately to avoid the first flurry of gunfire in my direction, then crawled along the terrace till I reached the door as bullets flew above me, shattering the glass and spreading it everywhere around me. By the time I got to the door, my forearms had tiny shards wedged in them, but I had no time to see to these new injuries as more soldiers stood inside the building, waiting for me. Once inside, the red flashing alarm light gave me a momentary cover to roll behind the furniture in the lobby and narrowly avoid the next bout of gunfire.

It was utter and pure mayhem in the lobby, with soldiers coming from every side, making me wonder how on earth I was ever going to close the distance between Blair and myself and how I would ever get my hands on Wolf's Bane now.

Even though the glass windows were well shattered, creating a kaleidoscopic effect that did nothing to help me with scoping my surroundings, I saw a black shadow outside, rising from below and heading up to the roof. Upon first sight of this strange sight, I had no clue as to what I had just seen, but

before the shadow disappeared, I caught glimpse of the face amid all the blackness floating upwards.

It was Ralph.

Folkloric tales that I had heard when I was young told of accounts where vampires could fly. Even as a child, that had seemed like an exaggeration to me. Their inability to come out in the daylight and their proclivity for blood were all within the realm of plausibility. But were they really able to fly? That was far-fetched. It had always seemed unlikely. Until just now when I saw Ralph flying up like a giant bat. If he were to rendezvous with Blair on the roof, the two of them would become an unstoppable force, what with the additional mercenaries swarming the building.

My heart sank a little as I realized that the only way Ralph could have escaped would have been after defeating Alexis. An image conjured itself in my mind: Alexis lying lifeless on the floor, her body drained of all blood, bite marks on her neck.

I am okay, a voice resounded in my head, laying my worst suspicion to rest. *But Ralph escaped.*

How?

He freaking flew! Didn't you see?

Amidst the telepathic conversation, the sound of the chopper on the roof, and the gunfire blazing overhead, I tried to improvise a new plan in real-time, and upon thinking in a dozen different trajectories at the same time, I finally said, *There's no way we're doing this alone. Regroup with me so we can take them on together.*

In the meantime, I crawled further behind the bullet-riddled lobby furniture and hid behind the lobby desk where no bullets were flying. This allowed me to respite enough to remove the shards from my forearms and recalibrate myself to my surroundings.

The volume of gunfire was a bit misleading, I learned. There weren't as many soldiers as I had thought there were. Six of them were on one side of the lobby, while ten stood in a semi-circle in front of the staircase and elevator. But that still amounted to sixteen armed soldiers with a seemingly infinite amount of ammo for their fully-automatic rifles, leaving me stranded behind the desk.

A desk that would not hold for long under gunfire if the soldiers realized that I was hidden behind it.

I needed a diversion.

Chapter 31: Alexis

O f all the things that Ralph could have done, I would never in a million years have imagined him flying away from me and crashing through the window in an attempt to flee.

Well, he succeeded, and here I stood, unable to comprehend what had just happened. As far as I knew, vampires only knew how to fly in movies, and not even in all of them. Was it just Ralph who had this ability, or were all of the vampires able to fly? I dared not think about the possibility of hundreds of vampires being able to fly.

After my telepathic conversation with Will ended, I only had one goal. I had to track Will somewhere on the upper floors and help him escape from where he was stuck. It did not help that the reinforcements were arriving faster than either of us had anticipated and were quickly filling up all the hallways and corridors. Who were these men anyway? Private guns hired by Blair as an overkill way to ascertain our deaths? What was next, that we'd find out that they were all carrying silver bullets in their guns?

Even though we did not communicate this part explicitly, my bond with my mate had strengthened enough to make me realize that he needed a diversion if he were to escape from where he was stuck.

I had only one card left to play. It was not something preplanned or even something I had thought up more than a minute ago. It was only after taking a good look at one of the

soldiers and realizing that they were all wearing night vision goggles that this idea occurred to me.

I fished my phone out of my pocket. Amidst all the shifting and unshifting, my phone had lodged itself deep into the pocket of my flexible jeggings. Whenever I shifted, my jeggings merely tore just a little as opposed to any other clothing. That was the secret to being a werewolf and still remaining clothed—I chose loose and flexible clothing. Sweatshirts and hoodies for my torso and jeggings or pajamas for my legs.

Maliha's number was already on speed dial. It only took a press of a button to call her.

“Are you in a gaming zone without telling me? What did I tell you about playing multiplayer games without me? I hate it!” Maliha protested.

Rather than tell her that the bullets she was hearing in the background were not sounds coming from Call of Duty or Battlefield but actual shots being fired by actual mercenaries, I said, “Maliha, turn the lights back on. All of them at once. Right now.”

“Oh, we're still fucking with Beckett Pharma, are we?” Maliha asked. “So you're not gaming?”

“I'm not. And hurry up!”

“You better give me some explanation for whatever the godforsaken din is coming from your background,” she said.

She was stubborn, often irritating at times, but at least she always complied with my requests. Right after I told her to turn the lights on, the power came back to Beckett Pharma and

tripped the alarm as well as the emergency red flashing light, leaving the entire building lit with off-white fluorescent lights.

I might not be gaming right now, but I knew this much thanks to Maliha's adroitness in multiplayer first-person shooters: whenever someone turned the lights on in the face of a soldier wearing night-vision goggles, the soldiers were always blinded.

Hopefully, this would serve as a distraction enough for Will to escape.

I could already hear the sounds of soldiers screaming orders to take off the night-vision goggles. Making use of this diversion myself, I fled across the laboratory and took the elevators. The stairs would be flooded with soldiers. There was no telling how many mercenaries Blair had hired. With his resources pooled with those of Maurice and Ralph, there was no telling what lengths he had gone to. The only hope I had was that fate was on Will's and my side. In my not-so-long life, the most important thing I learned was that fate was the strongest force that existed, capable of moving mountains and parting the seas. With this hope, I reached out to Will.

Which floor do you want to regroup on?

The thirty-first, Will said.

I pressed the button on the elevator, closed the doors, and headed up to the thirty-first floor.

As the elevator ascended, it came to a halt at one of the floors, and the doors slid open. The sight that awaited me was downright pitiful.

Maurice lay sprawled on the floor, having dragged himself from across the hall. He had tracked blood all over the corridor. His hand was an inch away from the elevator button, and his body was severely bruised. Upon looking at me, he immediately recoiled and fell back.

My first impulse was to kill him. Will had spared his life, presumably because of my earlier imploring for mercy, but I was not bound by any such promise. I could kill him here, and no one would know. It would put a stop to his antics in the town. There was no guarantee that he'd sober up and disappear from this town if I spared him. If anything, given what I knew about him, Maurice would only serve to be a perpetrator of more chaos.

However, on second thought, after seeing him in such a weakened and compromised state, I chose not to do anything. Even if I did nothing, he was sure to die from weakness and blood loss. Better his death be because of natural causes than me. At least this way, my conscience would remain unburdened.

The elevator doors closed before I could make a decision. The elevator resumed its ascent, and for a while, it seemed I'd make it to the intended floor and regroup with Will.

It was for the second time that the elevator doors slid open, and this time around, it wasn't the sight of Maurice lying on the floor that greeted me but ten armed soldiers, all of them aiming their rifles at me, the red lasers of their guns fixated on my body.

Before any of them could so much as pull the trigger, I jumped up and broke through the elevator ceiling entrance. That was a

narrow miss. Had my reaction been delayed for more than a second, I would have looked like Swiss cheese.

Shouts came from behind me, some faceless man barking orders to his subservient soldiers to pursue me. Bullets grazed past the elevator roof as soldiers flooded inside the elevator and tried to climb up. I closed the hatch and jammed it, allowing myself some momentary relief in which I came up with the next course of action. The elevator roof was riddled with bullet holes through which I could see the soldiers standing underneath. They were trying to open the hatch which I had jammed. It was a wonder how I had avoided the bullets so far, but I could not stay here any longer.

At that moment, my eyes fell on the air ducts that had passage through the elevator shaft. How could I not have thought of these before? I kicked open one of the air ducts closest to me and threw myself in it, crawling safely away from all the bullets and soldiers. But that hatch that I had jammed would not remain jammed forever. They'd climb into the elevator shaft and follow me.

Unless...

I rolled in the opposite direction and headed back to the elevator shaft. The taut metal wires that held the elevator were stretched beyond their recommended weight. There must be at least eight or nine soldiers in the elevator trying to open the hatch.

As I unbuckled the elevator harness to the wire, the jammed hatch swung open, and a soldier popped out, aiming his rifle at me. I looked at him and smiled, shaking the last of the harness bolts in my hand. The elevator creaked loudly, and before the

soldier could understand what had happened before he could pull the trigger on me, the elevator lurched and fell, crashing against the walls of the shaft as it hurtled with terminal velocity.

I turned back and crawled through the air duct, climbing up, counting the floors in my head, and stopping only when I reached the thirty-first floor. Here, I undid one of the vent entrances and slid out of the wall panel.

To my right, the elevator entrance had smoke coming out of it. In front of me, soldiers were honing in on my location. There was no sign of Will on this floor. I looked at the elevator entrance again and saw that I had skipped a floor, and instead of thirty-one, I was on the thirty-second floor.

There was no time to alert Will of my predicament. The soldiers had made a formation around me, their knees to the floor, their guns against their shoulders, their fingers on the triggers.

I had a better bet of avoiding bullets as a werewolf. Immediately upon shifting, I leaped beyond the soldiers in one swift motion and landed behind them. Before they had time to register that they had just emptied their clips into an empty wall, I attacked them from behind. They might be soldiers, but they were humans and, as such, stood no chance against me. With a sweep of my paws, I swept them off their feet, and with a jab of my claws, I threw away their guns. Once I hammered them hard enough, they were knocked unconscious. Those who stayed conscious knew better than to butt in again and instead lay groaning and tending to their injuries.

Taking the guns away from around a dozen soldiers and knocking them out was too laborious a task. It did not drain me of energy, but it left me feeling that my time could have been better spent searching for my mate and assisting him with finding Blair.

Will? I'm on the floor above you. Where are you?

I am caught between a rock and a hard place yet again.

Hold on; I'm coming.

It was not our fault that we were finding ourselves overwhelmed. Whatever we had planned, Blair had planned something two steps ahead. And the fact that we were in too deep to call it quits only made the struggle more pertinent. The good thing, however, was that even though they had numbers on their side, we had power.

I traversed the body-ridden floor, leaving groaning and unconscious soldiers in my wake, and ascended the stairs. Here, on this floor, once I opened the door, I understood what the rock and the hard place were.

Will was entangled in a fighting match with ten soldiers at once, all of whom were using batons, nets, and bats to bludgeon and trap him. He was holding his own remarkably well, but it was only so that the other soldiers surrounding him with guns wouldn't shoot at him. If he were to disengage from this one-sided fight, they would shoot at him.

I rolled along the length of the floor and hit the soldiers lined with their guns held up from behind, making them topple almost as a bowling ball topples over pins. When I rolled back

to my feet, I saw that there was only one more soldier formation left, aiming their guns at Will.

I soared across the hallway, over the fight that Will and the soldiers were engaged in, and landed on top of the formation of soldiers below. They tried to adjust their crosshairs and aim at me, but my body tackled them before they could shift their line of sight.

This time, knowing that this was the last of the formations, I tore the guns from their hands with my teeth, clawed violently at their Kevlar armor, and thrust my legs and paws into their bodies to send them flying, leaving no soldier standing.

Now, I turned my undivided attention to Will and the horde he was holding back. I bit at their necks, latched onto them from every surface I could find, whether it was their holsters or the straps on the back of their armor, and tore them away from the deluge attacking Will, thinning this horde within a minute, leaving just a few stragglers now barely able to hold their own in a battle with two monolithic werewolves.

Before either of us could get to them, the stragglers ran off unsoldierly, arms flailing, voices pitched high, and legs trembling.

Will shifted back to his human form, rescinded on his knees, and panted heavily as he took a well-deserved break from all the fighting he had been doing. He took off the net the soldiers had thrown on him and sat down on the floor, staring at the pile of bodies on either side of the hallway.

I shifted back with him.

“Maybe it’s time we start using guns,” he said, his thumb gesturing at all the rifles lying strewn on the floor.

“As cover fire or to kill?” I asked.

“Does it matter now? Look at what we’ve done. Fighting them one on one is not effective, as we’ve surmised. There’s no point in going the way of force if our opponents aren’t playing fair, either. Let’s just use them.”

“You’re a stronger wolf than I am,” I said. “So, how about this? I will advance through the remaining floors, rifles in hand, laying suppressing fire for you as you move forward in your wolf form, and confront Blair on the roof before it’s too late. If he escapes on the rooftop choppers, this will all have been for nothing. I’m going to divert the soldiers. You do what you need to do.”

“Or,” Will said, going through the equipment of one of the unconscious soldiers on the floor, “We can use these.” He was holding smoke grenades in his hand. “No bullets. No guns. This is going to be stealthier and will allow us both to make use of our true natures, the wolf form.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I had never wanted to use guns. People often said that fire must be fought with fire, but what they didn’t understand was that after the battle was done, the aftermath was just ashes. If we had used guns like the soldiers, that would have made us no better than them.

Once Will and I had plucked out the remaining smoke grenades from all the bodies of the unconscious soldiers—a feat that took a surprisingly little amount of time—we headed back to the staircase, this time our destination being the rooftop.

As I headed into the staircase, I saw more soldiers coming up from below. Will pulled the pin on a couple of smoke grenades and threw them down the stairwell, filling the whole place with thick white smoke.

Amidst the cacophony of smoke and screams, we climbed our way to the top of the stairs till the only floor above us was the roof. Here, the stairwell ended, and a giant door hung open and askew. From the other side, the full moon peaked from behind the clouds, lending me strength as its beams fell on me.

I pulled the pins on a couple more of the smoke grenades and threw them behind me, covering the staircase entirely in smoke. When Will and I had made it past the door, we pushed it together and slammed it shut. A crowbar lay beside the door. Will picked it up and jammed the door with it.

“It’s not gonna hold for long,” I said, taking stock of my new surroundings.

“We don’t need a long time. We just need to stop Blair from getting on the chopper,” Will said.

But once he saw what I was seeing, Will became just as quiet. This rooftop was not a plain surface. It had many different levels, all of them forming a haphazard maze of air conditioner units, vents, electrical transformers, and fences. There were more stories on top of the roof, creating levels that started from where we stood and ended on the far east of the building, at the top of which was the helipad.

I could not see the helipad clearly from here, nor could I make out the shape of the chopper. To make matters worse, there wasn’t any sign of Blair, Ralph, and Maurice either.

“Will, it’s too damn quiet here,” I said.

“Calm after the storm or before it?” Will asked.

“Neither. We’re in the eye of the storm,” I said. “Shift now!”

As both of us shifted swiftly, soldiers emerged from around us, holding riot shields, wielding tazers, and holding guns.

“Hold!” the captain of the soldiers yelled from behind.

“Hold!”

We were surrounded, but what the soldiers could not see was that we were standing on a pile of smoke grenades. Will pierced them with his claws, and almost at once, the air filled with dense, impenetrable smoke, making it impossible for anyone to see anything.

Before the smoke engulfed Will and me, I caught a brief glimpse of Blair standing at the edge of the helipad, looking over the development taking place below,

Will, there’s Blair! You have to stop him; I said as the gunfire started roaring around us, as we parted ways and fled for shelter amidst the confusion of bullets, bangs, screams, and smoke.

Chapter 32: Will

The gunfire, by its sheer volume, made me worried for Alexis's safety, but so far, in the course of the battles that we had fought in this building tonight, she had more than held her own. Besides, these were regular bullets. They could never pierce past the thick coat of a werewolf's body. Granted, they could injure gravely, but they were nowhere near as lethal as what Blair held in his hands.

The whole rooftop had turned into a labyrinth of smoke, lasers, bullets, and soldiers. My keen sense of direction allowed me to traverse it and make my way past squadrons, avoiding their fire, ducking past the barriers they had put up, and leaping over the traps they had set on the floor. I only had one goal. Find Blair and destroy the Wolf's Bane.

Overhead, the moon shone brightly, now free of the clouds that had surrounded it earlier tonight. As I looked at the moon, I felt my body grow, my blood getting warmer, and my power increasing tenfold. There was a reason why wolves were fabled to be so treacherous on a full moon's night. The longer I stayed out in the light of the moon, the more aggressive I became, till a time came that I was no longer avoiding the soldiers swarming through the rooftop maze but striking them as they came in my path. A slash here, a bite there, and a tackle every so often. Once or twice, a ricocheting bullet hit me in the shoulder, but instead of piercing past my skin, it merely grazed and went off in a different trajectory. I wondered as adrenaline took hold of my faculties if this

newfound strength was due to the potion Vincent had gotten for me.

Now that the smoke was gradually clearing, the layout of the roof became more apparent, lending me a clear sight of where Blair stood. The roof had several levels. I had to strain my neck to be able to see Blair on the rim of the helipad. But there was no sight of any chopper there. Every glance I got of Blair made me more enraged, and I took out this rage on the hapless soldiers who were foolish enough to come my way.

At the same time, I felt like I was losing a little bit of control, relishing in doling out violence and torture on the soldiers, clawing deeper than I needed to claw, biting harder than was warranted. These were not some war-hardened soldiers. They had not seen real battles. They were private mercenaries trained merely in the theoretical practice sessions held in abandoned military complexes. They did not know war as intimately as I did. These soldiers were unaware of the fact that when you got knocked down in battle, you didn't stay down but got back up and fought till your dying breath. And this was my advantage. It allowed me to barge through, slam past, and plummet into the ranks of soldiers in the maze. They did not know that I was not trapped in here with them. They were trapped in here with me.

In the background, sounds of flashbangs, bullets hitting metal, and the orders of inexperienced captains rang in an otherwise quiet night. As if they knew what hell was being unleashed on the roof, the clouds had moved away, lending the moon a clear sight into the action and madness.

There was no more smoke now, and I had already ascended two levels. There were fewer soldiers here, and most of them had seen what I had done to their comrades below. They were playing defensively, hiding behind cover, trying to cock their rifles to get a proper aim at the rapidly moving werewolf. In the midst of this, I managed to catch glimpses of Alexis below. To my surprise, she was doing remarkably well, leaving a pile of bodies in her wake. A more thorough glance at the bodies reaffirmed to me that she was not killing them, just knocking them unconscious as she had already been doing. And suddenly, she wasn't there anymore. I sought her in shadow and sight but could not see where she had disappeared. It was a few seconds later that I realized what she was doing.

Why hadn't I thought of this before? When a soldier had a lot of opponents to fend off, they turned to the techniques of stealth. That's what Alexis was doing, by the looks of it.

The soldiers were on the lookout for a wolf. Most of them didn't know what I looked like in my human form. This presented an opportunity for me to go the way of stealth as well. Behind the cover of a large electrical unit, I shifted back and snuck out the side. While still behind cover, I saw that the soldiers were aiming at my last seen location, not where I currently was.

Instead of confronting any of the soldiers, I swerved across the roof, avoiding all of them, and came to the stairs leading up to the third level of the roof. There were no soldiers stationed at the stairs. Once on the third level, I could see the helipad clearly. Blair stood there, and not too far behind him, Ralph sat, tending to his wounds. But Blair did not look like how I had last seen him.

He was wearing armor. There were gauntlets on his hands with pistons attached to them. As I looked from behind the cover, Blair put on a sturdy helmet. From what I could see from this far off, his armor was different from the one the soldiers were wearing. This was custom-made, tailored specifically to fight a strong foe. Did he mean to engage me in battle yet again?

It dawned on me why there weren't any soldiers awaiting me on this sublevel. Instead of soldiers, vampires emerged from behind shadows. Their numbers were more than all the guards combined, and they stood in ranks, fangs bared, claws unfurled, slit-like red eyes.

There was no point in trying out stealth with these many vampires lying in wait. They would sense me within minutes.

I walked out from behind cover, one lone alpha against dozens of Ralph's reinforcements.

"Come on then!" I yelled as they saw me. They fell upon me like bats, screeching, hissing, and clawing. For a brief moment, my entire body was covered with vampires bent on draining my blood, intent upon rending my skin. The next moment, I shifted, throwing vampires every which way in the air. Now that I knew that Blair intended to draw this out and fight me, I was in a much better mentality to fight these vampires. Throughout the night, I had lost count of the soldiers, guards, and vampires I had battled, but this battle, by far, was the most strenuous. Just as the night granted werewolves powers, it did so for vampires too. The lack of the sun made them bolder, turned their actions quicker, and made their bodies lithier.

I could feel a few deep cuts within my fur as vampires latched themselves to my body with their claws. Some of them tried to bite me as I fought them, but I never let that happen. The cuts hurt initially, causing me to retract from the fight, but within moments they healed and allowed me to step back into the fray unhindered.

A vampire soared from above and attempted to strike my face. I bit down on his throat and dragged his body below, causing blood to spurt from his neck. This made the other vampires livid, causing them to become more frenzied in their attack.

I was outnumbered but not overpowered by any means. I took out my claws at full length and slashed lethally, intending to kill. Viscera and guts tore out from the torsos of the vampires standing in front of me as my slash carved their bodies open. Seeing this, the others recoiled. Making use of the way I had cleared for myself, I clamped my jaw shut around the face of the nearest vampire and tore it completely off. Two enterprising bloodsuckers decided to strike me from behind, which I dodged by rolling on my back and crushing them under my weight. Another vampire got trampled under my feet as I lunged at the remaining horde.

As many of them as there were, I had thinned out their numbers quickly. Now, the ones left standing were barely more than ten. As I collided with them in a fierce tackle, I skinned one alive with my sharp claws, decapitated another by tearing off his neck, and crushed two more under the full weight of my body. Out of nowhere, one of the surviving vampires wedged a stake into my snout.

Maddening pain took hold of my senses, paralyzing me momentarily as I struggled to take out the stake lodged in my mouth. *Foolish creatures, the stakes don't work on werewolves!* I thought as I snatched it with my claws and slid it out.

During the time I needed to heal, I backstepped and took a gander at the level below, watching out for signs of Alexis.

I could use some help here; I sent her a message.

Close your eyes and duck your head behind your paws, she responded.

As the vampires ganged up on me, I obeyed Alexis's instructions and protected my face. A distinct sound of hollow metal clanging on the floor rang in my ear, followed soon after by the loud bang of a flashbang. Upon looking up, I saw the vampires wincing, groaning, and holding their faces in their hands.

Prey, I thought, ripe for the taking.

I lifted my body on my hind legs and drew out my claws as I raced forward across the roof. As I passed each vampire, my claws tore through their bodies in a swift motion. When I had ended my charge, I turned around to see the results of my carnage.

A second ago, they were standing there, reeling from the effects of the flashbang, and a second later, they were all sprawled on the floor, writhing, dying, and bleeding.

Had I been unjust? Weren't all of these vampires, soldiers, and their masters assembled here to do anything other than kill me? This was nothing more than self-defense.

Here I stood, upon the threshold of the final level. I crouched low as I climbed the stairs. My paws bloodied the steps as I made my way up. My body reeked of vampires. Above the final level, there was only the helipad.

From this topmost point, the whole of Fiddler's Green looked like a miniature town, the kind they showed in museums. That tiny patch of lightwork to the left was Grimm Abode. The sea and its many waves resembled an abstract painting stretching into eternity. The moon looked like a bauble that kids hung on Christmas trees. The air was thin here.

I expected Ralph, Blair, and Maurice to stand there in wait for me at the topmost point on the roof, but they were not there. From my vantage point, I sighted Alexis, who had been following my steps. She was still two stories below, but her way was clear.

But mine wasn't.

Would this deluge never end?

More soldiers flanked me on this roof from all sides than had ever appeared anywhere below. I stood against them, one werewolf against an endless barrage of soldiers.

I shifted back, knowing that there was no way I was going to take on so many soldiers all by myself.

"You know what, Blair?" I called out.

"I'm sorry. I can't hear you over the sound of you dying," Blair called back. But it worked. He was no longer hiding. He came down from the helipad, armored like a gladiator, and walked past the soldiers till he came face to face with me.

“After tonight, everyone’s going to know that it took you an army to take me down,” I said. “Once this night ends, people will find out how big of a coward you are, hiding behind your hired guns and your shiny armor,” I said.

“If this is you begging, then you’re doing a horrible job of it,” Blair said. His voice came back garbled from behind the mask. It made his voice mechanical. The visor of his helmet was made of reflective glass, making it impossible for me to look into his eyes. The grooves of the armor accentuated muscles that weren’t really there, creating a faux image of someone strong and resilient. I knew the man under the armor all too well. He was gaunt, self-doubting, and contemptuous.

“Your soldiers and Ralph’s vampires haven’t been able to stop me thus far. What makes you think I will let you escape with the Wolf’s Bane on your helicopter?” I asked.

Ralph began cackling from behind, joined by Maurice. Somehow, Maurice had made it to the roof. He looked disheveled, but since he was a werewolf, he had healed quite quickly. Blair laughed the loudest.

“What makes you think there’s a helicopter? Do you think we’re going to escape? And miss the show? In case it didn’t make it through your thick skull, allow me to put it into terms that you’ll understand. The helicopter was a ruse meant to drive you up here. You’re stranded here, Mr. Wilhelm Grimm, surrounded by hundreds of soldiers, and there’s nowhere for you to go,” Blair said.

Now it was my turn to laugh. I threw my head back and let a howl escape me. “If there’s no chopper, then you’re just as trapped here with me as I am with you. What makes you think

I'm going to let you go free? I already defeated so many of your men. These are merely a handful more."

"Talk is cheap," Blair said, turning his back to me. "Talk to me when you've made it through the last step of the gauntlet. But know this, hell awaits you in the end."

With that, Blair, Ralph, and Maurice headed back to the helipad. Now that I knew that there was no helicopter incoming, their standing at the top of the helipad seemed kind of pointless.

Behind me, Alexis ascended the stairs and came to my side, the two of us standing side by side in our human forms. She slid her hand next to mine and held it firmly.

"Oh, would you look at that? Star-crossed lovers, fated mates, other sappy shit...cry me a river," Blair said from the top of the helipad. "You two are the trespassers, the perpetrators. You're the ones in the wrong."

"Takes a conceited asshole to talk about who is in the wrong and who is not," Alexis said. "You kidnapped me first. Ralph had my parents killed. Maurice has been corrupting this town for decades. Don't put this on us. You're the ones who have been making life a living hell for everyone. No one stood up to you until now."

"Neither of you has what it takes to kill any of us," Maurice said. Impressively, his wounds all looked healed, but his state was still disheveled from all the torn and bloodied clothes. "If you possessed what it took to kill us, you would have done it already instead of this verbal jousting. But we're men of means, men who understand how the world works, and to us, you're nothing more than vermin that need to be wiped out."

While they were talking, I was busy counting guns and soldiers. Ninety soldiers wielding ninety rifles. The odds were not in our favor.

Do you have any more of those grenades? I asked Alexis.

I don't, but I don't think that grenades are going to work here. I count upwards of eighty soldiers, she said.

Ninety, to be exact, I said.

If there's no way ahead, there's always a way behind. I reckon we've taken down more than a hundred soldiers and vampires combined in the past hour or so. On my count, we're going to fall back down and make use of the roof's mazelike structure to our advantage, she said.

Divide and conquer?

That's right.

“Hey, Blair!” I called from across the roof. “You never got to hear your father’s last words, did you? Of course, you didn’t. I killed him. I had the privilege. Do you want to know what your father said before I took his heart out?”

“You son of a fucking bitch,” Blair said. I had hit him in the jugular. He took off his helmet, revealing a scorned face underneath. Scowling eyes, lips contorted with anger, and cheeks swelled red. “You dare talk of my father?”

“Talk of him? I killed him. You take a man’s life; the least you can do is carry it with you. Don’t talk to me about not possessing what it takes to take someone’s life. I killed your father, but only after he told me your mother was a two-bit streetwalker!” Of course, his father had not said anything of the sort, but Blair did not know, and I was counting on his

ignorance and his unresolved emotions to drive him into a rage. If there was one thing I knew, it was the destructive power of rage. It was impossible to control yourself when you were angry.

And just as I had wanted, Blair did something that I was counting on, something so devoid of rationality that everyone present on the roof was startled.

“Fuck you, Wilhelm Grimm!” Blair yelled as he lifted a rocket launcher from behind and hoisted it over his shoulder. Just as he pulled the trigger and released the rocket, I grabbed Alexis and threw ourselves off the topmost level of the roof.

Chapter 33: Alexis

If riling Blair had been Will's intention, he had done an excellent job. The smoldering top level of the roof with flames roiling out of the debris was a clear indicator of it. As far as thinking on the fly went, that was pure brilliance.

The blast had been immense, loud, hot, and destructive. It missed us at the last moment when Will threw us off the roof. The rocket hit the top level of the roof, causing it to implode and devour all the soldiers standing atop it. No, they were not dead. Even from this far off, while my head was still dazed and my vision came and went in spasms, and my hearing was just a loud ringing in both ears, I could see and hear the soldiers struggling to get out from under the wreckage of the roof.

The helipad was still there, although now it was pretty tilted and swaying in the air dangerously. The three men who had been standing on top of it were nowhere to be seen.

Will was lying on the floor beside me, his face covered in soot and ash, his body looking like a pale ghost. A dust-covered ghost. I coughed out some rubble that had lodged itself in my mouth while we fell and began regaining my bearings. Neither of us was hurt, thankfully. The fall and the radius of the blast had thrown us quite far off, all the way back to the first section of the roof. After all that gauntlet traversing, we were back to square one.

Well, not quite square one. For starters, there were far fewer soldiers and reinforcements than before, and what remained of

them were thoroughly confused in the wake of that explosion. The top of the tower had caught on fire, creating a mirage-like scene with flames in the periphery of the resplendent moon.

As Will and I got to our feet, so did the soldiers who had taken the brunt of the explosion. Disconcertedly, they began picking up their rifles, adjusting their armor, and spreading out throughout the area.

I could not let our moment of surprise go to waste.

“Will, over here,” I whispered as I guided us both behind a series of air conditioner units. “That was fucking brilliant.”

“It was one of my finer moments; I’ll give you that,” Will said. “But where are Blair, Ralph, and Maurice? They couldn’t have died, could they?”

“They’re not dead, trust me,” I said. “If they’d died, the soldiers would have disbanded. But they’re still standing, still regrouping. They’re somewhere behind all the wreckage.”

“We’re still on for divide and conquer?” Will asked.

“Oh, for sure. Better than before. None of them know where we are now. This puts the odds in our favor.”

“Let the light of the full moon strengthen you. Let us hunt,” Will said and promptly shifted.

Encouraged by him, I shifted alongside him. The thrill of fighting side by side with Will was a feeling unlike any other. It exhilarated me, knowing that Will was fighting beside me, had my back, and would protect me just as he had done so many times.

We parted ways, him heading to the right while I diverted to the left. The rooftop was covered in smoke and soot, and unlike the smoke that had earlier been issued from the smoke grenades, this smoke was thicker, more pungent, and stung the skin. It wasn't about to go anywhere anytime soon, either.

Did his father really say something like that, or was that purely improvisational? I couldn't help but ask.

Purely improvisational. In truth, he had something about how he would come to haunt me later in some way. I assumed that he meant his son would come for me. He never said anything about Blair's mother. I was just trying to rile him.

That was clever of Will. Full marks for ingenuity.

As I headed back into that mazelike arena, I came across soldiers who were completely discombobulated and had no idea where either of us had went. I snuck behind one of them and wrung his neck with my jaws. He fell limply to the ground. Another one came into my line of sight as he was treading carefully, holding his rifle up at arm's length. I pounced on top of him, never giving him a chance to even scream. My claws pierced his jugular. As blood gushed from his neck, I watched him writhe until he writhed no more.

A group of four soldiers moved steadily in a formation, facing each direction. What they did not realize was that they were so close to the edge of the roof. I waited for the opportune movement before dashing across the roof and throwing them all off in one fell swoop. They screamed as they fell, but their screams only added to the overall atmosphere of disconcertment rather than providing any other soldier any whereabouts of me or Will.

This stealthy approach continued for another half an hour, during which I came across Will several times, finding him disposing of soldiers' corpses off the edge of the roof, assassinating some unsuspecting soldiers from behind, and creeping around corners to avoid larger groups. It seemed we had both taken some unspoken pledge to set aside our concern for killing these soldiers and go utterly berserk on them. This was the point of no return, and as such, it warranted wantonness. There was no other way. It was kill or be killed.

In another half an hour, I had singlehandedly eliminated around forty more soldiers, picking them one by one, and sneakily killing them. I wondered how the soldiers felt before their lives were taken from them. All they got to see was a shadow emerge from smoke and darkness and seize their life force.

I was that shadow. Strengthened by the moon, emboldened by the presence of my fated mate, I had now become my enemies' worst nightmare—an unseen opponent, a ruthless killing machine.

Still no sign of Blair or the others. This did not deter me from continuing my objective. I had aimed that by the time I was done, the battlefield would be cleared for Will to confront Blair one last time. This was his battle. I would help him as much as I could, but killing Blair, destroying the Wolf's Bane, and putting an end to this madness once and for all was something that Will was destined to do.

The strong pull of his destiny provoked me to kill more unsuspecting lurkers in my path, allowing Will to advance along the roofs. A couple of times, I even came across some

vampires, seemingly injured from the explosion, nauseatingly licking the blood off the corpses of the dead soldiers. In their bloodlust, they never noticed me as I came behind them and slashed their throats, bit down on their necks, and decapitated them.

What's your body count? I asked Will through our bond. In the wake of the full moon, our bond was at its strongest.

I've killed around forty or so. What about you?

I'm a little ahead of you, but that's irrelevant. It seems that apart from a few stragglers, we've gotten all of them.

Now that there was no more need for stealth, I leaped from behind the shadows and maze work and landed on top of the second level of the roof. I tilted my head up and howled at the moon. From across the roof, in a totally different direction, Will emerged and howled in unison.

This was to draw out those few who had remained alive until the end. There were just four or five of them, barely able to hold on to their firearms. This battle, by its sheer length and magnitude, had taken a toll on everyone on both sides. Even as the moon strengthened me, I could feel the strain that this long night had exerted on me. There was such a thing as mental tiredness.

Before Will or I could get the chance to take down the remaining soldiers, gunshots roared from the clearing on the roof. Five gunshots to kill the five remaining soldiers who had been left standing. As their corpses fell limply on the floor, I looked around to see who this unseen ally was.

“Useless, every last one of them,” Blair said, emerging from behind flames, holding a revolver with a smoking barrel. “I guess you get your money’s worth when you pay for subpar mercenaries.

He truly was a madman, having just shot his last few remaining soldiers himself. Why anyone would do that was beyond me.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are, you dirty grim dog,” Blair yelled, firing more shots in the sky. “Congratulations on the mess you’ve made of things.”

I understood a little later that the reason he wasn’t able to see me perched on top of the air conditioner unit was that his visor was blocking off his peripheral vision. This lent me an unexpected advantage. I could strike him from above and kill him in one blow. As for Maurice and Ralph, those two were already relatively weakened. They would not pose that much of a problem. I hoped.

While Blair was still talking aloud, I waited till he was directly under me and then dropped from above and wrenched him in my grasp.

“Argh!” Blair yelled as his gauntleted hands grabbed tufts of my fur and dug into my skin. “Not even your she-wolf can save you now, Will.”

He pulled me from behind him with unbridled force and threw me across the clearing. I clanged against the fence and fell with a thud but got back up within a second. Whatever armor he was wearing was mechanically modified to grant him more strength than he possessed.

I did not get a chance to retaliate; Will soared from behind me, roaring as he landed on Blair and thrashed him on the ground.

My heart swelled with happiness that, for once in my life, someone was looking out for me. Not from above, as my parents' souls did from heaven, but here, with me, in this mortal realm. And he wasn't just anybody; he was my mate. A reformed man who had gone to great lengths to conquer his demons and cast light into the dark recesses of his mind.

Will's brutish attacks brought Blair down to his knees, despite all the armor he was wearing. Blair recoiled the pistons in his gauntlets and punched Will in the stomach, causing him to fall on his back.

I couldn't let that happen on my watch. Before Blair had a chance to attack Will again, I slid across the floor, wrapped my mouth around the gauntlet on his right hand—his dominant hand—and jerked it. The gauntlet came loose, revealing a gloved hand. But I never got a chance to take off the other gauntlet. Blair recoiled it and punched me straight in the face with it, knocking me back.

My head throbbed with pain as dull flashes danced before my eyes. Blood dripped between my eyes where the mechanical, dull, punching piston had hit me. Through the blood and the flashes, I saw Will wrestling with Blair's other gauntlet, tearing it off his hand.

The punches that Blair landed on Will's body did not have the same effect as those mechanically enhanced gauntlets. However, seeing Blair's hands free drove a new fear into me. He could use the Wolf's Bane on Will now that his hands were not occupied with the machinery we had just torn off.

Be careful! I called out to Will as I watched him tussle with Blair's armored body. If it had been any other opponent, Will would have torn their body by now, given the strength he was using, but this new, impenetrable armor that Blair wore protected him from all the blows that Will landed on him.

Right as I thought that the battle was in our favor, some soldiers appeared from behind the rubble of the topmost roof, all of them holding tazers and batons. Just as they appeared, so did Maurice and Ralph.

This was it, the last stand. I could feel the finality in my bones.

Chapter 34: Will

Those pistons packed a punch. Although Alexis and I had managed to take them off, Blair was still very brawny with his gloved fists. It did not take me long to deduce that someone like Blair, who was normally so scrawny, was only able to channel this much power because he had imbued himself with some chemicals, possibly a serum of his own creation, to grant him strength. He was, after all, an occultist's son and a renowned pharmacist in his own right.

As we grappled with each other, our strengths an even match, to my surprise, Alexis called on me to be careful. At first, I thought she wanted me to exercise caution as Ralph and Maurice had re-emerged along with more soldiers carrying batons and tazers. But then it became clear. She had warned me that without the gauntlets holding his hands back, Blair could now use his hands to inject Wolf's Bane into me.

I wouldn't let that happen as long as I had my resolve. Despite his unnatural strength, I overpowered him in our tussle and threw him on the ground. What startled me was when Blair hit the ground, the floor below him cracked under the weight of the armor. He was a juggernaut in this Herculean armor, his weight almost close to mine. My blows were merely superficial against this armor. I could not understand what it was made out of. Was it some sort of plastic, some metal, or an alloy? How was it so heavy yet flexible enough to allow Blair such dexterity?

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Alexis singlehandedly taking on the swarm of soldiers rushing towards her with their weapons. Having seen her in action multiple times throughout the night, I did not worry about whether she could hold her own against that many soldiers. I knew that she could.

It was Maurice and Ralph that I was concerned about. So far, they had been witnessing my fight with Blair from the sidelines, unquestionably a little apprehensive about joining in, given their present condition. But the longer my fight with Blair went on, the less hesitant they became, slowly coming closer to the makeshift arena where my foe and I wrestled.

I saw Blair fidgeting with some buttons on the panel of his armor. This was followed by the sound of electrical humming coming from the suit. He stomped his feet on the ground and broke into a sprint toward me. There was no room for me to swerve to avoid this oncoming armored man. He collided with me, gripped me by my shoulders, and lifted me in the air. For a brief moment, it seemed that he'd bring me down on his knee and break my back, but that seemed like a faint possibility. His suit, armored, electrified, mechanically enhanced, and powerful though it was, had its limits. Under the weight of my wolf form, it buckled, causing Blair to fall with me on top of him.

It was then that Maurice and Ralph finally stopped standing by and joined the fight. Maurice shifted once again, now completely healed from the moonlight and the downtime, and pounced on me, pinning me down as Blair delivered punch after punch to my face. Then, Ralph descended upon me, looking more bat-like than ever, and kicked me in the side.

I did not stay down for long. I wedged my claws into Maurice's body and cast him away, watching as blood trailed along his falling trajectory. Then I kicked Ralph back with my hindquarters and watched with satisfaction as he struggled to stay standing. Blair, no longer punching my face, stood against me, trying to subdue me with the enhanced force coming from his armor. However, the more he pushed, the more firmly my feet planted in the ground, providing me the support I needed to leap in the air, taking Blair with me. He unleashed a flurry of punches on my chest, driving the air from my lungs.

Unable to take this barrage any longer, I finally bit down on his helmet and threw it off his head, revealing his rancid face contorted in rage, strain, and confusion.

"Why won't you give up?" he growled as he landed one more punch against me, but it was too late for him. Our airborne trajectory had completed its course, leaving me standing on top of him and him hanging at the edge of the roof.

In light of the carnage I had dealt with tonight, restraint was out of the question. This was the end of Blair, as I saw it. He might be armored and enhanced, but there was no suit or armor nor any chemical that would save him from this high a fall.

I stomped on his hand that was holding onto the ledge and watched him fall off the roof into the fog below, screaming as he flailed his arms in the air. I did not stick around for the satisfaction of watching him die. There were still two more foes left to deal with.

When I turned around, it was to the sight of Alexis standing victoriously over the bodies of the defeated soldiers. She had

since turned her attention to Ralph and was circling him viciously.

What chance do they stand now that their mastermind is defeated? I called out to her.

Alexis attacked Ralph as I took on Maurice simultaneously, all four of us engaging in our last battle on this rooftop.

The trouble with Maurice was that the same moonlight that granted me strength also granted him the same strength, turning him into a formidable foe. The wounds I had inflicted on him earlier tonight had been healed, and after he'd had such a long rest, he was in better shape than I was. There had to be a way to end this fight without engaging him for too long. I needed to think quickly and do something that would render him incapable of fighting.

Two werewolves fighting each other under the light of the moon was a recipe for disaster—it would be akin to an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. With that in mind, I immediately shifted back into my human form and rolled out of the way as Maurice vaulted at me. In the middle of my role, I grabbed onto one of the electric tazers that had belonged to the soldiers. When I got up, Maurice's back was turned to me. The moment he turned back, I plunged the tazer deep into his neck and pulled the trigger, zapping him with electricity. Maurice's entire body shook as he yelped loudly, foam frothing at his mouth. I did not stop tazing him. Instead, I pushed the tazer deeper into his neck, burning his fur and directing volts of electricity directly on his skin.

He howled in pain one last time before falling limply on the floor. There, he shifted back into his human form, dressed in

blood-soaked and tattered clothes. For good measure, I tazered him again, and this time, his wilted body flopped as pure blue wattage surged through him.

He had his chance. I had spared him earlier tonight. His demise was his own fault, not mine. If it'd come to providing an explanation to Vincent or Fred, I would lay out the entire night's events in tedious detail and let them know what Maurice had done and how every single action he had taken tonight had warranted him his fate. Even now, as I had downed him, I had shown restraint. It was against the rules of honor to commit needless carnage against a fellow werewolf. Maurice might have forgotten the creed, but I had not. Even in death, he deserved dignity. I kicked away his limp body and turned my attention to the fight unfolding before my eyes.

Alexis was giving Ralph a tough time, bludgeoning him with her paws every time he got close. She slashed at his neck and sent him swerving in my direction. I impulsively brought up my fist as Ralph fell towards me, ramming my punch straight into his face. He groaned loudly and then fell face-first on the floor. I watched him for a full minute for any signs of life, but when he did not move after the minute was over, I became certain that both he and Maurice had been indeed vanquished.

Was this it? Had I really gotten rid of Ralph, Maurice, and Blair in one night? Was their reign of terror over? It had been the toughest night I had to bear in the longest time. Apart from the long nights of my imprisonment during which I had to bear the torture, the only other tough night that I could remember was the day before our ship came to America.

It had been a long storm the night before, and all of my pack members onboard had given up any hope of survival. Ariana and Fred were huddled in a corner, weeping as the storm swept our ship from one wave to the other, crashing it into the rocks off the coast of New York. I was on deck, holding on for dear life as waves the size of tsunamis thrashed against the boat, praying to all the gods that ever existed to grant us a safe passage through this storm.

When the night ended eventually, so did the storm, and with daylight, we were greeted by the sight of Lady Liberty holding aloft the torch in her hand. After more than a month of traveling and bearing so many storms in the midst, we emerged from our voyage starved, tired, drenched...free. Afterward, we sailed north after replenishing our supplies from New York and came to Fiddler's Green. An age had passed that night, yet I still remembered it. I was certain that I would remember tonight just as fiercely.

"It's done," Alexis gasped behind me.

I stood at the precipice of the roof, looking idly at the sea, reminiscing about that fateful night more than seventy years ago when I had finished my voyage from Germany to America. When Alexis called my name, it brought me back to the present.

Back to the sight of the dead soldiers and the unmoving bodies of Maurice and Ralph. As for Blair, I was certain the fall had killed him and, with it, surely the only existing version of Wolf's Bane.

"I cannot believe it," I said, approaching Alexis. The side of her face was bloodied, but it did not look nor smell like her

blood. I placed my hands on her cheeks and brought her face closer to mine, not minding the blood covering her face, not minding the soot and sweat covering mine.

All I wanted to do was to kiss her to commemorate our success. From tonight onwards, things would be better. The pack would help us in rebuilding this town. We'd drive out the leaderless vampires, destroy this tower, and hold a new election for a new mayor, an honest mayor.

I kissed Alexis, and it was for the first time in my life that I was kissing my mate with absolutely no worries clouding my mind. I could sense that she could feel the lightness and the weightlessness of my kiss, for she wrapped her arms passionately around my body and pulled me closer to her as she plucked my lips and sucked on them deeply.

“Will?”

I gasped.

All of a sudden, I felt agony like I had never felt before. It felt like boiling water coursing through my veins. Blood dripped from my eyes as my throat became hoarse, and the air went out of my lungs. My heart palpitated excruciatingly, driving the anguish deeper.

“Will!” Alexis yelled.

I didn't understand. As the light went from my eyes, as my personal darkness blended in with the darkness of the night, I could not understand what had just happened. I lost control of my body and fell, and the last thing I saw before my vision was robbed of me was Blair standing behind me, grinning

macabrely, holding the emptied syringe of Wolf's Bane in his hands.

It burned.

This was unfathomable pain beyond what I could bear, and it burned.

Chapter 35: Alexis

My mate lay fading in my arms while his murderer stood beside me, laughing, holding the emptied syringe in his hands. It was beyond my comprehension how the course of the night could turn so quickly. Just a few minutes ago, we were celebrating our victory, and here, now, I sat defeated on the floor with Will's body.

"Did your precious little mate think that a fall would kill me? It takes much more to take down Blair Beckett. Well, at least now we know that the serum works. It's too bad that this was the only working prototype of Wolf's Bane in existence. But, oh well. I'll make more. And when I do, you're next," he said.

I could not hear the rest of what he said over the sounds of Will wheezing and struggling to breathe. His entire body was burning up, making it impossible for me to hold on to him. This was not how this was supposed to happen. Will could not die. I'd somehow save him. There had to be a way. There must be some form of antidote in the laboratory inside. This was not the end. My mate had yet to live a long and happy life with me. If anything, this was merely a small hitch.

"Oy, wake up!" Blair boomed from behind me.

Through tears dripping down my face, I turned and saw that Maurice and Ralph were slowly moving and getting up.

"I've done your job for you," Blair said, lending a hand to Maurice and then lifting Ralph. "He's dead. The serum works. Look. Look at his pathetic little slut, holding him, crying,

thinking that her tears are going to heal him or something. This ain't Harry Potter, bitch. True love doesn't exist in real life!"

They were meaningless. His words, the fact that Maurice and Ralph were still alive—it was all meaningless. I had to save Will. Every vein on his body had turned dark, creating a horrific web of dark lines. The tan that he had sported as a result of working on his ship in the noon and training the troops in the morning was gone, and all that was left was ashen skin, pale as the moonlight. The reddish hue of his lips was replaced by a cold blue.

Even as his body singed me, I lifted him in my arms and raced towards the doorway. If only I could get him to the laboratory, I'd fix him.

"Stay with me, Will!" I said, not knowing whether he could hear me.

"Run, Alexis, Run!" Blair called from behind. Then a gunshot roared from behind, followed by a bullet whirring past me.

I slammed through the door, almost toppling over as I entered the staircase. I raced past the door leading to the top floor, not knowing where the laboratory was. It had to be somewhere here. I had to hide. Had to save Will. This was unacceptable.

I could hear the three men chasing me through the building, now following me inside. I barged through door after door on the top floor, desperately clinging on to Will and holding on to hope, hope that the laboratory was somewhere here, somewhere near.

At the last juncture, when it became physically impossible to hold onto Will's hot body any longer, I came upon a small room that resembled a laboratory. I rushed inside and jammed the door shut.

Once I lay Will down on the floor, I tried to think of what I could do with the equipment that surrounded me to save his life. There were just more syringes, more vials, all of them a reminder of the poison that coursed through Will's body.

"Will, would you please hold on just a little longer?" I begged, giving him chest compressions in the midst of my panic. His heart did not seem to respond. From the shelf above me, I took out a syringe containing adrenaline and jammed it into his chest, emptying its contents into him.

Will did not budge. His mouth was covered in froth, and his eyes had rolled up. Whereas his body had been immensely hot just moments ago, it was now starting to grow cold. With my hand, I felt his pulse and became submerged in shock as I realized that it was fading.

"Please, please, don't you die on me right now!" I moaned, putting my head on his chest, hoping to hear some heartbeat. There were just a few weak beats that were more a prelude to death than a sign of life.

I joined my hands in a fist and brought them down on his chest one last time and then provided him CPR by giving him the kiss of life, all to no avail.

"You cannot leave me alone in this world. I don't know what I'm going to do without you. Will, please." My voice was breaking, and my throat was getting clogged up. I could taste

the bitter froth from Will's lips on my mouth, feel it numbing my tongue.

And then, miraculously, Will opened his eyes briefly. He looked up at me, a very faint smile on the verge of his lips. The story his face told was completely different from the one his body was telling. He still had a weak pulse and was not coming back to life. How was he cognizant, then?

Will's lips moved ever so feebly, whispering something. I leaned in close to his face to hear him better. All he managed to say amid his death throes was one word.

“Ariana.”

My hand was still on his chest when his heartbeat for the last time. My face was still close to his face when his cold, final breath brushed against my cheek. I wrapped my hand around his wrist, feeling for any signs of life but not finding any. I let go of his wrist and watched with hopelessness as his hand fell limply to his side.

Then the pain started settling in my body, mind, and the deepest part of my soul. Not only was my mate dead, but the last thing he had said aloud was not my name but Ariana's. She was on his mind as he died, not his actual fated mate who had been by his side all along. It tore my heart, this unknowing as to what to be more dejected about; the fact that Will now lay dead in front of me or that after all that we had been through, after all our confessions and professing of love and devotion and duty, he had never really accepted me. His utterance of Ariana's name was a rejection in itself. He had rejected me once in life, and now, he rejected me again in death.

Sorrow and horror competed in my brain for the position of the most felt emotion. Sorrow won; the horror came second, followed by pain at a close third. Anguish jarred my senses, freezing me to the spot next to my dead mate. From beyond the glass of the laboratory door, I could see Ralph, Maurice, and Blair approaching. But there was nowhere for me to go.

What existence did I deserve if it was an existence without my mate? What purpose did my life hold if the man I had loved professed his true feelings for another woman at the time of his death?

The glass panel in the door clattered and shattered on the floor as Maurice shot at it.

“Would you look at that?” Blair sneered. “She tried to do her best, you guys. She tried to save him. Oh, that’s adorable. Look, she even used some adrenaline. This ain’t intro to pharmacology 101, kid. When I make a serum to kill a werewolf, I make it without an antidote. You better believe it. Your mate’s dead. That’s what you get for messing with the top dog.”

I cast one last look at Will’s corpse before getting up and running in the opposite direction, hoping to find a passage that would save me from those who had usurped me of everything in one night.

More gunshots rang through the laboratory as I fled with what little force I had left in my broken body. Even as I tried to escape, I found myself lacking the will to do so. Without my mate, existence seemed like a barren prospect. Even though the sun was coming up from behind the horizon, the world could not look bleaker.

Part of me wanted to run back and fend them off Will's body. He deserved a funeral. I had to take him back to Grimm Abode and arrange a proper burial. He could be buried next to Ariana for all it mattered, but his body deserved dignity. Dignity that I doubted Maurice, Ralph, or Blair would grant him.

But even as I turned to go back, Maurice came running from the other end of the corridor, holding his gun in front of him. He shot at me but missed from that far off. I had never wished more for a bullet to hit me straight in the heart and end my misery. Then, Blair and Ralph emerged from the corridor, and my suicidality was replaced by the urge to run and live to fight another day. If I could not have Will back, at least I could avenge him. Alone, broken, and cornered, I had no way of avenging him. I could come back with reinforcements of my own. Vince would help me. The rest of the pack would want to fight for their fallen alpha.

No matter how I tried to rationalize it, the pain of Will's passing stung me, stupefying my body, slowing me down, forcing me to think about him lying on the laboratory floor, dying, saying Ariana's name.

There was nowhere to go ahead. This hallway came to an abrupt halt with a long glass window at its end. I stood with my back against the window as Maurice came towards me, followed by Blair and Ralph.

"Stay back!"

"Or what? You're going to shift? That's not how it works. Your mate's dead. Your bond is severed. You're going to wilt. Go ahead. Try it. Shift. Turn into a fucking wolf. By all means, I'll wait," Maurice snarled.

I tried to shift. It was the only way I could get past the three men blocking my way. But as I tried to muster the strength to morph into my true form, I found myself unable to do so. I could not shift. With what little vestiges of resolve I had left, I tried one last time to shift and failed again.

“You’re as good as dead,” Maurice sneered. “Consider this a mercy.”

He lifted his gun and aimed it at me. There it was back again, that urge for everything to end. The inane desire for death. I closed my eyes with my back against the glass.

First, there was the sound of gunfire, followed by the strident sensation of burning lead penetrating my body. As warm blood pulsed from the bullet hole, the glass window behind me shattered when the bullet went straight through me.

With nothing holding me back, I fell off the top floor of Beckett Pharma, a fatal bullet wound in my body and my alpha’s remembrance in my mind.

Thank you for reading Her Fated Mate! Want to know more about Alexis and Will’s story? Find out in the next book [Her Reborn Mate!](#)