



PROTECTING
MY VAMPIRE

NIKKI GREY

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Protecting My Vampire

**Paranormal Protector
Romance**

By: Nikki Grey

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Foreword

The Vampire Kingdom was Lost, but Through Us It was Reborn

My vampire king, Cassius, had transformed into a human, meaning that we were going to live out our lives together as though we were in a marriage arranged by fate. The dark world we lived in had become brighter with our love, and Cassius had grown happy.

Our roles had reversed. Now I was the shifter and he was the mortal, but we were both in love. What we didn't know was that our fantasy would soon turn to a nightmare and I would have to become his protector as the vicious ancient vampire Amara returned from a dark realm.

To fight we needed to retreat and regroup, and find allies in the unlikeliest places. Cassius was vulnerable, but I was not going to fail him, and he was not going to fail me. The war for love had begun, and I was devoted to my king. I would not let Amara stand in the way of our future.

Protecting My Vampire

Chapter One

Cassius

The act of sleeping was like a dream for me. It had been centuries since I had enjoyed the simple pleasure that blessed every mortal. I swam in the depths of my subconscious, my body enjoying the gentle rhythm of rest that rose and fell with every sweet, deep breath. Snores rattled out of my mouth and I sank into the embrace of the bed, my body a dead weight, yet still alive, recuperating and resting through the small hours of the night. My dreams were vague things though, shapeless and formless, mere sensations that danced and throbbed around my mind. Perhaps my body had forgotten how to dream given how long it had been since I had been able to sink into these murky depths, but I did not mind because my life was better than a dream. Willow had freed me from my curse and had broken the tether to eternity that had kept me shackled. I no longer had to fear watching her grow old and die, I no longer had to lose her, at least not until we had lived a life together.

And what a life we would live.

She had seen me at my worst. I had seen her brethren, and we had both survived. Her beauty would never fade in my eyes, and although I had been taught to never court death I was now more at peace with the idea of that grisly creature coming to visit me. Vampires were indeed an aberration, and I had ended that blight upon the world. I was the last vampire and as I had drunk the potion I had pushed away that part of myself, returning myself to my mortal form. My flesh was now pink instead of pale, and it burned with a heat that had long faded to ice. I became thirsty, I hungered, and I could not conjure the arcane spells that had once been at my fingertips. I had lost the wry sense of everything that happened in this castle, and indeed my link to this fortress had been severed as well. I had lost so much, and yet what I had gained in return far outweighed all of that.

As long as I had Willow, I had everything.

Now my only fear was losing her. She slept beside me, her perfect body swelling with curves, her skin soft and supple, the blanket falling around her flawless form. Dark tresses of hair caressed her milky skin. The pendant that allowed her to access the wolf inside her rested

against the hollow of her throat. How that skin welcomed me. How that flesh tempted me. If she were a sea then I would have swam to her depths and drowned in her. If she were a mountain then I would have climbed to her peak and basked in the glory of the rich air. If she were a jungle then I would have delved into her darkest depths, never fearing what awaited me because I knew that each step brought me closer to something wonderful, brought me closer to her.

I thought I had known love before, but never like this. Willow had shown me how fulfilling and wholesome it could be, and she had taught me that an ancient relic of the world like me could still experience something new. She had awakened me and rejuvenated me, and I felt privileged to be able to say that she loved me.

We had been through many trials, but now I hoped they were over. Our future stretched before us like a golden road coated in stardust. We had all the possibilities of the world open to us, and there was nothing we could not do together. We lived in a dying world, yes, but with a bit of finesse we could still travel elsewhere, and we would find an endless adventure

within ourselves. Love is a many splendored thing, and each moment we spent together was something precious and divine.

And we still had all the books in the library to amuse us, of course. I doubted that any of them could define love in the way that I felt it though. Such a thing escaped the confines of meaning and explanation. It was something that could only be comprehended through experience, and if it had not been for Willow then I would have spent eternity missing this most obvious and evident truth in the world; love was everything.

I was giddy. My head spun. My thoughts were dazed. The aftermath of our lovemaking lingered on my skin. Tingles reverberated throughout my body, and drops of sweat trickled along the angles of my torso. My chest heaved and I gasped as I relived the sensation of her fingertips running along my spine, of her lips trailing kisses along my collar bone, of her body pressed so tightly against me that I thought we were going to melt together and truly become one.

I breathed deeply. The sensations were intense, even more so than when I had been a vampire. There

were so many ways in which being a vampire was superior to being a mortal, but in some ways there was nothing to compare. The limited lifespan gave everything an extra intensity. All the sensations were concentrated in vibrant and vivid bursts that bubbled within and spewed out like fire. I had almost passed out the first time we had made love in my new form, and while it would take some getting used to, in leaving my life as a vampire behind, I was certain that I would get used to it, especially with sensations as sweet as these.

I did mourn the history that had been swept away by my decision. Vampires had been a proud people. Most of us had not been turned by choice, but we all devoted ourselves to a culture that was long and storied. Myths about us would endure, but the last vampires had died, and the last vampire king had abdicated his throne, peeling away his immortality and leaving it to rot. If the others knew that I had done this then they would have looked upon me with scorn. They would have shamed me and waged war against me, seeking to tear me apart and leave no trace of me left. But they were safely ensconced away, trapped in a shadow realm from which there was

no escape. They were caught in limbo between life and death, never to enter the world again.

Never to trouble anyone.

And the wolves that had been my sworn enemy no longer pursued me. Willow and I had formed a truce with them, and they accepted her decision to stay with me. I had been willing to go to war with them, but thankfully that had not been necessary. Given that my position had changed, I thought that I would not be the focus of their ire if our paths should ever cross again, although my enmity would be something I needed to shake, a part of my past that I needed to release.

Just as I was basking in the soft comfort of the night I felt Willow stir beside me. I smiled towards her, but she had a concerned look on her face. She sniffed the air and her eyes blazed with a primal, savage fury that told me something was wrong. A rush of air passed through the door. I turned my head and I gasped. No, it was impossible. It couldn't be.

Amara, the vampire who had first turned me, had returned. She wielded her long sword and screamed as she came running into the chamber. I was frozen, unable

to react in time, my senses dulled, otherwise I would have felt her coming. She drew back and I saw the fire in her violet eyes. They screamed death and vengeance and all the dark things of the world, and all I could think was that my mortal life had been too short lived. There wasn't even time for it to flash before my eyes as the sword came shrieking through the air towards me, but I wasn't alone.

Willow growled as she shed her mortal form and transformed into a majestic wolf. She leaped over me, claws bared, her huge wolf form tense with anger as she pushed the sword back and then glared at Amara.

I really wish that I had been dreaming.

Chapter Two

Willow

I had been drifting in the sweet realm between dreams and life. The two had been woven together like a fine tapestry for me, because I had everything I ever wanted. The finest man I had ever known was beside me, and yes a man, no longer a vampire. I loved him as he was, and I love him as he is. Now his flesh is warm to the touch. His pallor is not deathly pale, and no longer does he have time stretching out before him with no end. I no longer needed to fear growing old before him, wrinkling and shriveling while he stayed as he ever was, youth forever etched upon his skin. Now he would grow old with me, and what's more we could have a family. The world we inhabited was not exactly ideal in which to raise a child, but in some ways no world was. Danger lurked all around and there was nothing that would guarantee a child's safety, but we would love them all the same, and a loving home would be a happy home.

I knew that well, because that was one thing that had been denied me.

But although the past still stung, the pain had ebbed away after my last visit to the pack. Old wounds had not healed entirely, but I could accept that things had moved on, and that just as I had changed, so had they. I suppose it was easier to let things go when I had something more important to hold onto. Nothing was going to take Cassius away from me.

As my arm lay draped across his chest I murmured softly, enjoying a shallow dream of a child running through the castle walls, giggling loudly. It was a rich, mellifluous sound that had been sorely missed in this barren place, and a smile twitched upon my face. But then some dark instinct took hold of me and I knew that something was amiss. I looked up. Cassius did not seem disturbed, but he was only a man now. He had been shorn of everything that had made his senses keen, and his connection with this castle had been severed.

He had abdicated his throne as the last vampire king, and with it all his responsibilities, as well as his privileges. The vampires were all gone... yet why did I sense one?

It was a niggling feeling at the back of my neck, an itch I could not scratch. I did not understand it at first as it did not seem possible at all, but in my confusion I spent too much time questioning it rather than taking action, and then the room filled with the scent of brimstone and ash. Somehow she had returned, the woman who had sired Cassius as a vampire, the one who had lured that desperate boy he had been into her lair with promises of everything he had ever wanted, all his dreams made real. Little did he know at the time that those dreams would swiftly turn to nightmares. He had banished her and the rest of them to some nether realm ridding the world of the rot of vampires, but now she was here and things were so real I knew this was no dream.

I could also taste the anger in the air. It radiated off her as thick as tar and was unmistakable. It made the air hot and humid, and I almost made myself sick because of it. I shook the sensation away though, not intending it to prevent me from protecting my mate. Cassius wore a look of shock, as though he had seen a ghost. In a way he had. Questions about how Amara had returned could wait for later though. I embraced the wolf inside. The pendant glowed as it worked its magic and helped break

through whatever natural barrier had impeded me before. I felt the wonder and the pain strike through me, lancing as though someone had impaled me with a spear. My flesh parted, tearing and transforming into something new, something more.

I bellowed out a scream as I lunged towards Amara. As I shifted, it shifted too into a howl that reverberated through the hollow halls of this castle.

My castle.

Amara wielded the deadly sword. She swung it around, looking to decapitate Cassius. I had not gone through all I had to lose him now. I had not fought for his mortality to see all the years we were going to have together taken from us in one fell swoop. I pushed myself over him and managed to raise my hands, blocking the swing of the blade with my paws as I changed. Amara snarled and hissed with hatred, drawing the sword back for another attack. I bristled with hatred, the instinctual hate for vampires made my blood burn, and I wasn't going to let her get another attack in. I didn't care where she had been hiding or how she had returned. All I knew

was that she threatened our happiness, our home, and wolves were nothing if not territorial.

The blade gleamed in the dim light. The ruby in the hilt was as red as blood. I charged towards her, using every ounce of my speed and agility. There was no use holding anything back in a fight against a vampire. One was enough to decimate an entire wolf pack. My only chance was to hope that her lost years in the nether realm had made her sluggish. I slammed into her. We both crashed against the wall. Her face twisted with horror as her fangs lengthened. Her neck twisted as she tried to attack with a fatal bite, but I managed to angle myself away. I swiped wildly with my claws, trying to do as much damage as I could. I heard her scream in pain, and then I clamped my jaws on her wrist, making her drop the sword. I pressed the advantage, losing myself in the frenzy of battle, filled with the innate need to kill her.

Her flesh was covered in marks from my claws. Blood as black as oblivion trickled from her arm where I had bitten her, but still she stood. Damn vampires and their notorious resilience. It was sometimes hard to believe I had ever fallen in love with one, and for a brief

moment I wished that he had ignored my pleas and remained a vampire. It would have been nice to have an ally in this fight. As it was, I had to prevent her from getting to Cassius because she would tear him apart or worse; turn him back into a vampire again and put him under her spell.

Was that even possible after the potion he had imbibed to get rid of the vampiric curse? I had no idea if he was immune or not, and I wasn't in any hurry to find out.

I gnashed my teeth and snapped my jaws at Amara, hoping to make the killing blow because every moment she survived was another moment where she might kill me. I knew I was at a disadvantage, and the longer this fight went on the more chance I had of losing. But she didn't seem to quit. She didn't seem to suffer. I wondered if all the rage that had built up since she had been banished by Cassius was fueling her and giving her strength.

If it was, then how could I defeat her?

While I was attempting to work this out I noticed that she had stopped reaching for her sword. Where we

her hands? I noticed them creeping up inside my arm and then, oh no, she had a hold of my pendent. Of course she knew what it was, she was the vampire Queen! If she took it away then I would lose my ability to shift. Cassius and I would be two helpless humans against one vampire. If she was merciful then she would kill us both, if not then we would become her slaves and be forced to live in eternal servitude.

The thick cord bit against the back of my neck as she tried to rip the pendant away. I had to end this. If I stepped away it would be handing her the advantage. I had to kill her before she managed to steal the pendant from me. I growled and thrust my front paws out, clamping them around her neck. I squeezed and extended my claws, piercing her skin just as she had pierced the necks of so many victims with her teeth. Again dark blood oozed out. It was liquid hate. I squeezed as hard as I could, focusing all my primal strength on her throat, hoping to feel a snap as her neck broke. Her eyes bulged and she gasped for breath. The pallor of her face changed. Her grip loosened on the pendant. I was winning. I could feel it. I was going to kill

her. I was going to save Cassius. All I needed was to hold on a little longer...

My muscles burned and my head throbbed. I had never considered myself a killer, but I knew what needed to be done when the crucial moment came. Wolves were ruthless. It was in our blood, and Amara was not going to get my blood. Not today. I summoned the reserves of strength I had and forced it all into my front paws. I dug my claws so deep into her skin that I might as well have been a part of her myself. My teeth gnashed against each other. I clenched my jaw so tightly that I thought my teeth were going to shatter. The low growl that rolled between my lips was like thunder. All I could think about was the life she was trying to steal from me, the life that Cassius and I had dreamed about, the life he had given up eternity for.

We hadn't even had a chance to have a child yet, and Amara was trying to take this from us. She was trying to prevent me from becoming a mother. No, no you vampire bitch this was not going to happen. Your time has passed. Your day is over. It's time to say farewell for the final time. Ding dong, the Queen is dead-

I gasped.

My paws clapped together and I fell forward as Amara used the last trick in her arsenal.

She shifted into a bat. A cloud of black smoke wafted around me as my paws thudded against each other. I swiped them through the air, hoping to catch her again, but she was already darting away. She gripped her sword between her feet and dragged it through the air, almost weighed down by the weapon, but not quite. She retreated and I snarled. Victory had been stolen from me. But perhaps victory against a vampire was being able to live. I went to stalk down the hallway after her, not willing to let her leave just yet. I had to strike now, while she was weak. I could still get her.

I could still...

“Willow,” Cassius placed a hand on my flank. I turned my golden, wolfish eyes on him. He held out his hands, perhaps afraid that the beast within me had gone feral and I was lost. I could smell his fear and panic. His gaze darted towards the hallway. Sweat peppered his brow, glistening like dew. “We need to leave right now.

We have to get out of this castle. If she's back... oh God... if she's back then this is all over. We have to go."

I bared my teeth. My upper lip rippled as my hackles rose and I looked back towards the hallway.

"No, please Willow, you have to listen to me. You have to trust me. You have no idea what she's capable of, especially not when she's back here. We need to leave. There's no other hope for us. If we stay then we'll die... or worse. We need to get somewhere safe, anywhere but here."

Everything within me told me to ignore him and keep fighting. Wolves never gave up, and to let an enemy escape would be a blight on my honor, even though I had never given any thought to this before I became a wolf. It was funny how the animal mind could change us. But he had my heart, and when he asked me to trust him I knew I had to obey. It was the vow we had made to each other, and to go against that now would be violating everything we had been through together.

So instead of chasing after Amara I lowered myself and he climbed on my back. He dug his fingers through my hide and gripped on tightly, and I sprinted out of our

bed chamber. The trail I sensed veered back into the throne room. It was tempting to follow and continue our battle, but perhaps that was what Amara was counting on. Instead I clambered up the spiral stairs to the top of the tower, knowing that time was against us. If Amara recovered enough then she could use this fortress as a weapon. There were so many secrets to this place, most of which I had not been told, for Cassius had seen no need. The grey stones and stairs spun around us as we rose through the castle. I began to feel dizzy, but I fought through the sensation. Cassius lurched from side to side, holding on so tightly that I thought he was going to rip a fistful of hair away from my flesh.

I didn't remember it taking so long to ascend the castle. I wondered if Amara had played some cruel trick to fool my senses and make me believe I was in a never ending staircase, but just then we emerged at the top. The hallway was quiet. I could not sense anything, but I knew not to trust them. Vampires were wily creatures and could hide themselves if they chose to do so. Cassius had hidden himself from me when we first met, observing me from a tree branch before deciding to introduce himself to me.

How different my life would have been if he had stayed away... how shallow and boring and empty I would have been.

I panted as I sped along the stairs, reaching the portal room. This was the first part of the castle I had seen, and I had a strange feeling it might well be the last. Cassius leapt off and slammed the door shut. I doubted it would do anything to prevent Amara from entering, but even a moment's delay might have proved crucial. I remained as a wolf while Cassius went to the ancient book. In the middle of the room was the round pool of still water. My heart pounded in my head. I braced myself, staring at the door, ready for an attack. I twisted my head to the side as well, making sure to keep my attention on the windows.

The truth was, Amara could come from anywhere.

Cassius muttered words from the ancient book and the fountain burst into life. It shimmered a strange effervescent color. He grabbed the book and shoved it under his arm.

“Come on,” he said, and headed to the pool. I was about to follow him when there was a sudden dull thud

against the door. I turned my head, knowing that she was on the other side.

“Come on,” Cassius yelled, beckoning me urgently towards him. My rematch with Amara would have to wait. I grunted as I ran towards him and dived into the pool with him. It shimmered and my stomach lurched as we tumbled through this portal between worlds, leaving behind the place that had become my home.

Chapter Three

Cassius

I felt sick as we tumbled in the place that existed between worlds before we emerged on the other side. I prayed that the portal had closed before Amara had been able to follow us. I landed on soft grass, crashing to the ground. The impact made my teeth chatter and pain spread throughout my body. It was a sensation I was still getting used to. Willow was beside me, still in her wolf form. She glared up at the portal, which thankfully closed, winking out of existence before Amara could follow us. My chest was tight and my heart pounded. Fear trickled out of me in the form of cold sweat. I knew how close we had come to dying, or worse.

But how?

The thick tome rested on the ground beside me. I gathered it up and cradled it, fearing that somehow Amara would be able to reach this far beyond the castle and steal it from me, just as she had stolen so many other things.

Willow shifted back into her human form. Echoes of the wolf remained though, in her angry eyes and her pinched features.

“What the hell was that? How did she come back? Is that really who I think it is?” she asked, the questions punching the air.

I nodded slowly. I remained sitting, drawing my knees up and leaning my elbows against them. The book rested in my lap. Willow was standing, pacing back and forth. “Yes. It’s Amara.”

“But how? I thought you banished her?”

“I did!” I exclaimed, but calmed myself. I did not want to be angry with Willow. If I was angry with anyone it was with myself for not seeing this possibility. How had I missed it? I must have been arrogant enough to think that I had known everything. Amara had managed to keep even some things secret from me. I should have known better.

“Then how is she here?”

“I don’t know. But that’s not the biggest problem we have.”

“It’s not?” she recoiled.

I shook my head and groaned. “If she’s back in the castle then she might be able to bring all the other vampires back with her.”

“So we’ve gone from having no vampires in the world to having all of them,” Willow threw up her hands and paced around, stomping her feet into the ground. I could feel the vibrations passing under me.

“It’s not my fault.”

“Then who’s fault is it?” she snapped.

I bit back the words on my tongue as I glared at her. She could see something in my eyes. She softened and sighed, placing a hand on her forehead and rubbing the tension away.

“I’m sorry,” she continued. “I don’t mean to snap at you. I’m just shaken, that’s all. I thought things were finally over. I thought all we had to do was be happy. And I should have killed her. I almost had her. If I had just squeezed harder...”

“You can’t blame yourself. Amara has survived everything that life has thrown at her. She even survived

being banished into a realm where time has no meaning. She's not about to let her skull get crushed."

Willow stopped pacing. She took a breath. She blocked the sun. I looked up, missing its warmth. Vulnerability to the sun had been a myth that vampires had spread among ourselves to obscure the truths of our true weaknesses, of which there were few. It had been a mild irritant, an itch on any exposed part, especially the brighter the light got. But now that I was human I derived comfort from the sun. It was warm and gentle. The shadows were cold though. Willow then slumped down beside me.

"Can she follow us here?"

"Given enough time, but she's going to have to try and find where we are. Tracking us is not going to be a simple matter. That's why I brought this with us," I tapped my fingers against the cover of the book. Willow nodded. She then glanced around to take in her surroundings. Her eyebrows dipped in the middle.

"Are we-?" she asked, the question hesitant.

"I thought we should be somewhere with allies, just in case."

“They’re not going to like this. They’re not going to like this one bit,” Willow said warily.

I shrugged. “I didn’t think we had much choice. Besides, even though they may not like it, they’re going to have to learn about this new development sooner or later. And by telling them, we might just save their lives.”

“Or doom them to a war that is never going to end.”

“Everything ends one way or the other Willow, everything,” I said, and I stared up at the sun and squinted, hating that I felt so powerless.

We looked hopelessly at each other for a few moments. Realization set in that we had lost so much. We had planned for a future in the castle, living together in our own paradise. Neither of us had ever been particularly fond of being with other people. Willow was more inclined to do so because of her innate sense to be with a pack, but after the way she was treated as a child she was quite happy to create a small pack consisting of just myself and her, with an addition of a child along the way.

But now? The thought of bringing a child into the world made me uneasy, for it was just another potential

victim of Amara. I shuddered when I thought about her. She had always been a source of agony. I remember seeing her for the first time, her hair flaming as she stood over me, her smile alluring, her eyes blazing with a kind of intensity that I had never seen before. Her words were honeyed and they played a tune that lured me into her lair where she offered me eternity, coating the promise in sweet nectar so that it seemed appealing, without telling me what she was taking away. Because of her I had lived too long a life. She had ruled me, conquered me, she had reached into my soul and ripped everything apart. For all intents and purposes she was my mother, having breathed a vampiric life into me. I had struggled against my very nature to cast her out from the natural world, knowing that if she ever returned she would be hellbent on killing me.

And now Willow was in danger because of it as well. I glanced at her and noticed the worry on her face. She gnawed on her lower lip and her brow was knotted slightly. There was a pensive look in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said. She looked at me and then became deflated.

“It’s not your fault. Let’s just get to the others,” she looked around, and I wondered if she blamed me for bringing her back here as well. Even though she had made amends with her pack she might still have been wary, but I thought it was the safest place for us.

*

The world was beautiful, not that we could appreciate it. Emerald green leaves hung from the trees. The sky was a beautiful azure blue, while wisps of white clouds drifted across in an idle way, without a single care in the world. The air was warm and sweet. The slight breeze tugged at the grass and made it look like the sea, ebbing and flowing as a tide would. It was soft underfoot. Insects buzzed between flowers, and birds hopped from branch to branch. I occasionally saw a small animal scurrying away. It was idyllic, perfect almost, as though we had stepped into a picturesque scene. But perfect things could be ruined and marred, and if Amara found us... I dreaded to think of the possibility.

We said little as we walked. I knew there was plenty on her mind. I struggled to order my own thoughts as well. I had just left the only home I had known for

centuries, and goodness knows what Amara was planning there. The throne of the vampires was full again, the great threat that I thought I had ended was back and now the world was in danger. I had sacrificed so much and what for? But something nagged at me... I just couldn't understand how she had returned. Even with her power it shouldn't have been possible. I thought I had considered every possibility. I thought I had neutralized every advantage she had. How had she done it?

I suppose if anyone had been able to escape I shouldn't have been surprised that it was Amara. She was always the most determined of us, holding onto the cold anger that had entered her heart way back when she was a human. Now that anger was burning again and directed at me, and I was forced to put my trust in the wolves. It seemed so ridiculous that it shouldn't have been true.

The trees thinned as we approached the village. I had to rely on Willow to guide us. Stripped of my senses I found it difficult to orient myself. The forest looked the same all the way round, and I wasn't entirely sure how to

tell any direction apart. It was only when I looked up and saw the faint plumes of smoke rising through the air that I knew we were close. I could not catch a scent drifting towards us though, nor could I hear anything. It was horrible to feel so lost, as though so many parts of me had been amputated. I was glad to have done this thing for Willow, to give us the chance at a normal life together, but I must admit that it was strange to not have access to the abilities I had possessed for so long, especially now when I needed them the most. It would have been difficult to defeat Amara under normal circumstances, let alone as a human.

Willow and I had nervous looks on our faces. I gripped the book tightly, glad to have something to hold, otherwise I would have wrung my hands together nervously. As a vampire I had always been a confident fellow, knowing that I could hold my own against anyone. Self control and self discipline were far easier things to manage when I knew I could spirit myself away with a spell, or turn into a bat and fly away. I had no such things to rely upon now, and I felt an uneasy knot in the pit of my stomach. As we approached they stared at us,

looking suspicious. My throat tightened and went dry. My hands trembled a little. Had this been a mistake?

“Willow!” Peter, her father called out. He was a tall man with kind eyes. He rushed over to us and hugged Willow tightly. His greeting towards me was not so enthusiastic, but it was not cold. He nodded towards me and put his hand out, shaking it, noticing the difference from the last time we had met. “What are you doing here? I wasn’t expecting to see you again so soon.”

Willow’s tone made it clear that the reunion was not going to be a happy one. “We need to speak to Brandon, Dad. Something has happened. I’m afraid it’s not happy news, and we might need to stay here for a little while.”

“Oh,” confusion flickered across Peter’s face, but then he smiled. “It will be good to have you home for a while.” He squeezed Willow’s arm and jerked his head. “I’ll take you to Brandon, and then we’ll sort out where you can stay. You’re always welcome here. Both of you,” he made a point to speak the last few words, and I appreciated it. Our first meeting had not been entirely productive as he and all the other wolves believed that I

had kidnapped Willow. They had invaded my realm and tried to assault the castle to bring her back, not realizing that Willow wanted to stay with me of her own accord. Eventually we returned here and managed to negotiate a truce. Willow had managed to repair some of the wounds that had existed since her childhood, but it had not been an easy process and she had still been happy to leave. Now I had brought her back here and while she seemed composed at the moment, I wasn't sure if that was how she really felt under the surface.

Peter chatted about some of the recent hunts, and pointed to an empty building that he thought we could use. I was more interested in the other wolves. They whispered to each other and made small pointing gestures, clearly intrigued as to why we had returned. My heart sank when I thought about what their reaction was going to be. Willow was right; they weren't going to like it at all.

We were shown into the main building of the village. It was a large building, like a hunting lodge. The main chamber was a square room with a few chairs dotted around. A rug was draped on the ground, and

there was a throne towards the back of the room. Brandon, the Alpha of the pack and the once intended mate of Willow, sat upon this throne. It was not as ornate as the one in my castle, yet it meant just as much. Weapons and hunting trophies were displayed on the walls, and tapestries depicting great scenes from the pack's history rippled down, offering a splash of color. Sunlight burst through the window and cast the room in warm light. Naomi, Brandon's mate, sat beside him. She had a book on her lap. She looked up as we approached and her eyes narrowed towards Willow.

Brandon shifted in his seat, clearly surprised to see us. He glared at me. I saw him tense, knowing that he was ready to strike in case I made any move to attack. He could never fully trust a vampire, even though I was not one of them any longer.

“Willow? What are you doing here?” he asked.

Peter nodded towards us and then left, saying that he would arrange for some supplies like blankets and things to be brought to the empty building. Brandon overheard this and cocked his head. “You're coming to stay here?”

“For a short while,” Willow spoke in tense tones. “Something has happened Brandon,” she said, looking sideways. Her words rode a frustrated sigh.

Brandon opened his palms. “Do you want to tell me what it is?”

She glanced towards me. I suppose it was my responsibility to deliver the bad news since I was the one responsible. I stepped forward and took a deep breath before I began. “Brandon, do you remember how we told you that I banished the other vampires to protect the world from them as they were planning to go to war with mortals and werewolves alike? And that I sat alone in my castle because I had betrayed my own kind.”

“It’s quite hard to forget something like that,” Brandon replied dryly.

“Well, one of them has made it back.”

Brandon blinked. “What do you mean one of them has made it back? How can they come back from death?”

“If you remember they weren’t strictly dead, at least not the ones I banished. I sent them to a nether realm that existed between time, trapping them there in a

moment that would never end. Or, at least, I thought it would never end. But one of them found a way back.”

“How?” he wore a deep frown.

“I’m not sure.”

Brandon sighed. He shook his head and his arms hung between his legs. “So now you’re here to warn us? Do you want help?”

“All of the above. And we seek refuge,” I said.

“Refuge?” Brandon’s words rippled with laughter. His gaze passed between Willow and myself. “The last time you were here you couldn’t wait to get back. You were so proud of your home. Have you really given it up so willingly?”

“I have given up many things,” I said quietly.

“Cassius isn’t a vampire any more Brandon. He’s just a human. He has no special powers. When the vampire returned she went straight for him. It wasn’t safe there. We had to flee. We’re asking you to offer us sanctuary.”

Brandon stroked his jaw and looked directly at Willow. Willow had told me stories about how cruel he

had been when they were younger. We learned that he had even killed his father to become Alpha because he had been unhappy with the way the wolves were being led. He seemed to have mellowed and become wiser as the burden of leadership rested upon his shoulders, but I worried that the bully within him would emerge once again.

“So a vampire is loose in the world again and is coming for revenge against him,” he pointed towards me, “and you want to come here and make us all potential targets?”

“That’s about right, yes,” Willow said. “She’s going to come for you at some point anyway. And even though Cassius is still mortal he knows her. He knows how she thinks. He can still be of use, especially if she comes to attack you.”

Brandon cursed under his breath and leaned back in his throne, looking to the heavens. “I was not expecting this to happen today. How could you let this happen?” he looked at me. I bowed my head, feeling the heat of shame pass through me.

“I am not sure how it happened.”

To my surprise Brandon laughed. It was a dry, cracked sound, a sound without humor. “So you, the wisest and oldest and most powerful creature in the world has been bested. Do you think this has anything to do with the fact that you’re no longer a vampire? Have the spells you’ve woven been undone?”

I ignored the insult for I knew that I deserved some sort of payback for my oversight. “No, magic does not work that way. If that was the case then the other vampires would have returned with her. Since it was only Amara it means that this was her doing. Somehow she found a way back, I just have no idea how.”

“Great. Well, you’d better tell me about this Amara then, if we have to prepare to defend ourselves against her.”

“She is the most ruthless of all the vampires. Her rage is only matched by her intelligence. She has lived for a long time. Of all the vampires she has seen it all, and has held onto her hatred of everything all her life. She taught me to hate as well. She taught me many things. She was the one who turned me into a vampire in the first place.”

“Wonderful. Anything else?” he asked. “Do you know who she was before all this?”

“She was a nun. She lived in a convent that healed the sick. Her heart was pure, and her faith was unwavering. But then one day she felt the naked cruelty of a man. Her clothes were stripped, her flesh was violated, and something precious was taken from her. God did not save her, did not protect her, and so the faith that had been such a vital part of her identity had been stripped from her. The world seemed like a lie, and she was no longer willing to partake in it. And because of the crimes committed against her she saw that the whole of humanity was sinful, and her heart was poisoned with hate. She became a vampire and carried this hatred with her. She’s a fanatic, believing that only vampires deserve to live in the world because we are the purest creatures. She has waged war against many, especially against your kind. An ocean of blood has been left in the wake of her life, but nothing except the complete conquest of all worlds will be enough to sate her hunger. She wants to punish everyone for the sins that were committed against her, and over the years this hatred has grown out of control. It consumes her completely.”

“Well she sounds like a lovely person. Once again my opinion of vampires has been vindicated,” Brandon said. He looked annoyed. I did not try and dissuade him of his notion. “So if she’s so powerful and wise how did you manage to defeat her before?”

“I did not defeat her. I merely took her off the board. It was a gambit that would only work once, because she does not fall for the same trick twice. Her downfall was her hubris. She did not believe that any of her vampires would ever turn on her. The idea of me betraying her never entered her mind. She had no reason to think that she was drinking poison, and when she entered a paralyzed state I cast the spell that spirited them all away.”

“So we can just poison her again then,” Naomi suggested. It was the first thing she said.

“She won’t drink anything she hasn’t made herself now. One of the reasons she’s so dangerous is because she will always learn from her mistakes. And she will come for all of us.”

Brandon puffed out his cheeks and rubbed his eyes. He looked tired. “So what do you think her next move

is?”

“To swell her ranks. She will either try and bring the vampires back from the nether realm I condemned them to, or she will try and turn others. But I stole this from the castle,” I held up the book. Brandon looked nonplussed. “This is a book of portal spells. Without it she will find it much harder to determine where she needs to go. It has bought us some time, at least.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” Brandon said sarcastically. “Alright, go and get settled in. I’ll think on this and then I’ll address the pack later.”

“You’re letting them stay?” Naomi asked, her voice rising with surprise. Brandon’s glance was sharp, and he looked shocked. He hadn’t been expecting her to speak against him.

“Willow is still a part of this pack, and Cassius no longer poses a threat to us. There is no reason to turn them away,” he said. I wondered if I should have felt insulted about no longer being considered a threat. I did not make any comment about it though, I merely thanked him and then turned outside where Peter was waiting for us.

Chapter Four

Willow

My head was swirling with emotion. I still couldn't quite believe this was happening. After trying so hard to run away from this place I was back here, back in the place that held so many bad memories for me. My heart was filled with anguish as I yearned to be away from here, and yet there was my father, standing with an imploring look in his eyes, his sadness pitiful as he tried to grasp this second chance he had to know me.

"I've just gotten you some blankets and changes of clothes. I put a little bit of food inside as well, but there'll be more later. If there's anything you need just come and see me and I'll make sure you get it," he spoke quickly, his words belying his nerves. "And if you want to come and see us you're more than welcome. I know it's not what you planned, but it's really good to have you back here Willow, and you too, Cassius."

"I just wish it could be under better circumstances," Cassius said. I wasn't sure what to say. Words lodged in my mouth and I felt as though I was choking on stones. I managed to force a smile, but I did not allow it to linger.

Dad began moving away, but before I could follow I sensed movement behind me. It was Naomi.

“Could I have a word Willow?” Naomi asked. Dad said that he would take Cassius to our temporary (or new) home. He must have thought that this was going to be a welcome reunion between two people who had once been friends, although that friendship had existed so long ago that it was almost like a dream. I turned to see Naomi’s hard eyes staring back at me.

“What are you doing here?” she spoke in a low, strained tone. Her words were heavy and they dripped with animosity and fear.

“I just told you what we’re doing here, and if you must know it wasn’t my choice. Cassius thought it would be the safest place for us.”

“Well you should have stayed away. I know what you’re really planning. You’re not going to get another chance with him Willow.”

My face scrunched up in confusion. “Another chance with who? Brandon?” I asked, realizing that was the only person she could have meant. Her eyes narrowed so much that her pupils looked like two black

dots embedded in her face. Her features were pinched, every ounce of beauty stripped away from her and replaced by this hard, brittle thing.

“You came here to get back with him, didn’t you? You’re trying to steal him from me. I’m just telling you that it’s not going to work. You can’t expect a promise made in childhood to supersede the one he and I have made together. I am his mate, and you’re just going to have to deal with it.” Her words flew from her mouth like arrows and she radiated this deep resentment that must have burned her blood. I was shocked by the animosity.

“I don’t have any intention of doing so Naomi. I’m not here for any other reason than Cassius said. There’s a vampire on the loose and we couldn’t stay in the castle. It’s as simple as that.”

Naomi did not seem convinced though. She snorted and looked down her nose at me, folding her arms across her chest. “We’ll see, but I can’t see how you wouldn’t want to make a play to be the mate of the Alpha. It’s what every wolf wants.”

“Not this one,” I replied through gritted teeth. “But then you always did have trouble putting yourself in

other people's shoes Naomi. Perhaps that's why you found it so hard to be a good friend. I have no intention of stealing Brandon away from you, but if you keep acting like this then it probably won't be long until he tosses you aside anyway. I imagine being bonded to you must be insufferable."

She had been slapped by my words and rendered speechless. Her mouth hung open, and I walked away before she had a chance to respond. A smile twitched upon my face. It was not as intense a battle as my one with Amara, but at least this small victory had been a satisfying one.

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When I entered the building that had been given to us my heart sank. It was just like what I remembered this place to be. The building was made of stone. There were two rooms, one with a bed inside, the other with a few chairs. A pile of blankets sat upon the table. Father and Cassius were standing in the middle of the room. Father was going through all the people who had lived in this place before. I suppose it was better than standing in awkward silence. It must have been hard for him and

Cassius to find some common ground. They both lit up with relief when they saw me.

“It must have been nice to catch up with Naomi. You two were such good friends,” Dad said. I arched my eyebrows and wore a sardonic smile. How easy it was for them to see the world differently than me, to push away all the grim memories that had plagued me so often.

“Indeed, so this is our new home then?”

“It’s hardly a castle,” Cassius said, laughing.

“I’m sure you’ll get used to it, and maybe there will be a chance for you to get something bigger, but this will do for now. Did everything go well with Brandon?”

“I suppose as well as it could have gone,” I replied. “Dad, you should know that having us here might bring a huge danger as well.”

Dad did not look fazed. “If it means having you back then it’s all worth it. I have missed you so much Willow. We all have.”

I knew he didn’t have the authority to speak for all the pack, but I wasn’t going to challenge him on this. I appreciated the sentiment and tried to push away this

nagging sense of unease that itched beneath my skin. A moment of silence lingered before Dad said that he would give us some time alone. He invited us to eat with him in the evening, an invitation I did not think I could refuse. He gave me another hug, squeezing me tightly and holding me for so long that I thought he might never let me go, but then he walked away.

I picked up one of the blankets and went to the bed. Cassius leaned against the doorframe.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I snapped. I sensed his shame and regret.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have brought us here. I’m sorry. I didn’t have much time to think. Are you terribly mad at me?”

I turned slowly to face him. His head was cast downwards. He looked like a boy who had just been caught doing something mischievous. It was hard to believe that he was an ancient man, a man who had gone through many phases of life, even being called a butcher by my own people. But he was not a villain by any means, and I did not wish him to believe that my frustration

with the world meant that I was frustrated with him. I sank to the edge of the bed, using it like a perch.

“I’m not mad at you Cassius. I’m just mad at the whole situation. I’m mad that our lives have to be uprooted, I’m mad that we’re back in this place, and I’m mad that I wasn’t able to end things with Amara.”

“You gave it a damn good shot though. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone get that close to killing her.”

“It wasn’t close enough though,” I said ruefully. He came to sit beside me and placed his arm around my shoulders. My head fell against him and I let him support my weight.

“I am sorry. I wish there was something I could do, or undo. But at least we have a roof over our heads, and we can actually eat proper food for a change, and maybe I’m wrong and Amara won’t try to find us at all.”

“So then we can live our lives here,” I said with mock enthusiasm. Cassius looked troubled. I sighed and tried to shake out the negative emotion that swam within me. “I’m sorry Cassius. I don’t mean to be so difficult, it’s just that being in this place again... it makes my skin crawl a bit.”

“I thought you felt better about your relationship with people here after our last visit.”

“I do, I mean I did, at least I thought I did. It helped resolve a few things, but I still didn’t want to come back here. I know that Dad cares about me, and it was good to know that I am still considered a member of the pack. But despite all that, I can’t forget the way they treated me. I can’t just ignore all the years that I was ostracized and bullied and made to feel like there was something wrong with me. And to come here now begging for them to help us it just... it makes me feel like they were right all along.”

My voice turned small. He spread a palm across my back and leaned towards me, kissing my forehead. “You know that’s not true. They weren’t right at all. You are your own person with your own life and your own accomplishments. You have seen things that they could never dream of seeing, and have done things that they could never dream of doing. You are in no way lesser than them.”

I gave him a weak smile. “I appreciate you saying that Cassius. But knowing that is one thing, believing it is

another.”

He drew back. “Well, perhaps it is enough that I believe it for both of us.”

“Perhaps,” I said, nuzzling into him and putting my arms around him, seeking to draw comfort from his body and the familiarity of his scent. He looked up and around.

“I must say though that it’s going to take some getting used to being in such a small home.”

“You always did say that the castle was too big for you,” I joked, “and at least there are no eerie tombs below us.”

“There is that,” he replied, laughing softly.

“Naomi didn’t help either,” I returned to the previous subject. “She seems to have it in her mind that I’ve returned to steal Brandon away from her. I don’t have any idea what would make her think this. It’s like she doesn’t even care that I have you.”

“When some people treasure something, they think other people treasure it just as badly. It speaks to a weak mind.”

“I just worry that the longer we spend here the more things are going to be like they were when I was younger. I always hoped that life was this progressive thing, moving forward and leaving other things behind, but it always seems as though we’re anchored to our past and there’s no way to escape it.”

Cassius nodded slowly. “It can be that way sometimes, yes. The fact is we are who we are because we have been shaped by what has happened to us. The only way to escape the past completely is to outlive everyone who used to know you, but that brings with it other problems,” he replied wryly. I chuckled, and then looked around the room. My tone turned solemn.

“I can’t believe that only a short while ago we were sleeping in the castle, thinking about our future. You know, I was dreaming that we had a child and they were running through the halls of the castle, laughing happily. It made the world seem a little more colorful.”

His arm tensed around me. “Maybe it’s a blessing in disguise that this happened. That castle was probably not the best place to bring up a child. The world was dying. Maybe it shouldn’t have had new life in it.”

I looked up at him. “New life is new life. It’s precious no matter where it is, and technically every world is dying if you think about it.”

“And maybe we’re just on borrowed time as well.”

Dark fear crept into his voice. It was impossible to ignore. “We’ll get through this Cassius. We’ll find a way to defeat her.”

“I know what she’s capable of Willow. I’ve seen it firsthand, and I only narrowly managed to outwit her once. I’m not sure I’ll be able to do it again. I know what she must have planned for me and I’m filled with dread. I can’t remember being this scared before and the thought of bringing a child into the world, to make them vulnerable to her...”

“Are you saying you’ve changed your mind?” I asked, my words cold. It was yet another thing that Amara was taking from us.

“Not entirely, I just... perhaps it would be better if we waited until this threat was dealt with.”

“And what if it’s never dealt with Cassius? Are we supposed to put our entire lives on hold because of her?”

“I don’t know,” he said disconsolately, looking helpless.

I let the silence hang in the air for a few moments before I spoke again. “Look, this morning has been stressful and we’ve both been shaken. We shouldn’t speak about anything like this until we have clear minds. Let’s just get through the day and maybe we can talk about things tomorrow.”

He nodded, but I knew that our relationship was going to be put through a stern test. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I was not going to let our love suffer because of this. I also wasn’t going to let Amara win. I had been so close to complete happiness, but the thing I had learned about life was that there were no happy endings. Things didn’t come to a close. They kept happening in this relentless churn and if you found something good, something worthwhile, then you had to fight to keep a hold of it because otherwise it was going to fade away and nobody was ever going to let you have it for free.

Chapter Five

Cassius

Our body clocks were slightly off. We quickly learned that it wasn't morning in this world, although it had been when we left the castle. The light began to fade and so we made our way to Peter's home. It was a quaint place, but there was a sense of sadness about it, as though there was something missing. I wondered if Willow's presence could help fix this feeling. Peter cut a forlorn figure without his wife by his side. I could only imagine how he felt, hating the idea of living without Willow.

Her parents had tried their best, but they had made mistakes in trying to push Willow into doing something that she had not been capable of. Their efforts had only resulted in Willow feeling inadequate. None of the remedies had worked to bring Willow's wolf out. Only I had the pendant that worked, and now she was what her parents had always wished her to be, but I think they realized that they had lost something in the process. Instead of building trust with Willow they had only

taught her that she would never be complete in their eyes unless she could embrace the wolf.

It had been hard for her to learn, and I hoped to never repeat that lesson if we had a child of our own. Of course, the thought of having one now when Amara was around... I had nightmarish visions of Amara snatching our child away from us and whispering the same promises she had whispered to me. I could not bear to have such a thing happen to my own flesh and blood. However, I tried to put these thoughts out of my mind. I knew Peter was already uneasy around me. Most of the wolves would be, and I doubted it made much difference that I was no longer a vampire. I represented something that was anathema to them, something that made their blood crawl and this was not something that could be looked past easily.

He welcomed us with eager smiles. Peter hugged Willow, and then he hugged me, somewhat awkwardly. The table was laden with plates and bowls and dishes, each of them filled with food. There were cuts of meat, loaves of bread, jam, fruit, vegetables, something that I had not seen in a long time. I had managed to subsist

without food for so long, but now that I was human again I was filled with pangs of hunger. My stomach rumbled like thunder and I apologized, but they all found it funny.

“I’m still getting used to feeling things like hunger again,” I said.

“It must be so odd to be human again after so long, although I can understand if you don’t want to talk about it,” Peter said. He was a robust, strong man with a thick head of hair. I could see the echo of Willow in his eyes, but the years of sadness had taken their toll on him and made him look older than he actually was. It would have been nice if Jessie had still been here so that I could have gotten to know her more and perhaps seen which parts of her had been passed onto Willow. I hoped that Willow and I would be spared this sadness. Dying together would be preferable than living apart.

“No, it’s fine. I know it’s not something that everyone goes through. It has been a period of adjustment. I’m not quite sure I have worked through all the kinks yet, but I’m getting there. It’s helped to have Willow by my side. She’s why I did all this, after all.”

“And it’s very romantic,” Peter said with a wistful look on his face. “I know your mother would have liked it. She’d have loved telling the story.”

“So are you less angry at me now that I’m with a human rather than a vampire?” Willow asked. Her words were tense. If she meant it as a joke then she had misjudged her delivery. Peter averted his gaze for a moment.

“You have to admit it was quite a shock,” Peter said. “It was only natural for me to feel that way, no offence,” he turned towards me. I smiled, pretending that none had been given. “I changed my mind of course, after I learned about you. And you’re an adult now Willow. You get to make your own decisions and your own choices. You’ve made it clear that this is your life. I’m just glad that it’s brought you back to me. I’ve done a lot of thinking and I know that we weren’t the best parents to you. We tried you know, and if we made mistakes it was only because we loved you.”

“I think it’s best if we don’t talk about the past,” Willow said, looking down at her food and taking a savage bite out of a chunk of meat. I felt the tension

rising and knew I had to try and soothe things. If we were going to stay here for the foreseeable future then we were going to have to try and get on well with the pack, and Willow was going to have to deal with her emotions whether she liked it or not.

“This is a delicious meal. Thank you for hosting us tonight. I have really missed eating,” I said. Peter smiled.

“I tried to do what Jessie would have done. I was never quite as good as her at these things, but I learned a lot from her,” he said.

“It reminds me of some of the banquets I used to enjoy when I was younger. Of course, they were held in some of the biggest manors in the city. Tables stretched out for what seemed like miles all filled with every type of food in existence, but the quality is the same here. I do love being able to pick and choose what I eat, and of course the company is far less stuffy than what I was used to,” I laughed a little as I spoke.

“In manors? Oh, you must have been quite an important person.”

I blushed a little. “Not really. Not until I became a... well... you know.” I averted my gaze as I referenced my

history as a vampire.

Peter cleared his throat. “And what did you do before then?”

“Well, I was a struggling concert pianist. All I wanted was to be up on the stage and share my music with the world.”

“That’s fascinating. I’m afraid we don’t have a piano around here. Did you compose anything that I might have heard of?”

“Well, I only became a musician of note when I was given the gift of time. But you might have heard this piece,” I started to hum one of my more famous tunes. There was a blank look on Peter’s face for the first few notes, but then recognition bloomed upon his features. He clapped his hands and continued the tune, his rich voice filling the air. He then laughed.

“I remember my mother humming that to me when I was a child. To think I’m actually speaking to the composer. But that was composed a very long time ago,” he frowned as he began to realize what it meant.

“Cassius has been around for a while Dad,” Willow reminded him.

“I just didn’t realize it was quite that long,” he gave me a shadow of a smile and then went back to his food. I wondered if he was ever going to get used to my nature as a vampire and what it implied. I had no idea if he thought I was worthy of his daughter or not. I assume he would have preferred her to choose someone who was more traditional. It would certainly have made this night easier to handle, but I couldn’t very well go changing my past.

“So how long are you two going to be staying here for? I hope that it will give us a chance to reconnect,” Peter said, his eyes filled with hope. I noticed that Willow did not comment on that last part.

“That really depends on how much danger we’re in. I have to be honest with you Dad... things could get pretty bad. Brandon is going to address the pack tonight but the vampire who is loose... she’s vicious. She’s probably the cruelest one there has ever been and if she decides to set her fangs on us then it’s going to mean a

lot of trouble for the pack. I'm not quite sure how we're going to be able to handle her."

"We'll find a way love, because we do it together. We always have. That's the nature of wolves," Peter offered a reassuring smile, but I could tell that Willow was not convinced. I could almost hear the thought spinning in her mind.

If being together was so important then why did you push me away?

But Willow did not say anything, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor.

"I suppose we have been due some kind of drama. Life can never be this peaceful for too long. War is in the very fabric of the world and it's our responsibility to fight. I suppose living here without it wasn't going to be possible for the long haul. Wolves are always called to fight," Peter continued. "I'm just glad that your mother doesn't have any part of this." He might have meant it to be reassuring, but I didn't find the words comforting, and I wasn't sure Willow did either.

We continued eating and our conversation turned to various other matters. Peter shared some stories about

Willow when she was a child, which I enjoyed hearing. Willow, not so much. I found her hand under the table and gave it a comforting squeeze, hoping to convey the depth of my emotion and appreciation to her for this. I knew this was not what she wanted from life. We both wanted to live in our isolated paradise where we did not have to worry about presenting ourselves to other people. All we wanted was to live alone, to be lost in our own sense of happiness, but we were back in the real world where we had to deal with other people and worry about what they thought of us.

And it was my fault because my trap had not been strong enough to hold Amara. Despite being present with Peter, thoughts still churned in the back of my mind, trying to unwind this puzzle. There was something I was missing, something I hadn't considered, but what was it? If I hoped to defeat Amara again then I needed to understand how she could have returned, because anything other than utter oblivion was thus doomed to failure. Banishing her was one thing, but killing her was quite another. Frankly, I wasn't sure it was even possible. If there was ever a guard against death then Amara was

the one to find it, and her nature meant it was quite likely she would have kept a thing for herself.

The day turned to the evening turned and we were summoned to hear Brandon. He stood in the middle of the village. The buildings were arranged to form a neat square outside his lodge. There was a fire pit that was lit every night. The flames crackled and illuminated him, casting him in an amber glow. The stars were out now, glittering in their twinkling glory. The moon was a crescent, waning. The wolves had all gathered. My hearing was not as good as it had been before, but I still knew they were talking about me.

Why was the vampire here? They asked. Why had the outcast returned?

Not all of them understood our story, but Brandon did, and they followed his lead because he was the Alpha. He had led them into the pale realm of the vampires and had made them stand before the castle. They had watched as I insulted them and goaded them, forcing them to stand outside in the brittle black forest where hope went to die. If Willow had not persuaded me to show them mercy then I might well have left them there

to die, falling prey to hunger and starvation, losing their minds before they lost their lives. Some of them had not forgotten this. I could see it in their eyes. I planned to stay away from them as much as possible. I had had enough trouble to last me a lifetime.

Brandon held up his hands, quieting the small murmur of chatter that passed through the crowd.

“My pack, as some of you have already realized we have visitors. Willow and Cassius have returned to us, and Cassius is a changed man. He no longer suffers from the vampire’s curse.” I wasn’t sure this would change anyone’s opinion of me, but I appreciated that he told them. “However, they return with troubling news. A vampire has escaped and as we know even the presence of one vampire in the world can be terrible. We must be on our guard and prepare for an attack. We thought the days of war were behind us, but we were wrong. This vampire, Amara, is going to try and raise an army. She may attack us with one, or she may come herself. Either way we must set up watches throughout the day and night. We must produce weapons and prepare traps, and we must pray to the moon to watch over us. We are

wolves, we are proud, and we were not born to simply die at the hands of a vampire. If Amara does come for us then she will find a staunch enemy waiting for her. She will be forced to turn back in horror, and if we get the opportunity then we shall kill her and put an end to the threat of vampires once and for all. Be on your guard, be vigilant, for we live in a dangerous time. But remember that we live in a pack, and our pack is strong.”

His words were met with a howl. The people around us lifted their heads and opened their mouths, bellowing out a long howl that soared into the air and made the stars tremble. If the moon was indeed watching them then she would have heard this, and she would have been proud. Brandon stood there and waited to answer questions and concerns that some of them had. I wondered if they were going to ask me anything, or blame me. Either was likely. But then, before this discourse had ended, Willow squeezed my hand and beckoned me away. We slipped through the crowd and the darkness, disappearing from sight.

Chapter Six

Willow

I found the crowd stifling. I had never been used to being around this many people. The smell of them filled my nostrils and the heat made my skin prickle with sweat. It had been bad enough to be forced to endure the presence of my father. It wasn't that I didn't want to be around him, but being forced to speak with him when there was so much trouble behind us made it difficult to cope. He seemed to want to leave the past behind as though it was a whisper, but to me it was a constant drum that hammered within my skull. All the pain and torment, all the insults that had been flung my way were not things that I could easily shrug off. And now I was back in this cauldron of anguish and there was nowhere to turn. My people needed me, and I was going to have to find a way to move beyond this, but it was too much to ask too soon. I needed to be free. I needed to feel the cool air of the night upon my skin, and I needed to be alone with Cassius.

“Where are we going?” he asked with a tinge of panic in his voice as he noticed we were moving away

from the village. The light from the fire faded. His human eyes would not be able to peer through the veil of darkness as his vampire gaze would have. Instead he was forced to trust that I would not lead him astray.

“To one of my favorite places.”

“At this hour?”

“I never took you to be a coward,” I teased.

“I always was, before I became a vampire,” he muttered, low enough that he might have thought I couldn’t hear him. I could though, but I pretended I didn’t. Cassius had never had much pride in the man he had once been. I loved him no matter what, but now that he was a mortal I supposed that a lot of old feelings came rushing back, small insecurities that had not been present as a vampire would be more pressing in his mind now. I hoped that I could distract him from this.

The forest was indeed dark. A cloak of inky blackness descended upon the world, sweeping away all the vivid color that the sunlight revealed. It was as though all the world was night, and there was no escaping it. The thin moon offered little light, the stars glowed, but they were so far up in the sky that they did

not radiate anything of note either. Cassius stumbled behind me, his strides uneven, while I was surefooted. In the distance I could hear the sounds of nocturnal animals coming to life. They were hesitant as they heard us storming through the woods, taking a moment to remain secluded in safety before they ventured out, just in case we were looking for them.

We were not.

We moved swiftly and then I stopped as we came to a lake. The moon was reflected in it, as were the stars. They shimmered slightly, the liquid night that might as well have been made of ink. The air was cool, which I found refreshing. I noticed Cassius shudder a little. His breath turned to vapor as it left his mouth.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“This is the lake we use to bathe. In the daytime many wolves come here to refresh and cleanse themselves,” I replied.

“And at night...?”

I flashed him a bewitching smile. His eyes must have adjusted by now so that he could at least make out

the features of my face. “At night lovers come here to enjoy some time alone. It’s a place where intimacy can thrive,” I dropped my voice low and moved closer to him. My fingers laced in with his. I felt the heat radiating off his body.

“Isn’t it too cold?” he asked, his teeth chattering a little.

A small laugh left my lips. “I’m sure we can find a way to warm each other up. Besides, you’ve seen me in your world. I think it’s time you see me in mine,” I said, stepping back from him towards the lake. My feet found the water and I stood in the shallows. A chill wrapped around my ankles and contrasted with the burning desire that ran through my blood. These two sensations fought with each other, embattled in a war that only one could win, for only one was fueled by Cassius.

I pulled my dress over my head, revealing my curves to him. The night caressed my skin, the shadows softening my body so that I was just an hourglass. Long hair fell against my shoulder. I placed my hands on my bare skin, enjoying the feeling of the air caressing me. Then I looked at him. His eyes glinted in the night. He

came to me with open arms. His hands slipped around my waist as we fell into a kiss. His lips found mine unerringly. They would always find me, because we were made for each other. Our breath danced and twisted in a rising plume, while my heartbeat quickened. All I wanted was to lose myself in him for a while, to forget about the danger that surrounded us. I wrapped my arms around him and tried to coax him into the water.

“It’s too cold,” he whispered.

I laughed and slowly wound my arms around him. I twisted my leg around his ankle and then, as he was prone to my attack, I shifted my weight and jerked him to the side, bringing him crashing down. We sank into the lake. Water sloshed around us as we made a splash, sending ripples rushing out across the lake. I collapsed in laughter as he cursed and spluttered and tried to push himself away, scrambling to the long grass on the shore.

“You’re insane!” he cried as he wrung out his clothes and shook the water from his hair. I followed him and laughed.

“It’s refreshing, and it’s a rite of passage. Besides, it’s only a bit of water.”

“You have to remember that I’m not as hardy as I once was. Anything could kill me now. What if I become ill? I might get pneumonia. I need to get out of these wet clothes.”

“I thought you’d never offer,” I said quietly and helped him peel away his attire. His mood shifted after this, being reminded of why I had brought him out here in the first place. His clothes were draped across the grass, wrinkled and soaking, while our skin glistened with dewy moisture. As our hands swept across our bodies they pushed away droplets of water and spread the fire of passion. The heat and the ice mixed together, creating these wild sensations within us that were intoxicating. We kissed again and I pressed my body against his, making sure to share all of my burning warmth. He responded by turning towards me and deepening the kiss. He might as well have been falling into me. It was such a sweet sensation, and it was one that I was never going to tire of.

We fell to the grass, resting on our knees. We faced each other and stroked each other tenderly. Our shivering breaths passed between us as we nuzzled into

each other. I stroked the powerful muscles that stretched across his back and he reached down my chest, his fingertips grazing the rising curve of my breasts. I shuddered as he touched my nipples, teasing them as he pinched and stroked them. My breaths deepened as I felt the water simmer upon my skin. We had made love so many times now that we were attuned to each other's body. We knew where each other's sweet spots lay, and the mystery wasn't in finding them, but was in how and when they were going to be stimulated.

He swelled with arousal, all the blood rushing to the middle of his body. He was hot to the touch, as though I was making love to the sun itself. He turned me around and held me close, coiling his arms around me like vines. His long fingers dug into the soft skin of my breasts, groping them and causing sweet sensations to shudder around me like rippling waves. My neck arched back and he kissed me, his breath getting tangled in my hair. I reached down and found his arousal, curling my fingers around it. I felt the hardness pressing against my palm, such a sweet feeling. I loved knowing that I turned him on this much, that I made him a weapon of lust rather than just a mere man. I began to stroke him

lovingly, going slowly at first and then speeding up, loving how the rhythm of his breath and his heart changed. It beat against my back, the steady, strong rhythm making lust course through his body, sharing it with me somehow. I stroked his soft tip and a grunting moan rolled past my ears. It sounded like distant thunder, because my mind was rising into the air, pulling away from my body.

He moved his lips around me, twisting so that he was in front of me again. He caught my lips in a fervent kiss and then I descended on his body, wanting to please him, wanting to stimulate all of his sweet spots at once. My hair spilled over his thighs as I ran my hands up and down his long chest, my fingers moving across the angles of his muscles. He exuded masculinity and the force of his attraction and arousal was almost suffocating. My mouth dropped open and I kissed his erection, loving the hardness against my tongue as I wrapped it around him. I closed my lips around his shaft and gently sucked deeply, the gentle motions of my mouth causing great, erupting tremors that passed through his body and shattered the silence of the night as they burst out of his mouth.

I made love to him like this for a while, before he pulled me away gently. Our eyes locked as he pushed me to the grass and sank down with me. His lips left a trail of kisses from my stomach down to my thighs, and then he used his mouth and tongue to make me as wet as the lake we lay beside. My head twisted from side to side as soft moans rolled out of me, joining the night air. Spikes of pleasure ran across my body and waves of delight ebbed and flowed within me, getting more and more intense until I could not cope with them at all and my entire body arched, caught in one moment of ecstasy where all the world felt as though it had opened up to me and there was no mystery left at all. I was seized by this orgasmic delight, my back arching up, before I settled to the ground again.

And then Cassius slid up my body, his arms cradling me, his lips kissing me, his love drowning me. Our limbs twisted together, moving by instinct to find each other. He pressed me into the ground as I opened myself to him and felt that sweet burst of pleasure mixed with pain as he entered me. I clung to him, feeling the writhing movements of his body rolling over me, as though the very world was quaking. I wrapped my legs

around him and dug my fingernails into his back. He kissed me and then buried his head against my neck, his breath so hot it scorched me. His hands grabbed my thighs and ass, and then moved up to my breasts. My entire body was screaming out with passion. It was as though I had become one single nerve, the entire sensitive surface of which was being stimulated at once. The pleasure was exhilarating and draining, and I wasn't sure if I had a number of orgasms that were chained together, or just one long one that lasted for an eternity.

I panted as he made love to me, as I lost myself in all of this pleasure we were sharing and the world seemed so far away. The world, with all its cruelty and strife meant nothing more to me than an ant would to a titan. The only thing that mattered was he and I and the love we shared, and I knew that as long as we had this we would always be happy.

When it was over we lay in the grass, the pleasure dissipating from our flesh. Our chests heaved, and the emotional intensity was so great that I had almost embraced the wolf inside me. It was always so raw and powerful and bestial that my mind wanted to open my

soul, but I remained mortal for Cassius' sake. I remember hearing the howls of wolves running away from the lake. In my youthful naivete I thought they had just been friends, but now I see that their bonds had run deeply within them. It was the same bond that linked Cassius and I together.

A thought occurred to me. When I spoke, my voice was as soft as a whisper, as though I was afraid of shattering the silence of the night, despite having done so already with my soaring, sweet moans. Yet that seemed like another version of me, a version that was not beholden to the whims of the world because it was all pure instinct and raw bestiality, somehow even more primal than I was as a wolf. It was nothing that I could control, nothing that could be reined in.

“What is love?” I asked.

Cassius angled his head to look at me, peering down from the bridge of his nose. “Are you becoming a philosopher now, or perhaps a poet?”

I shrugged and my fingers danced along his bare chest. “I was just thinking about the nature of it. Think about how many people have been bonded together by

this feeling. It must be one of the most common things to have ever existed. Everyone has felt some form of love at some point in their lives, and yet it always feels unique and real. Perhaps it is self centered of me to believe this, but I don't think anyone has loved someone the way I love you. Yet how can that be true? With all the souls that have passed through the world surely our love cannot be that special, and yet it feels that way."

"Because it is always different depending on the people involved, I suppose. The feeling might be the same, but the people make it special. That is what I like to think anyway. After all, what is life without people? What is love without there being anyone to love you in return?"

"Now who's the poet," I teased. He laughed and leaned his head against the grass, staring up at the sky. It was easy to lose ourselves among the stars, for a little while at least.

"Can I admit something to you Willow? I'm scared."

"Of Amara?"

"Of what she might do."

“We shouldn’t think like that. We’re together, and I’ll keep you safe. I know she’s this all powerful vampire, but I’ll fight to the death for you.”

“And that’s what I’m afraid of. When we agreed to have mortal lives together I never thought that we would only get so short a time.”

“I suppose we can never guarantee how much we get. It’s just important to enjoy all the moments that we are able to share. A life that is enjoyed is a life well lived, no matter if it lasts for a day or a hundred years.”

Cassius nodded sagely and kissed me on the head. “I just wish I knew what to do. I have always prided myself on being one step ahead of things, but now I feel so lost. I can’t even rely on my arcane knowledge.”

“You’re not useless just because you’re not a vampire anymore, Cassius. I know it must be hard for you to think of yourself as mortal again, but just because you can’t do all the things you used to do it doesn’t mean that you’re less than you were, and it certainly doesn’t mean that I love you any less.”

“I appreciate you saying that Willow. But like you said, sometimes knowing a thing is different than

believing it.”

I realized then that we were struggling in the same way, just for slightly different reasons. If we couldn't help ourselves, then maybe we could help each other. I leaned into him and kissed him softly, tenderly.

“I suppose we should head back to the pack,” I said.

“I know you're finding it difficult to adjust to living in this place again, but it doesn't need to be so hard. People have made mistakes, but if they're trying to be better then maybe it's okay to give them the chance to do just that.”

I knew he was talking about my father. “Maybe,” I conceded. He rose to a sitting position and reached for his clothes. They were still sodden.

“I can't wear these!” he protested, and playfully glared at me. I looked guilty.

“Well, if you need something to wear you could try on my dress,” I teased, and he just gave me a look in reply. He felt all of his clothes and tried wringing the water out of them. It cascaded in thick drops, but they

were still too damp to wear. “It’s lucky that it’s night. At least nobody will be able to see you.”

And so we returned to the pack without wearing any clothes. We clasped hands again and this time we ran more quickly, because Cassius felt uneasy about showing this much of his flesh to the world. I was laughing. He clutched his clothes to his groin, hiding his manhood as we grew closer to the village. He muttered that he hoped nobody was going to be around to see him.

“I don’t think you have anything to hide,” I said.

I did not feel the same self consciousness as he did. As a wolf I was technically always naked. It just seemed to be a natural state for us and there was no sense in trying to hide from it. I didn’t think anyone would see us anyway. Most of them would have been sleeping by now, so we should be able to slink back to our new bed and cozy up for the night, ready to face another challenge.

But there was already a challenge waiting for us, and I was so distracted by Cassius that I allowed my senses to lose focus. I caught the scent of wolves, but I did not think anything was amiss because it was only natural for there to be wolves. They often hunted and

sprinted through the world at night, and on a night when they had been given deathly, doomful news it was only natural for them to want to embrace time with each other.

However, they were not hunting prey, at least not in the traditional sense. They ran up to us and before I knew that anything was amiss they were already attacking.

Chapter Seven

Cassius

They came from nowhere, as though they had just been summoned into the world and came into being there and then. There was a gnashing of teeth and then a strong weight slammed against my head, knocking me away. I lost my grip of Willow's hand and crashed to the ground. The impact made my teeth chatter and pain lanced throughout my body. I groaned as I tried to push myself up. The darkness blinded me, the pain crippled me, and there were so many of them that I could not fight back. I was kicked in the ribs and doubled over, clutching myself to try and shield myself from further damage, but I was too late, and I guarded the wrong thing. Another kick slammed into my back and I cried out, twisting and writhing on the ground like a helpless child. Someone got hold of my legs and dragged me across the ground, the grass burning my skin.

“You damned monster. You'll doom us all!” one of them growled, his voice low. I looked up. My vision was blurred. The world seemed upside down, and when I looked at his face I saw nothing but a shadow. I

wondered if it was death that had finally come for me after all. It was only fitting, I thought, since I had been goading it for centuries, taunting it and escaping its clutches, while it had silently stalked me through the years, through all the lives I had lived. I should have known it would be waiting for an opportunity to strike, waiting for the moment I became mortal to finally sink its claws into me.

But Willow... where was Willow? Did they have her? Was she fighting back? I tried to defend her, but I was so weak. My trembling hands searched the ground for a branch or a twig or anything that I could have used as a weapon, but I found nothing but air. How I longed to be able to shift into a bat or cast a spell, to bear my fangs and send these wolves reeling with bloodied noses and wounded pride. Instead I was the one who had to bear the wounds, I was the one who could not defend the woman he loved.

And, as it happened, the attack had been so swift that she could not defend me either. The wolves disappeared into the night, leaving us aching and bruised. They had swarmed around Willow and made

sure that she could not attack. She crawled towards me, blood dripping from her lips, making her look like a painting.

“Cassius,” she breathed.

I reached for her and clasped her hand. We pulled ourselves up, using each other as support. Anger blazed in her eyes as she spat blood. The strength quickly returned to her. She wanted to break away, to give chase.

“Wait,” I said. She looked at me. I shook my head. “Don’t go. It’s too dangerous. You shouldn’t have to go after them alone.”

“But they hurt us. They were waiting for us. I can’t let them get away with this.”

“And we won’t. But we need help. We can’t do this by ourselves.” Admitting this felt like I had to choke up my own heart, but the truth was undeniable. Willow knew it too. She stood there, gazing into the direction in which they had retreated, and then she cursed. She held out her arm and helped me to my feet. I gathered my clothes and we trudged back to the pack, our elation at having enjoyed intimacy together having faded after the attack. I had been looking forward to returning to our

new bed and finding a way to be comfortable on the unfamiliar mattress, but instead we made our way to Peter's house. Willow hammered her fists against the door and then flung it open, not caring that it was the small hours of the night. She cried out in a rasping voice. Peter emerged, his eyes filled with sleep, looking as though he had just been stolen from a dream.

“Who did this? Why are they still attacking us? I told you that this hadn't ended. I knew that I should never have come to this place,” she was furious, and she might as well have been a dragon rather than a wolf because the words that flew from her mouth were like flames. Peter looked shocked. He brought out blankets to wrap around our scratched, bruised, naked bodies and then made some tea. He was clearly one of those people who believed that tea could cure everything, or perhaps Jessie had been and this was a lesson he had learned from his spouse. As I held the warm mug in my hands it was hard to dispute the fact. The warmth was indeed soothing.

“What happened?” Peter asked, his voice stern.

“We were coming back from the lake. Then we were attacked. They were waiting for us. They don’t want us here Dad. They still see me as an outcast. Things haven’t changed,” Willow said. She was still trembling. Angry energy ran through her body, making her leg jitter up and down. Her hair was still wet from the lake. It ran in lank strands over her shoulders, leaving a trail of wetness upon the blanket that was wrapped around her shoulders. Her eye was bruised, but her wounds would heal more swiftly than mine.

“That’s not true Willow. You’re as much a part of this pack as you ever were. You’ve always been a part of this pack,” Peter said.

Willow rolled her eyes and flung her arms in the air. “Are you really that oblivious Dad? Do you know how painful it was for me to grow up here? I was never allowed to be myself. I was never ever told that I was fine just the way I was. All of you were focused on what I didn’t have, and you know that the only reason I can shift into a wolf is because of this, right?” she said, and held the pendant in her hands. “I could lose this and all that I am goes with it. I could fling it into the lake, or I could

smash it, and suddenly there would be no more wolf. If that happened would you still welcome me? Would I still be your daughter, or would I just be the failure that I was before?”

“You were never a failure Willow,” Peter said, trying to sound comforting, but his voice sounded weak. Willow’s eyes blazed with fury as she glared at Peter.

“Really Dad? Is that why Mom was always making me try some new remedy? Is that why you had me drink all those awful concoctions that almost made me vomit, or why you had me hike up to the mountain and sleep there for three nights under the full moon, or why I had to do any number of these stupid ordeals that you just couldn’t let go. The only thing you ever wanted from me was to become a wolf, but the only reason I am is because of this pendant. I’ve never been good enough for you or this pack and that hasn’t changed. I should never have come back. I was happy with Cassius. I was happy away from you all!” she shrieked, and then she rose from her chair and turned towards the door, rushing away into the night. The blanket billowed around her like a cape.

“I should go,” I said awkwardly, but Peter reached out and grabbed my hand.

“She’s done this before. She needs some time to calm down,” he said. I saw the desperation in his eyes, the yearning of a parent to make things right between him and a child. It was the same sight I had seen in the eyes of my dying father, and I had not been able to grant him his final request. I wanted to be able to do differently for Peter. I sank back into my chair and nodded silently.

“I think we’re going to need something stronger than that,” he said, and went to a cabinet, bringing out a thin bottle and two glasses. He poured out a copper colored liquid and handed the glass to me. I sipped it. It was sharp and bit down the back of my throat. It had been a long time since I had enjoyed something like this. My tongue tingled and the sensation lingered on my lips. I stared at the glass.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Peter said.

“It’s just been a while. As a vampire this stuff didn’t have any effect on me.”

“More’s the pity. It’s probably not a good thing to admit, but I don’t know how I would have gotten through life without this.” He looked at the drink, savoring it with his eyes before he took a sip. He held it in his mouth before he swallowed, and I wondered how many nights there had been like this, where he was left to try and piece together some moments of calm after an emotional storm. He then swallowed and took a long breath.

“I don’t care what anyone says, bringing a child into this world is the hardest thing anyone can ever do. You think all you need to do is love them, but it takes more than that. And just when you think you’re doing the right thing you realize it’s been wrong all along, and every time you try and make things better you end up making it worse,” he sighed.

“I’m sure that Willow will adjust. She just needs a little time.”

“Maybe, but the thing is this is the first time I’ve had to do something alone. I always had Jessie to help me before. She could always calm Willow down with one of her stories. I never had that same gift. I don’t really know what I’m supposed to do. I wish that she were here.

I miss her so much,” he choked on his emotions and hung his head. I wasn’t sure what to say. Thankfully, Peter continued. “Have you never gone through anything like this?”

“As a vampire I was unable to have children. It’s been the one thing in life that I haven’t experienced. Willow and I are hoping to have one of our own, but with the way the world is...”

Peter nodded. “I get it. Before Willow was born Jessie and I had long discussions about the ethics of the situation. We weren’t too concerned about vampires back then because we hadn’t had a skirmish with any nest for a long time, but obviously being a wolf comes with its own risks. Humans are spreading out more and more every year, and it seems like only a matter of time until they find us. But we decided it was worth the risk. Of course, what we didn’t realize was that things weren’t going to be like what we expected. You never realize how a kid is going to turn out, even though they’re made up of you, they still become their own person and they’re completely unpredictable.” He paused for a moment. “I want you to know that we were never ashamed of

Willow, and we never tried to make her feel bad for not having a wolf. We just wanted her to know that she was a part of this pack, and we wanted her to have everything that the other wolves had. We didn't want her to miss out on anything. I know now that we should have handled things better, but we were just trying to do our best. Nobody teaches you how to be a parent, just like nobody teaches you how to handle life. You'll find the same thing someday."

"I'm sure I will. You know, one of the reasons that Willow and I bonded as much as we did was because we always felt lonely. I think she just felt a little unappreciated, like instead of focusing on what made her different in a good way you only focused on what she was missing. I understand why you did things the way you did, I'm just trying to help you understand what she's going through."

Peter nodded. "I appreciate that. I know this can't be easy for you to come into this home and be witness to such intense emotions. I never wanted life to be like this. All I ever wanted was for us to have a happy home, but Willow... I'm not sure she's ever going to be able to let go

of this anger. I thought maybe after Jessie died this would all be put to rest.”

“I think she will, she just needs time. We were both getting used to the idea of the living the life we had arranged for ourselves, and then suddenly that had all changed and she was back here. I think she’s a little afraid she’s going to lose the person she became away from here, and that things are just going to be the same as before she left. She reacts harshly because she’s just trying to defend us. I think that when we have trauma that comes back from a young age, we react to it as we would have back then. This is her emotions lashing out. She already feels guilty enough that she let Amara slip through her fingers, and now to be attacked like that... I sometimes think she doubts whether she is a true wolf or not.”

“She is, no matter whether she can shift or not. She’s our daughter and we love her to the world and back, and make no mistake about it, I will find these wolves who attacked you and I will make them pay. As soon as the sun rises I will go to Brandon and get him to

punish these people because nobody attacks my little girl and gets away with it.”

I saw the same fire in his eyes that I sometimes saw in Willow’s, and I felt awe at the intensity of the emotion. I wondered if I would feel the same thing when I had a child, if we managed to escape the threat of Amara and these wolves. I took another sip of whiskey and then looked to the door, hoping that Willow would be aware enough to show her father some forgiveness.

“You know, I get that you want to give Willow some space, but sometimes people don’t realize what they need is connection. I think maybe you should take a leaf out of Jessie’s book and go and tell her a story.”

“But what story could I tell her?” Peter stared at me blankly.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. You might not have realized this, but one of the biggest problems Willow had was that she felt alone. I think she might appreciate a reminder that she isn’t.”

Peter stared into the last little bit of whiskey that rested in his glass. He was unmoving, and for a few moments I thought he was never going to move again.

Then he downed the rest of the drink and rose, striding out of the door. I hoped that Willow would be calm enough to prevent another discussion with him from turning into an argument.

Chapter Eight

Willow

I didn't care where I was going. In my state of emotional tumult I was ready to head in any direction, to walk to the ends of the world if need be because I just wanted to be away from this place. I had been cursed with a home that didn't want me. I was poison to this pack. Things were so much easier and better when I was alone with Cassius. We didn't need anything other than each other to make us happy, but now it was all ruined. Amara and these wolves had ruined it all. Why couldn't I just be happy? It wasn't fair.

The emotions became so intense within me that I ended up surrendering to my wolf side and sprinted through the forest. I slammed through branches and ran quickly, spurred on by these raw feelings. Eventually I came to a stop, drained and tired. I shifted back into a human and sat upon a rock, looking out upon a sloping hill that stretched down into a valley. It was hard to make out the details at night, but it still looked beautiful. I sniffed and felt tears rolling down my cheeks. My

shoulders shuddered. I used the blanket to dry my tears, but more came to me.

And then I realized that I wasn't alone.

"What are you doing here Dad?" I asked, my voice terse as he seemed like an intruder.

Dad shifted into his human form. He held his hands up and kept his distance. "I don't mean to come here if I'm not wanted, but I don't like the fact that you're suffering alone. Cassius wanted to come, but I asked him to stay behind. I thought you and I should have a conversation," he said. I groaned inwardly because that wasn't what I wanted at all, but now that he was here it seemed rude to turn him away. I shifted over, making room for him on the rock. He moved closer to me, tentatively, and drew his knees into him, resting his arms on them.

"I'm sorry that I don't always know the right things to say, and I'm sorry for the way your mother and I treated you. I wish that she were still here. Cassius said that I should try and think of a story to tell you, that maybe it would make you feel better, just like it did when your Mom used to calm you down. The problem is that I

don't have her imagination or her skills. The only stories I know are the ones that I've lived through, like when you were born. I was so nervous I was pacing a ditch in the dirt. I was so afraid that something was going to go wrong, but then I held you in my arms and it felt as though everything was right with the world. I'm not sure how to describe it exactly, but the love I felt for you in that moment was more than anything I had ever felt before, and that's saying something because I loved your mother with all my heart. But when it came to you I just... I knew we shared something deep because you were a part of me, a part of me made flesh. And I just... I wanted to give you the best life possible. I wanted to do everything for you and I'm so... I'm ashamed that I failed." He hung his head. He sounded tired and exhausted.

"You know Willow, it's been so hard since your mother died. There are some days when I wake up and I still expect to see her there, but she isn't, and she's never coming back. I'm glad that you two were able to make peace before she died, but I don't want you to remember the bad times. We were always trying to be better and we

didn't mean you any ill will at all. Please, you have to believe that."

I sighed and pressed my hand to my forehead. "I know Dad. I didn't mean to make you feel bad about it. I know you're missing Mom. I miss her too. I wish we had been able to spend more time together, more time when we weren't angry with each other."

"I wish that too, but you know Mom wasn't really angry with you. She was angry with herself. We both were. We realized too late that we were pushing you towards something that you didn't want. We had lost sight of what being parents meant. If we had just listened to you... well... like I said it's too late for that now."

I nodded and looked up at the stars. "Do you think she's up there now?"

"I think so, probably still spinning stories," he smiled and paused for a moment. "You know that I love you Willow. I know this isn't your favorite place in the world, but I do hope you at least consider sticking around. The house is so lonely without your mother. I really could use the company, and I know tonight did not prove it, but people don't look at you as an outsider."

You're my daughter no matter what, and I'm sorry that I made you feel like you weren't enough for me. The truth is you always were. I suppose I just thought that your unhappiness was because you didn't have a wolf, not because everyone was making you feel bad for not having a wolf. I'm sorry that I didn't listen to you. Do you think we can move forward? Because I know that we have lost a lot of years to this and I don't want to lose anymore. There are already too many things we can lose out on in the world."

I heard the emotion in his voice. I thought about everything Cassius had told me about his relationship with his father, and how he was filled with regret. He had left behind a trail of broken and mangled relationships, and I did not want to be like him. When I looked in on myself I had to admit that it wasn't really Dad that I was mad at. It was everyone else, and myself. I nodded and allowed him to hug me. He let out a choking sob, but he managed to stifle his tears.

"And I want you to know that we're going to get to the bottom of this. Whoever led this attack shouldn't be a

part of this pack. I'm not going to allow them to stay here. They're cowards for attacking you in the dark."

"Thanks Dad. It's nice to know I can count on you."

"You've always had good instincts about the people you keep around you Willow. I can even admit that Cassius is a good man."

"I bet you really do like him more now that he's a man rather than a vampire."

Dad laughed. "Well, I'm not going to deny that. He's certainly less dangerous."

"Yes, he is, but he's also more vulnerable. If anything should happen to him then--"

I didn't need to finish my sentence because Dad knew what I was going to say. "I'll do whatever I can to make sure that you don't have to think about that. We'll get through this Willow. Vampires, traitors, whatever, we won't let anything get in the way of your happiness."

He turned to face me and took my chin in his hand. He inspected my wounds, his brow knotting with concern. "Any wolf who did this is not part of the pack. Brandon will make sure they do not get away with this. I

know I have failed you in the past Willow, but I shall never fail you again.”

He hugged me again, the kind of hug that I had always wanted when I was a little girl. There had been so many times when all I had wanted from him and Mom was for them to say that they loved me, that they were happy with who I was no matter what. At least now he was able to say these things. They may have been long overdue, but it was better to hear them than to go through life always feeling lesser than I was. I hugged him back, feeling guilty and ashamed that I had let the trauma of the past overwhelm me. It was like a tide washing over me, seeking to drown me. When I had returned here before it had been painful, but then I knew that it was only going to be a temporary stay. This time it might well be permanent and having to be around these people who bullied and shunned me... it was too much, and after the attack it felt like too little had changed.

But I was wrong.

Things had changed.

Life was a process in which we always learned and grew. We were mutable, malleable things and while the

core of us might have remained throughout the span of our lives, there were so many other things that transformed within us. I had changed, and so had Dad. Our relationship could as well, but only if I allowed the grim memories of him and the aching hurt to die with the past. Sometimes the only reason wounds kept hurting was because you kept fiddling with them, preventing them from healing. I was beginning to see that life was like this. If we looked at the past for too long then we were never going to leave it.

I wasn't going to allow myself to be trapped like that, to become like Cassius had been the first time we had met. He had almost lost his mind to those things, speaking with gargoyles due to his loneliness and regret.

Dad and I stayed there for a while longer, sitting in silence. Occasionally there was a story about Mom, which was bittersweet to share. Even though she was gone from this world I still felt the shroud of loveliness that she used to drape over the world, even if it was misguided towards me sometimes. Thinking about her brought a tear to my eye. So much time we had together was spent being angry with each other. I was talking past

her and she was looking down at me, and it was only at the very end that we managed to accept each other for who we had become. I was able to see her not as this cruel, tyrannical figure, but rather as a person with her own flaws and her own regrets. As a child I assumed that my parents were infallible and invulnerable and would never make any mistakes. I thought they knew everything, but I was wrong. They were just trying to muddle through life like the rest of us. I wondered if I would be the same when I had a child, or if one day they would think of me. It was natural to assume that they would, giving that time seemed to move in circles.

That was if we had a chance to live, for while Amara was out there we were an endangered species.

Chapter Nine

Cassius

Peter and Willow returned as the light was creeping through the world, pushing back the darkness of the night. The sun's rays began to peek beyond the horizon and the birds were chirping, a trumpet call to beckon the sun towards them and spread warmth across the world. My eyes were heavy and my shoulders were hunched over. I still hadn't gotten used to fatigue yet. While sleeping was a simple joy that I had missed during my vampiric years, it was annoying to always feel so sluggish and weak. The human body was such a fragile thing, prone to aches and strains and tension in all the joints and muscles. It was easy to understand why some people would want to turn their backs on all this and become something stronger instead.

Willow looked sheepish as she returned, sheepish, but calm. Peter gave me a reassuring smile, indicating that whatever tension had risen between them had dissipated.

"I think you two should go and rest for a couple of hours before we speak to Brandon. The light is coming in

now, so whoever attacked you won't try it again, especially not when you're in the middle of the pack," Peter suggested.

I was happy enough to listen to his suggestion, although I wasn't sure if he was quite right in saying that people wouldn't attack. If they felt as though they could get away with it, or if they were justified in doing so, then surely they wouldn't hesitate?

I tried to push the troubled thoughts away from my mind. It wouldn't do any good to become paranoid, although if I did I felt it was justified. Willow and I linked hands as we walked back to our new home. We opened the door warily, afraid that someone might have left an unpleasant surprise for us. Thankfully there were no traps or anything of the sort. I staggered toward the bedroom and fell onto the bed, feeling the mattress groan under my weight. Willow lay beside me. She pulled the blanket over us and I felt myself succumbing to the warmth.

"I'm sorry for earlier. I just let everything overwhelm me. After we were attacked it felt like people

were trying to push me away again,” Willow whispered, her words as soft as the night.

“You don’t have to apologize. I know it’s hard for you to be here. But I spoke with Peter and he does seem to care about you a lot.”

“He does. I need to forgive him. I think it was unfair to have such high standards for him. I hope our child isn’t going to be as harsh with me,” she wore a wry smile, and I was glad to see her being able to express such a thing. I slipped my arm around her and she nestled against me, resting her head against my chest. I let my heavy eyelids fall.

“I think it’s an immutable law of the universe that children are going to be annoyed and frustrated with their parents. No matter how perfect the parents are, there are always going to be moments where they argue. I think it’s the nature of families. We’re just going to have to make sure our arguments aren’t too dramatic.”

Willow murmured something unintelligible and then sighed. I had other worries on my mind.

“Do you think Brandon could be behind this attack?” I asked.

“Brandon?”

“I mean, he was one of your bullies, and he has not made a secret of the fact that he doesn’t like me. I fear that he doesn’t see me as a human, just as a vampire who can actually be killed relatively easily.”

Willow considered the matter for a moment. “As much as I hated Brandon in the past, I have to admit that he has actually changed. He’s matured. I don’t see the same cruelty in his eyes that I used to see. And I’m not sure why he would want to attack you.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he thinks that if I’m dead then Amara won’t bother with his pack. He must know that by sheltering me he is inviting her ire. Perhaps he wishes to offer my body in a trade for peace.”

“Brandon wouldn’t do that. He’s many things, but he’s not sly. If he was going to kill you then he would do it openly. He would not hide it from the pack. No, this was something else. But I will find them and I will kill them.”

“I didn’t mean to create a civil war between the pack.”

“And you haven’t. The people who attacked us did. I don’t care how they managed to justify it to themselves, but they’re wrong. Brandon will see that. He has to,” Willow said, although I got the impression that she was speaking more from hope than certainty. Her hand slid up my body and came to rest against my cheek. She stroked it idly and looked up at me. “This isn’t how I thought our lives together were going to begin.”

“I didn’t either, but I suppose any life with you is better than a life without.”

“How are we supposed to move forward though? Are we just going to live in fear of Amara attacking? What if she never comes for you?”

“She’ll come,” I said, a grave, haunting tone entering my voice. If I knew one thing for sure it was that Amara’s pride would never allow me to go unpunished. She would not allow me to find happiness. It was only a matter of time before she found me, and then she would try to kill me. I just had to find some way to get to her first. And still I did not know how she returned. I gritted my teeth as I tried to figure it out, but sleep came over me before I could make any progress.

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I awoke a few hours later, and somehow I felt even less rested than I had before. My eyes were bleary, a dull ache made my head feel twice its regular size, and there was an awful ache within me that seemed to pierce my spirit, sapping my strength. I had to look around to make sure that blood was not trickling out of me, for it felt as though my vitality was being drained. The wounds I suffered didn't help. There was a dark, purplish bruise upon my side. Every time I twisted my body a sharp pain surged through me. My lip was swollen, and there were scratches on my skin where I had been dragged along the ground. Willow was in a better state. The bruise on her face was fading, thanks to the wolf inside.

How I envied her having these supernatural powers when I was so... ordinary.

The sun was in full view now, having pushed back the moon. The pack seemed as it always had been, but I watched the wolves with warier eyes. It could have been any of them who attacked us. If I still had the senses of a vampire then I might have been able to tell them apart,

but my blunt human senses were useless in this endeavor.

“Can you tell who attacked us?” I asked in a low voice.

Willow wore a sour look. “It all happened so fast and I was distracted. Their scents blurred into one, and I didn’t manage to pick any of them out. They chose their moment well.”

“We shouldn’t expect any less from hunters,” I said. It was a reminder of how deadly wolves could be. In recent times I had not been concerned about wolves. I had been safe in my fortress, and my abilities protected me whenever I was around them. Unless wolves were provoked, they were not dangerous, and we had not been in a state of war.

It hadn’t always been that way. When we were locked in a fierce struggle for supremacy wolves had always been watching and waiting for us, attacking in force. At the first sign of a vampire they would streak across the world and seek to kill us, bringing our lives to an end. They knew they had to strike hard and strike swiftly, showing no mercy at all because if they gave us a

single chance to retaliate then they knew we would make it count. Even I, with all my wisdom and prowess, had come close to being torn apart by wolves before. I had felt their hot, feral breath burning my skin. I had seen their claws ripping my flesh apart, dark ichor leaking out. I had looked into their golden eyes and witnessed the ferocity of the beast they sought to unleash. Somehow I had always managed to wriggle away. I left a trail of their blood behind me, the butcher of wolves, a willing soldier in the fight that never ended.

And it could never end, not while there was still a vampire alive. Amara was the last soldier, but she could still cause a lot of damage. Whoever attacked us had chosen the wrong target. I wasn't the one who was going to hurt them after all. It was always going to be Amara.

We made our way to the Alpha's abode. Willow knocked on the door loudly, calling out that she needed to speak to Brandon. There was movement inside. He appeared and welcomed us in, wearing a worried look.

"Is the vampire here?" he asked.

"No, but there has been an attack," Willow said, walking past him and entering the chamber. Naomi was

there, and she gave us a vile glance. Willow barely acknowledged her.

“What kind of attack?”

“Last night some wolves attacked us when we were returning from the lake. It was completely unprovoked. They were lying in wait. We barely had a chance to strike back before they left,” Willow said. She then proceeded to lift my shirt without any warning and showed him the dark marks left upon my body. Brandon’s frown deepened and he let out a heavy sigh.

“I made it clear that this was not to be tolerated,” he said.

“Brandon, we’ve come here in peace and for refuge. You can’t expect us to stay here if we’re going to be attacked. I won’t be a victim.”

Again, she implied, but did not say. However, from the glance that Brandon gave her I felt confident he knew what she was getting at. He nodded slowly.

“I noticed you didn’t stay for the whole speech last night. If you had, then you might have heard the discussion people had. It was rather lively. I’ve never

known so many people to have so many different opinions,” he said.

“And what opinions would those be?” I asked.

“Quite frankly, people aren’t sure that I’m making the right decision. They think I’m insane for allowing you to stay here when it puts a target on our backs. They believe that you’re going to bring nothing but trouble with you, and the best thing to do is to just shoo you away like troublesome vermin.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been compared to a rat,” I breathed. This brought a half smile from Brandon.

“I’m not going to let that happen,” he said.

“Why?” Willow asked.

Brandon took a moment to consider the question. His frown lifted, but he still looked pensive. When he spoke it was in a low, thoughtful tone. His words had the weight of wisdom, and I knew that Willow was right when she said that he had matured.

“Because I feel I owe it to you after the way I treated you when we were younger. It wasn’t honorable. I should have acted with more decorum. But also because

this is what my father would have done. I,” a pained look came across his face, “did not always see eye to eye with him, but after becoming Alpha I have gained a new appreciation for the way he held himself. My actions define the way the pack behaves and I want them to be better than I have been before. I have left a lot of myself behind in the past Willow, but I hope you can believe me when I say that I want to be a better man.”

They were gentle, thoughtful words, but the impact of them was lessened by a scoffing sound that came behind him. Our eyes turned to Naomi, who had not seemed to want to make that sound out loud. She tried to disguise it as clearing her throat, but it was already too late.

“Have you something to add?” Brandon asked.

Some kind of instinct rippled across Naomi’s features. I thought she was going to press her lips together and remain quiet, but she changed her mind and rose from her chair, walking towards us.

“It’s all well and good you speaking of honor Brandon, but your first duty is to the safety of the pack. I’m not condoning what happened to you,” she looked at

Willow and I and spoke in a patronizing tone, “but I can understand where this frustration comes from. We have known peace for many years and the thought of a vampire coming here to destroy all that is troubling, to say the least. I think if you really had the best interest of the pack in mind then you would move on and leave us be.” Her words were directed towards Willow and myself.

“But Amara will come for you anyway. The whole reason why I banished her was because she wanted to renew hostilities with werewolves and cleave a path through the world. My absence won’t make things any better for you,” I said.

Naomi looked away. “I did not say I agreed with it, just that I can understand where some people are coming from. If you will excuse me I have some matters I need to attend to,” she drifted past us, her footsteps lighter than the wind. As she left, Brandon sighed.

“I’m sorry about her. I don’t know what’s gotten into her,” he said.

“She seems the same as she always has to me. Maybe that’s the problem Brandon; she’s stayed the

same while you've changed.”

Brandon thought on this, although he did not make a comment in reply.

“Look, I'll address the wolves later. I'll make it clear that anyone who dares to attack you is going to feel my wrath and will be banished from the pack. I won't tolerate this infighting, especially not when there's the threat of a vampire out there. We have bigger things to worry about. Cassius, from now on you can consider yourself under my protection. If anything happens to you then you can come to me and I will make sure that you are kept safe. This is my promise to you, and I'll let everyone else know this as well. Now please, try and enjoy the hospitality of the pack while I think about what to say.”

I thanked him for his kind words, and then Willow and I left his company.

“I do feel for him in some ways. Many men have struggled with a leadership role before. It cannot be easy managing so many different egos and philosophies,” I said.

“It makes me wonder how Amara did it,” she replied.

I shrugged. “It’s always easier in war. Focusing all the attention on the enemy can make people ignore the troubles at home. Besides, Amara had sired most of the vampires. They already had an instinctual need to obey her.”

“It must have taken a lot for you to break free from that.”

“It did,” the words dropped out of me slowly as I thought about the wrenching pain in my heart. “But these things become easier over time. The more years I spent with Amara, the more I was able to... compartmentalize my feelings towards her.”

“Good, because the last thing I want happening is her putting some spell on you to turn you against us all.”

“I’d die before I let that happen,” I said, and I meant it. But sadly the prospect of dying seemed all too real to me and it made me sick to my stomach. I held Willow’s hand tightly, almost believing that if I kept a hold of it then nothing could take me from this world, nothing could take me from her.

Chapter Ten

Willow

It was midday when Brandon gathered the entire pack to speak. I stood with Cassius and my father as Brandon took his position next to the unlit fire pit. His voice boomed out. It astonished me how much he looked like his father. I remembered the old Alpha standing there addressing the pack; Brandon had the same stance, the same cadence of speaking. It was as though the spirit of his father was imbued within his voice, and it occurred to me that I had been so wrapped up in my own tormented relationship with my parents that I hadn't thought what it had been like for Brandon. Dad had filled me in on what happened after I left the pack the first time; Brandon had been determined to wage war against the vampire who had kidnapped me (so they thought), but his father had not wanted to put the pack at risk of fighting. Brandon had seen him as a coward, and had challenged him to a duel, killing him eventually and taking over the role of Alpha for himself.

Although I had felt a lot of agony and angst towards, and because of, my parents, I had never thought

of killing them. I wasn't sure I was even capable of doing such a thing, but Brandon had. How much did that weigh on his conscience? How much could that change a man?

“Something troubling happened last night, my wolves. Our guest was attacked. One of our own was attacked. It happened in the dead of night, when most of us were sleeping. That means that some of you wolves plotted and planned like the slyest vampires to attack in the dark. We are wolves. We do not hide our intentions. We do not hide our attacks. This will not be tolerated. I know that many of you are worried about what is to come, but I am here to tell you that Cassius is under my protection. Anything that happens to him will be repaid tenfold. That includes the attack last night. I want whoever was involved in that attack to step forward now.”

His voice rang out, but was met with silence. Nobody moved. Tension filled the air. A few people shifted uncomfortably on their feet and looked down towards the ground, but nobody stepped forward.

Brandon moved towards the crowd. “Are you cowardly enough to try and deny your actions? Wolves

should always stand by what they have done. You made your statement, are none of you brave enough to come forward?” he called out. Again there was silence, but this time it did not last as long. I detected movement in the crowd. Someone came forward, pushing through the throng of people.

“It is not a question of bravery Brandon, but a question of honor. You speak of this, but you do not know its true meaning. Here you stand, welcoming an outcast and a vampire into our midst, putting the pack at risk for no good reason.”

The man who spoke was called Ewan. He had a shock of blonde hair, was tall and broad, with muscles that were hewn from a life of hard work. His figure was imposing and his voice was deep. It was matched with a steely glare, while his voice rumbled like thunder. Brandon’s eyes narrowed towards him.

“Willow is not an outcast, and Cassius is a vampire no longer. His knowledge may be of use in the coming battle.”

“There might not be a battle if you turned him away. You are inviting her here by keeping them here.

You should send them back to this vampire and be done with it. We have known peace for many years now, but you are risking all of that.”

Brandon clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. His eyes blazed with anger. “You dare question the ruling of the Alpha?” he growled.

Ewan tilted his head and cocked his eyebrow. “Why not? You did, after all. Let’s not forget that you’re only the Alpha because you killed your father. He never wanted to go after Willow. He tried to talk sense into you, but you wouldn’t listen. And now a vampire has returned and we have to live in fear. Do you really think that you are the one who can lead us through this?”

“Of course I am. I am the Alpha.”

“Only because you have proclaimed yourself to be. But I think that it’s time for a change. Clearly you are not fit to lead us. You have put the pack in danger, and that is a sin that cannot be forgiven,” Ewan’s words were harsh, and they flew from his mouth like swift arrows. His body bristled with hostility. While he spoke he moved to the front of the crowd, joining Brandon as though they were equals, and with his challenge that was

exactly what Ewan was trying to position himself as. They both stood before the pack and it was clear there was going to be a division. I knew that Ewan's words were going to capture the attention of the hearts of the people. None of them wanted to suffer an attack, and if Ewan could offer them safety then perhaps they would want him as their Alpha.

But with wolves things were never easy, and this wasn't going to be as simple as an election.

"Ewan, you have no blood claim to make a challenge, and even if you did your actions have proven that you are not fit to be an Alpha. You led a band of rogues to attack two unarmed people in the middle of the night. Do you really think this is behavior befitting a wolf?" Brandon asked scornfully.

"I could say the same thing about you Brandon. But then I would think a man capable of murdering his own father is willing to do just about anything," Ewan's words made Brandon's eye twitch. Ewan then turned to the crowd and addressed them. "I think we have witnessed this circus for long enough. We accepted Brandon's rule because of tradition, but it's clear that it is he who does

not have the pack's safety as his highest priority. He allowed Willow to remain with this vampire, and then he allows them to stay here. I think he has clearly never gotten over the fact that Willow was taken from him. Let us not forget that they were promised to each other.”

I winced at this, especially as people started to nod and murmur in agreement.

“That agreement was dissolved,” Brandon said through gritted teeth.

“But emotions are not as easy to dissolve, are they? I wonder if you have always loved Willow, which is even worse because now you are allowing her consort safety because of your feelings for her.”

“You lie!” Brandon cried out. “And I will not allow you to poison the minds of this pack. You are the one who has taken matters into your own hands by attacking them without a proper challenge, and now you seek to try and usurp my leadership with your silver tongue. You can speak and speak as much as you like, but you cannot simply conjure the truth into existence. The fact is that I was wrong about Willow. She was always a part of our pack. As for Cassius, he has knowledge that will help us

defend ourselves against the vampire queen. I am a proud man, yes, but I am not proud enough to refuse help when I know that something can be of use. We know the nature of vampires. This queen will come for us and our blood no matter whether Cassius is here or not. I would rather face her with a man by my side who has intimate knowledge of her than not at all, so now come here and accept your punishment. Unless the people who worked with you are willing to step forward as well I will put all their punishments upon you,” Brandon growled, seeking to put an end to this before things got out of hand.

As it happened, we were well past that point.

Ewan wore a serpent’s smile. “I’m not going to be punished Brandon. I came forward to make a challenge against you, and that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“I already told you that you don’t have a blood claim.”

“So it’s okay for you to challenge the Alpha, but not for anyone else? That doesn’t seem fair. So nobody is allowed to challenge you until you have a child? I don’t think that’s the way that the pack should be run. It

should be run by the strongest and most capable wolf, and you have shown that this is not you any longer. Or are you a coward and going to hide behind a technicality to prevent this challenge from taking place?”

It was a clever move by Ewan. Now, if Brandon remained true to the rules people would see him as a coward, and there would always be an element of doubt in people’s minds about his strength as a ruler. One thing a leader needed was the trust and confidence of his people. If that was ever damaged then his authority would crumble, so he would have no choice but to accept Ewan’s challenge. Everyone else knew this too, including Brandon. Ewan wore a smug smile on his face and arched an eyebrow.

“Fine,” Brandon said, and just like that there was going to be a challenge for the leadership of the pack.

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“What are we going to do if Ewan wins?” Cassius asked. I sensed the anxiety in his voice. I felt it in my blood too. It was as though thousands of tiny spiders were crawling within me, waiting to spill out in my tears and in my blood. Just when I thought we had found a

sanctuary it was almost being taken away from us, and I could not do anything to stop it.

“I have no idea. I’m starting to wonder if we should just flee now, while everyone’s attention is on the battle. If the wrong person wins...”

“Can’t you make sure that the right one does?”

“You mean interfere?”

“You or your father.”

“For someone who knows so much about wolves there is a lot you need to learn about our ways. The whole point of the challenge is that it’s one Alpha against one challenger. The fight is to decide the strongest. If anyone interferes then by default the person they are trying to help clearly isn’t strong enough to win the fight by themselves. They would immediately be declared the loser. Nobody can interfere.”

“Well, Brandon seems to be able to handle himself in a fight.”

“But that doesn’t mean he’s guaranteed to win. If he doesn’t then we know what Ewan is going to do with us. The best we can hope for is that he tries to run us away.”

“And the worst?”

I looked at him grimly. “He’ll throw us on the pyre with Brandon.”

Cassius face paled. He pursed his lips and tried to make a lighthearted comment. “I suppose we’ll have to trust in Brandon then.”

“That’s all we can do now.”

I felt it slipping away from me, my hold on life. For a while there I had been under the impression that I actually had control. I thought that I was holding the reins and steering myself towards a destiny that was of my own choosing, but I was quickly beginning to realize that I was actually just tumbling down a river in a barrel, being pushed and twisted and pulled in every direction by the choppy waters. Control was an illusion. Things just happened, and we had to react as best we can. It did not matter that our love was true. It did not matter that all Cassius and I wanted was to live alone in a small paradise we had made for ourselves. Other villains had other agendas and they were always trying to interfere. First Amara had returned from nowhere and pushed us out of the castle, and now Ewan was trying to do the

same, trying to blame us for the ill portents that were appearing on the horizon. Or was this just a good excuse to make a play for power? It might well be the case that Ewan had always had this desire in his heart and was just waiting for an opportune moment, but either way the result was the same.

Now I had to cheer for Brandon as my champion, the man who had once broken my heart. My mind turned to the past, when I had been younger and more naïve.

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I watched with pride as Brandon won the contest of strength. It was not a fight exactly, more like a wrestling bout where the boys tried to throw each other to the ground. I knew that Brandon was going to win, yet seeing it was to see strength personified. My young heart swelled. He was still a boy, yet in this moment it was easy to see the man he would become. At the time I thought I was going to be the woman who stood by his side as well. As he celebrated his victory people swarmed around him, eager to be close to him so that his greatness would reflect onto them. I rushed up as well, trying to make myself seen and heard, but I was lost in the crowd. For a

moment his gaze fell upon me and I thought he was going to reach through the throng of bodies, pulling me towards him. Instead he turned away and pretended that I was not there at all. He ran off with the rest of them, and I was left alone.

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The memory was a short one, but just as bitter as it had always been. It was just after I was supposed to get my wolf, when people were starting to notice that I was still without one, and the doubts became louder and stronger. It was then that I first realized my future was not going to be as I pictured it, but how many futures could one person have? How many could be discarded before you started to run out of them? The possibilities seemed to be dwindling, but I was not ready to leave the pack yet. I was not going to turn tail and flee and become a coward.

Besides, I had a feeling that even if we left we would be chased by Ewan. As long as we were alive we were a danger to them. Unless they could show our bodies to Amara they would still be at risk of her thinking they were harboring us, so they needed to be able to prove

that they had disposed of her enemies. What they did not realize was that Amara wouldn't care either way. She would not make a bargain with them, and she would not spare them. In fact she might well be even more annoyed that they had taken the delight of killing us from her. I had seen a hunger in her eyes that was fueled by madness. There could be no reasoning with her, and I wondered if this was an effect of the long life she had lived. Cassius had been on the verge of growing mad when I first met him. He had been searching for a companion to save him from insanity. Was Amara the same? I thought it was impossible to live a long life without suffering from some of these effects, and I was glad that I had not taken up Cassius' offer of becoming immortal with him.

Although, if I had then we might well have been able to defeat Amara in the castle and would not have had to worry about this. It was never possible to predict what was going to happen though. All you could do was what you thought was best for yourself in the moment, and as much as I liked the idea of spending every single moment of existence with Cassius, I knew that part of the beauty of life was that it had to end. I did not want us to

both dwindle into obscurity, fading out like the pale light of a dying world. I wanted our love to burn, to remind us to cherish every moment because otherwise we might end up taking it for granted.

I wondered if Brandon felt the same thing about Naomi. He can't have expected anyone to challenge his authority, not at this moment, not when there was so much danger. And yet it had happened, someone was trying to wrest the pack from him and he was going to have to fight for it.

The whole pack had gathered. Dad and Cassius were beside me. People kept whispering around us. Even those who did not have a problem with Brandon's decision to allow us refuge in the pack were still going to have something to say about it. None of this would have happened without our arrival, there was no escaping that fact. I tried to ignore them as best I could. Thankfully it wasn't hard because the fight was imminent, and it demanded our attention.

Brandon strode forward just as he had always done in his youth, bare chested and brash, eager to try and intimidate his opponent. I didn't think that Ewan was

the type to be easily intimidated though. He moved like a serpent, shifting from side to side with a dark look in his eyes. He flexed his hands into fists and his gaze never left Brandon. Naomi watched on, clasping her hands together, a worried expression on her face. I could say many things about her, but it was clear that she loved Brandon and must have been worried about this.

The pack formed a circle around the fighters. Brandon and Ewan stood in the middle of the village, the future of the pack on the line. Our future was on the line as well.

“Let’s get this over with,” Brandon said, and moved towards Ewan.

Ewan was quick and agile. Brandon tried to end the fight early with a huge right hook. His fist surged through the air, and if it had connected with Ewan’s face it might well have taken his head clean off. But Ewan ducked and punched back with a jab in the chest, stealing the wind from Brandon’s lungs, making him double over. Ewan leaped and thrust his knee into Brandon’s face. There was an ugly crack and Brandon staggered back, clutching his face. Blood dripped from

his nose and lips, red rivers trailing along his skin. There were gasps from the people around us. I noticed that I was gasping too. The Alpha was bleeding, first blood, and that was unusual.

In times past, these kinds of challenges were more common. I had never seen one of course, and over the years people had become more tolerant of leaders. The position of Alphas was passed between fathers and sons, between brothers, but here it was the product of a deadly rivalry that was going to change the very nature of the pack. Ewan wanted to press his advantage, knowing that he wasn't going to get a better chance of bringing Brandon to his knees. He ran forward and looked as though he was going to smash a groggy Brandon with his elbow, but instead he ducked down and crashed through Brandon's legs, sweeping them out from underneath him. Brandon crashed to the ground and cried out as he tried to get to his feet, but Ewan turned around and slammed his elbow in the back of Brandon's head. Ewan then wrapped his arm around Brandon's neck and squeezed so hard that his bicep swelled. He pulled Brandon's head back, clamping his fists together as he strained, looking as though he wanted to rip Brandon's

head clean off. Both men had red faces; Brandon from his lack of oxygen, Ewan with the strain. Saliva dripped down his chin and sweat popped on his forehead. He grunted as Brandon tried to break free, but his hands slipped away from Ewan's arms and he couldn't find the strength to turn his body around. I had never seen him so vulnerable before, and I thought there was a chance that Ewan might actually win.

Brandon's face was a crimson mask as the blood continued to pour from his nostrils. I could hear him breathing tightly, but the breaths were fading.

"He's going to lose," Cassius said despondently. I knew he wanted me to rush in and help Brandon, but even at this stage it would still do him no good. Nobody would respect Brandon if I helped him. I had to let this take its natural course, and if Ewan won then Cassius and I would just have to fight our way out of the pack.

I began to feel the wolf inside me. I glanced across to Dad and we shared a look. He knew what was going to be required if Brandon lost as well.

"Get ready to run," I said. Cassius looked wounded. I knew he wouldn't like having to flee. I knew he wanted

to fight as well, but he was the most vulnerable one and if a wolf managed to sink their claws into him then it would all be over.

But then my gaze drifted back to the fight. There was an anxious hush among the crowd as Brandon started to show his strength. He pushed himself up inch by inch, slowly trying to fight against Ewan's pressure. Ewan fought back though, driving his knees into Brandon's back, putting all his weight upon Brandon to try and push him into the ground, as though he was trying to bury him alive. It seemed like a futile effort, the last death throes of a man who knew he was taking his last breaths. There were so many mixed emotions. Brandon was a man I had loved, and then hated, and now... now my feelings towards him had mellowed. I saw him as an ally, perhaps a friend, but now I wondered if I was going to have to mourn him. Tears appeared in my eyes as I realized that he might be dying, and I had no way to stop it.

Chapter Eleven

Cassius

I had watched many men die before. Death was something that I was familiar with. I had seen men die who were tired of living and welcomed the sweet release. I had seen men fight to the very last breath, believing that if they just held on for one moment longer they would be able to shrug off the pull of mortality and continue living through sheer force of will. I had seen people who had their lives stolen from them in battle, and I myself had been such a thief many times over. It was always heartbreaking to see the light leave their eyes for that final time, to know that whatever ineffable flame made them alive had been snuffed out, and could never be relit. Something unique was always taken away from the world, and there was never anything that could be done to fix it. I had hardened my heart over the years, making sure that I did not let it weigh upon me too heavily, but in this instance I was moved.

I have no idea if it was because my heart was warmer as a human than it had been as a vampire, or if it was because Willow was moved to tears beside me, but I

felt sorry for Brandon. I was so tempted to rush in there and send Ewan flying away, not just for Brandon's sake, but also because I wanted to get revenge for how Ewan had attacked me. As I watched him driving his knees into Brandon's side and back I felt the echoes of pain in my ribs. They throbbed and I had to lift my hand to my side to try and ease the pain. I leaned forward, feeling nerves clenching through my body as I watched these last fatal moves of the fight.

Except they weren't the final moments.

Brandon was fighting with all he had, and when his human form failed his wolf took over. There was an anxious whisper that rushed through the crowd as they had anticipated this moment. Brandon's body changed. His muscles widened and swelled, looking as though they were going to explode. His skin gave way to the fur and changed shade, while his jaw lengthened and the blood receded. Fangs shone like daggers and his eyes filled with fury. Ewan's eyes went wide as he tried to keep his hold around the wolf's throat, but his arms were not wide enough. As Brandon's body grew bigger Ewan was lifted off the ground and lost his leverage. Brandon started to

move his body from side to side, trying to swing Ewan away.

Ewan had no choice but to let go. He fell to the ground, but the impact was lessened as he embraced his own wolf. His fur was sandy brown, and he was smaller in stature than Brandon, but no less vicious. As soon as Ewan turned into a wolf he lunged towards Brandon. His tactic was clear; he wanted to keep the assault going in a fast and furious manner so that Brandon did not have a chance to fight back. He wanted to use his speed to his advantage, but although Brandon was bigger he was no lumbering brute, and throughout the fight he had observed his opponent carefully. Ewan liked to feint his attacks, so the next time he tried, Brandon was ready for him.

Ewan bared his teeth and went to twist at the last moment, seeking to dive under Brandon's swipe and then attack Brandon from the rear, but Brandon brought his hind leg up and sent Ewan spinning off his course. The change in momentum sent him twisting away, and Brandon was upon Ewan immediately. He howled and then brought his paws down upon Ewan's flanks, digging

his claws in. There was an almighty cry of pain as blood began to trickle along the light colored fur, oozing out of the deep gashes. Ewan tried to run away, wanting to put some distance between himself and Brandon, but Brandon wasn't going to let him. Brandon put his weight into his hind legs and then lunged forward, leaping onto Ewan's back. He gnashed his teeth and tried to get to Ewan's neck. They tumbled around and rolled along the ground, a mix of dark and light fur, as though a yin yang symbol was tossing and turning across the grass. We were all enraptured by the fight and leaned forward, holding our breath in our lungs. Ewan and Brandon were locked together as though they had never been apart, as intimate as lovers, yet the violence was unmatched. Ewan kept twisting and writhing, just managing to keep his neck out of reach. Brandon's fangs were so close to piercing the vulnerable flesh and if he just got an inch then it would all be over.

It only seemed like a matter of time, especially when Brandon changed tactic. He stuck his paws into either side of Ewan's body, using his claws like swords and bringing Ewan flat to the ground. Ewan's cry was bloodcurdling and as I watched the fight memories

flashed through my mind, memories of a life I had lived a long time ago when I had been a murderer, a butcher, when wolves had whimpered beneath me. I pushed the thought away, reminding myself that I was a different man, a better man, and I did not have to let the things I did then define me.

Ewan lay there, twitching and wounded. The fight had been gradually stolen from him and now Brandon was ready to make the final move. He rose and surveyed the pack, as though he was warning them that if anyone should dare challenge him again then they would suffer the same fate. He then opened his gaping jaws and was about to kill Ewan, when suddenly there was a scream.

“Wait! Stop! Brandon don’t do this!” Naomi cried. There was a shocked gasp as people watched Naomi rushing into the fight. Brandon was as confused as the rest of us. He stood there as a wolf, blinking slowly as Naomi ran, her long hair trailing behind her as the breeze caught it. She flung herself down upon Ewan, cradling his body, holding up a palm with a desperate look on her face. Her eyes were stained with tears and she trembled. “Please Brandon, don’t hurt him,” she

said. I tilted my head. She spoke with more concern than she should have had for just another member of the pack, and it did not seem as though she was doing this for Brandon's sake.

Brandon returned to his human form, as did Ewan, eventually. He was twitching. His body was covered in blood and his eyes were half shut. Naomi cradled him as she would a helpless child.

"What are you doing here?" Brandon demanded.

"Please," Naomi croaked, "please just leave him alone. This is all wrong. This was all a mistake."

"What do you know of this?" Brandon's voice was low and searching, and his gaze was focused on Naomi. She hung her head and sniffed back her sadness. When she raised her head again her eyes were filled with something resembling anger.

"Don't ask questions that you don't want to know the answer to Brandon. Please, just end this now. Just let him go."

"Let him go?" Brandon's voice echoed like thunder. "You expect me to show him forgiveness after he

disrespected me? After he broke the rules of hospitality and attacked our guest? After he tried to steal this pack from me? Have you lost your mind? He deserves all the punishment I can mete out to him, and he deserves no mercy.”

“Then you are going to have to show me no mercy as well,” she said in a low voice.

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes flashed with defiance. Perhaps it was all she had left in her. “If you kill him then you need to kill me too, because I was there with him. I attacked them as well.”

Brandon tilted his head in confusion. “Why? Why would you do this?”

Her features darkened as a scowl appeared on her face. “Because you could not. Because you’ve grown soft, just like your father. I remember you when you were young, so brave and never afraid to speak your mind. You were willing to take on the world and whoever else stood in the way of power. You were focused, strong, brilliant, and I would have followed you no matter where you led. You had the courage to kill your own father

when he was weak, but now you have turned out to be just like him. The moment Willow returned you should have banished her. You never should have gone after her. And then you allowed that monster to stay with us?" she shook her head. I winced as she referred to me as a monster. Was I ever going to be anything else? "I don't know you anymore Brandon. I feel like I'm losing you, and I'm not about to let this clan fall into ruin because you have become too weak. Ewan was... he agreed with me. He was there for me. He reminded me of the man you used to be but please, just let him go. He doesn't deserve this."

Realization flickered over Brandon's face. "So you have been... cavorting with this man? You have disrespected the vows you made to me? You have broken your loyalty to the Alpha?" Naomi denied none of these. She just knelt there in silence. "And you say that he doesn't deserve death?"

She hung her head and nodded slowly. Brandon's mouth moved without speaking. He wiped blood from his nose and then turned to the pack, as though he was

looking for the answer to a mystery that he just could not solve.

“Go,” he said.

Naomi looked at him with wide eyes. When she didn't move, Brandon turned back to her and flung his arm into the distance.

“Do not disobey me again Naomi. I trusted you with everything, and you betray me like this? You dare to show such disrespect?” he shook his head. “It is only because of your position that I do not slaughter you where you sit, and because I have learned wisdom from my father I will let Ewan go as well.” He then raised his voice and focused his attention on the crowd. “And as for anyone else who agrees with her or Ewan, you can leave as well. Leave this place and make a home for yourselves elsewhere, and if you ever return or you try to make a stand against us then I will not hesitate in ending your lives. This is your one and only chance Naomi, so I suggest that you take it.”

His words bit the air like a winter breeze, coated in hostility and devoid of affection. Naomi opened her mouth, looking for all the world as though she was going

to try and argue with him, but in the end she thought better of it. It would have been a brave woman to try and stay in the same pack after she had cuckolded the Alpha.

“I mean it,” Brandon growled towards the pack, “if anyone here agrees with them, then leave. I don’t want you in my pack. I will not allow traitors to stand side by side with us when we are fighting for our lives.”

Slowly but surely a few wolves began to lumber forward. They had sullen looks on their faces and clearly had not expected their champion to lose. There were some heartbreaking exchanges on the faces of people who hadn’t realized their friends and lovers had turned to this way of thinking, had let this hatred fester in their hearts. They were drawn towards Naomi and helped her with Ewan, pulling his limp body up. He was still groggy, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head, but he would live.

Brandon glared at them and waited as they stalked away, a motley group of traitors who had betrayed their pack, all because they couldn’t stand to have a former vampire in their midst. I was not responsible for their actions though. They had done this all by themselves,

and now they were going to have to suffer the fate and shame of exile. We all watched until they disappeared from view, obscured by a thicket of trees. Then, Brandon turned towards us and spoke in a low, but serious voice. He was still clearly wounded, perhaps more by the betrayal of his mate than the fight itself, but either way both of these things ran deeply within his soul.

“I had not been aware that this pack was rotting with betrayal. I do not want this to happen again. I am the Alpha and you must trust that I have the best interests of this pack at heart. There is a battle coming and I will not stand side by side with people who are not committed to protecting each other. As a pack we must be united. This is the way forward, and the Alpha has spoken. If anyone disagrees with this then you can go and join the others,” he jerked his thumb in the direction of Naomi and her cabal, and as nobody dared move he gave a satisfied nod and retreated back to his chamber.

It was all over. He had won. Willow and I were safe.

But it was only one threat that was dealt with. Amara was still out there, lurking like death itself.

Chapter Twelve

Willow

It was all over and people were tense. As soon as Brandon left the conversation exploded. There were tears shed as people had seen their sons and daughters and loved ones leave. There were about a dozen in total who had decided that they couldn't bear to live in a pack where a former vampire was allowed to stay. Naomi and Ewan must have poisoned their minds. I should have known that she had been behind the attack, but I had never believed she could be capable of such a thing.

I squeezed Cassius' hand and offered him a reassuring smile. It was good to know that this was all over. My father gave me a squeeze on the shoulder as well. I was relieved that Brandon had won, but I couldn't help but feel pity for him, and after all we had been through together I thought it was only fitting that I should go and speak to him.

I peeled away from the crowd and went to his home. The door was ajar. I nudged it with my fingers and it creaked open. I found him standing at the window, gazing out into nothingness.

“How did I not see this Willow?” he asked, knowing that it was me even before he turned to look at me. I closed the door behind me and walked further into the room. As I grew closer to him I could see that he had not treated his wounds. His fists were blistered and blood still poured from his nose. There was a great welt on his head as well. I looked around for a cloth and picked it up, handing it to him. He absently pressed it to his face, wiping away the smearing scarlet stain.

“She must have kept it well hidden. You can’t see it if you’re not looking,” I said, trying to reassure him. It didn’t work.

“I am the Alpha. It’s my job to notice these things.”

“Sometimes you can’t tell the truth when it’s all so close to you. She was doing this right under your nose. If anything, I should have suspected her.”

Brandon nodded slowly. “You two never did get along.”

“That’s not quite true. We were friends once, a long time ago,” I said softly. It was long enough now that it didn’t matter really. We were both different people since then. “But she accused me of trying to win you back. She

thought that I was still in love with you. She must have been projecting her own behavior, fearing that if she was betraying your marriage then you could have as well.”

Brandon wore a grim smile and nodded. “I wonder how long this has been going on for.”

“Does it matter?”

He sighed. “I suppose not. But it would have been nice to know. I just can’t believe she has thrown her lot in with them.”

“Can’t you?” I challenged. He arched an eyebrow. “I mean, what she said wasn’t entirely untrue. You were like that before. I assume that you learned a lot from your father.”

His eyes flickered with shame and he hung his head. “At the time I thought it was the only way forward. I believed that any problem had to be met with force, and that the easiest thing was to kill anything that disagreed with me or stood in the way of what I thought was progress, even my own father.” He paused for a moment, choking on his breath. He pressed his hand to his forehead. I thought he was going to burst into tears, and if that happened I wasn’t sure how I was going to handle

it. I didn't like the idea of him becoming emotional. He had always been as steadfast as a rock, never unbending, never broken, but here I saw a man who was alone, who had lost all the people closest to him. "There was a look in his eyes when it happened. At the time I thought it was fear, but now I know it to be pity. He never tried to reason with me. He didn't treat me like a child. He took the challenge like a man, knowing that it was inevitable, and then at the end I know he looked upon me with disappointment. I've thought about that look for a long time since then. I see it every time I close my eyes. I thought leading this pack would be easy, I thought all I needed to do was be strong, but there's much more to it than that. Dad tried to prepare me as much as he could, but there are some things you can't teach anyone. There are some things that you have to just learn yourself. I wish that I hadn't killed him Willow. I wish he was here to deal with this now because I'm sure he would have a better idea of what to do."

I thought about what to say. I hadn't expected to have this raw or emotional chat with him. I suppose in some ways we were still bonded together, although our mating bond had been severed. "Brandon, just because

you did something you regret doesn't mean that you're not a good leader. You've learned from your mistakes and you've tried your best to emulate him as much as you can. You've protected this pack, and you've proven that you are the rightful Alpha. You don't have to doubt your position."

"I find that as I get older I am doubting everything," he said with a tired smile.

"I think that is the nature of things. The more we learn about the world the more we realize how much there is that we don't know. When we were younger we were so confident in our opinions because we thought we were learning everything. But then we get older and we realize how ignorant we truly are."

"Does that count for your vampire? Or has he lived long enough that he knows everything?"

I chuckled to myself. "There are times when he can seem arrogant, but deep down he's humble. And he certainly didn't anticipate Amara returning."

Brandon nodded. "We need to turn our attention to her. I find myself hoping that Cassius is wrong and that

she's not going to come after him, but I can't bet on that."

"She will. I saw it in her eyes. She's angry at both of us." I paused, my breath halting for a moment. "Brandon, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for putting you in an awkward position. I know that we arrived here without warning and our presence here puts you at risk. I don't agree with what Ewan or Naomi did, but I have to admit that they had something of a point. You would at least be able to stay safer for longer if we weren't here. If it makes it easier for you then we are willing to leave. I'm not sure where we'll go, but we'll find somewhere."

"I appreciate you saying that Willow, but I can't ask that of you."

"You are the Alpha. You can ask anything of me. If I am regarded as a member of this pack then I have to abide by the rules as well."

Brandon grinned, shrugging away the burden he wore for a few moments. "I'm not going to ask you to do that Willow. I've given you enough strife over the years. The last thing I want to do is send you out into the world alone when there's a vampire hunting you. If you're

going to survive then you're going to need a pack around you. We're all going to need to work together. I'm not about to turn my back on you. I know I can't make up for the way I treated you when we were younger, but I hope this will at least go to show that I'm not the same person as I used to be."

"No, you're not. It's a shame that Naomi couldn't change with you, but for what it's worth I think you're better off without her, and maybe there's some other wolf in the pack who can make a better mate for you."

The smile faded from his face. He looked as though he was about to say something, but I stopped him before he could. I thought he might have said something about him having already had the perfect mate, but letting her go. I didn't need to think about the past again, and I didn't need him to start bringing it up. I said that I would bring Cassius and my father to him later so that we could talk about a strategy.

I went to rejoin Cassius and as soon as I saw him I flung my arms around him and kissed him deeply. He looked stunned and dazed.

“What was that for?” he asked, his voice sounded as though it had been lost in a dream.

“I just wanted to let you know how grateful I am that we’re together, and that we don’t have to doubt our love for each other. After seeing how Naomi treated Brandon I just... I wanted you to know how lucky I feel to be with you. And I wanted to say that I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said, and the words warmed my heart. I brushed my nose against his and we smiled together, and in this small moment I felt as happy as anything. It almost seemed as though nothing bad could happen to us at all.

Chapter Thirteen

Cassius

I was still reeling from the drama of the fight. In a sense I think the entire pack was. From talking to Peter I had learned that it wasn't a common occurrence in recent history. Most people were happy enough to let the Alpha lead as there weren't many decisions that would be bad enough to warrant a challenge. I asked him if he would have stayed in the pack if Ewan had won. Peter shook his head vehemently.

"I would have left, as would many others. That's what happens when there's a change in leadership. If you don't agree then you're free to go off and start your own pack. It's what happened when Brandon took over from his father."

I thought it was coy of Peter to describe patricide in these terms, but I did not make a comment about it. I wasn't here to try and shame him. "And you weren't tempted to leave then?"

"Tempted, yes, but at the end of the day Brandon was offering to search for my daughter. I didn't

necessarily agree with what he did, but his reasons for doing so aligned with my own.”

Willow returned shortly and kissed me lovingly. Arousal burned through my body. All I wanted was to run away with her and dive into our bed together, losing myself to our passionate mood, but instead there were things that needed to be done. Willow told me about Brandon’s state of mind and how he wanted to develop a strategy. He seemed the type of man who wanted to get on with things rather than wallowing in melancholy, and I assumed that this would help keep him from thinking about the betrayal he had suffered.

The three of us joined him for dinner. He had thick cuts of meat served on platters, much like the buffet that Peter had prepared for us. My stomach growled with hunger and I licked my lips as I began to fill my plate. Brandon must not have been hungry as he did not take anything.

“Cassius, the time has come for you to tell me everything you know about Amara. What can be done to stop her?” Brandon asked.

I chewed through a mouthful of food before I answered. Savory juice ran down the corners of my mouth. My tongue darted out to lick it and stem the flow. “If I told you everything I know about her then we would never get anything done, but I’ll tell you all that is relevant. Amara is not someone who is going to let anything stand in her way. If she has something she wants to accomplish then she will split the world in two in order to do so, and there is nobody who can be free of this. The only reason I was able to stop her before was because I took her by surprise. She never expected me to turn on her.”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Brandon said bitterly. I felt a little bad. I hadn’t intended to pour salt into the wound. “Could you not have killed her when you banished her?”

My throat tightened. I was afraid of this exact question. I remember her staring at me with her eyes frozen by the poison. In many ways it was as though she had died. “I could have,” I admitted. “But I couldn’t bring myself to do so. You see, the pull she has over the vampires she sired is strong. It took everything I had just

to turn against her and banish her. It would have been easier, yes, if I had killed her, and I am sorry that I did not. It's just one more regret to add to the pile," my tone was dry and my efforts to make light of my weakness did not seem to land. Silence fell upon us.

"There's no use speaking of what could have been done. We need to think about what we can do now," Willow said, impelling the conversation forward.

"How will she attack?" Peter asked.

"That will depend on if she has vampires with her or not. If she has them with her then she is likely to take a stealthy approach, the vampires creeping around until they have us surrounded, then she will strike swiftly and rapidly, overwhelming us with everything she has."

"And if she's by herself?"

"Then she will make a show of it. She will project confidence and come right into the heart of our pack, swinging her sword and acting as though she can kill everything in her path."

"Can she?" Brandon asked.

“Most likely, but it is not definite. The thing about vampires is that we like to project an air of confidence. If you can make people believe that you are unbeatable then it almost becomes true. It’s a kind of magic all of its own, really.”

“So is there a trap we can set? How exactly do we kill her, because I think that is the only way we’re going to bring an end to this? I don’t want to just banish her again and have the problem come back. I liked the thought of living in a world with no vampires. The last thing I want is for us to become embroiled in another never ending war.”

I leaned back in my chair and wiped a crumb from my mouth. I looked at the meat on the bone.

“There are two ways we can deal with her. Either we can separate her head from her body, which Willow has already come close to doing,” I said, and Willow wore a look of pride. “Or we can try and entomb her in her final place of resting.”

“Wait, being in the tomb will kill her?” Willow gasped.

Peter and Brandon looked at each other, not understanding what we were speaking of. I nodded, feeling a little ashamed that I hadn't told her this.

"Why did you keep this a secret?" she asked in a demanding tone.

"I didn't think it was relevant," I said, although that wasn't entirely true. She knew it as well. Her eyes narrowed. I didn't think this was going to be enough to form a crack in our relationship, but it certainly wasn't going to help. I should have learned by now that secrets were never wise to keep. I held up my palms and took a breath. "Fine, it may have been relevant at some stage, but it never seemed like the right time. Before we became close I did not feel the need to share this with you, and then came the unfortunate episode where you poisoned and paralyzed me."

"Wait, you did to him what he did to Amara?" Brandon asked.

Now it was Willow's turn to blush. "Without the banishing," she muttered.

"She had her reasons. She thought that I was some kind of monster. I don't know what could have given her

that idea,” I joked, although none of us laughed. “After that I was afraid that you might turn on me again so I didn’t want to tell you this vulnerability, and then we became close so I thought you wouldn’t need to know. It wasn’t as though any other vampires were around that we needed to kill at the time.”

“No, but-” Willow said. I interrupted her.

“I’m sorry Willow. I didn’t want to die with you, and after I turned mortal it became irrelevant. But the fact remains that it is a point of vulnerability.”

Willow shook away the frustration she felt towards me. “But how? Is it some kind of magic?” she asked.

I nodded sagely. “Do you remember how I told you that death was always lurking around us and that we vampires taunted it by making our tombs?”

“Yes.”

“That wasn’t entirely true. We do use them to taunt him, but there is also an old pact between vampires and death, one that has been passed down as an ancient tradition. It’s something that none of us have been able to escape. One of the first things we do as vampires is to

create a tomb. We may have more than one over the years, but that is always tempting fate. We carve the stone ourselves. Some, like Amara, prefer to make ornate ones that look glorious. It's an affront to death. I preferred mine to be simple, hoping that I could just forget it and be overlooked."

"But how does it actually kill them? Is it filled with spikes or something?"

The echo of the words shuddered through my mind. "Our sire binds a spell to the tomb, so that if we are ever to fall in and the lid is closed then whatever remains of our life force will be taken away. There we will lie, dead and buried, and from that there is no return."

"And that's what you were too afraid to do to Amara?" Brandon asked, although his question was just a whisper around me. I remember standing there in front of my own tomb. It had been raining. The mud was slick on my hands, so dark that it looked like blood. I panted. My clothes clung to my skin with a mixture of rain and sweat. I held the axe in my hands and looked down at the gaping tomb before me, looking like eternity itself was waiting for me. I was half afraid that Amara was going to

condemn me to that tomb there and then. Instead she placed her ghost white hand on the stone and began to speak ancient words. They twisted through the air and I felt the tomb crackle with energy.

I blinked away the past and shifted my position in the chair. My gaze bolted upright. I cleared my throat. “I wasn’t sure how long the poison would last. I was afraid that she would wake up before I made it to the tomb, so I thought banishment was the safer option,” I said, although secretly it was because I could not bring myself to close the lid on her, at least not then. Now would be a different matter, I hoped.

“The tomb is deep in the catacombs of the castle,” Willow explained.

“Okay,” Brandon said, “so either we need to sever her head from her body, or we need to get her into the tomb.”

“I think I know which one will be more satisfying,” Willow said darkly, no doubt thinking back to their last fight.

“Is it possible to get back to the castle with that book of yours? I’m thinking that if we make our move

now we might be able to take her on before she has a chance to raise an army of vampires,” Peter said.

I blanched at the suggestion, as did Willow. “While I can understand your desire for swiftness, I would strongly advise against returning to the castle. It is her domain now and it will bend to her wishes. The shield spell I cast against you is only the beginning of the power. I could have killed you all with little more than a thought if I had wanted.”

“Thanks for your mercy,” Brandon said, rolling his eyes. “So what are we supposed to do, just sit here and wait for her to come?”

“I’m afraid that’s all we can do, but in the meantime we can prepare. We can fashion weapons to fight them with, and we can build defenses. It would also be wise to create a plan of retreat as well, just in case there is a need for it. I don’t want the wolves to die because of her,” I said. It was the reason why I had banished her in the first place, and I hated the fact that all my hard work could be undone.

“There are some other packs who can shelter us, but I don’t like the idea of having to run from her for the

rest of our lives. What about that book of yours, is there anywhere in there we can go that's safe?" Brandon asked.

"I'm sure there are, we just need the right resources for the spells. Not all of them will be open to us because we do not have access to the castle's magic, but we should be able to travel to some of them," I said.

"Then get to work on that. Peter, I want you to stand beside me now. I need a strong ally. Use your experience to drill the wolves. Get them prepared for battle. Make sure that all our supplies are ready to be moved at a moment's notice. We'll set up a regular watch and we'll have scouting parties out there looking for vampires. Make sure that nobody is ever left alone. If they see a vampire, retreat back to here immediately. I don't want anyone trying to be a hero because all they'll do is end up being killed, and I'm not going to have that on my conscience," Brandon said. We had our orders, and there was nothing to do other than carry them out.

Chapter Fourteen

Willow

It had been weeks since we had developed the strategy for fighting Amara. There hadn't been any sign of her since then, and there were moments when it was easy to believe that she might never attack. Some days there was a sense of tranquility to the world, as though these moments were going to be endless and the days were never going to be marred by any ugliness. I knew it was just an illusion though. Amara had eternity to wait. She could afford to be patient. Cassius' plan to flee the castle had afforded us some time, for Amara was going to have to try and find us. We just had to make as much use of that time as we possibly could.

Cassius and I would take long treks into the forest, exploring all the different regions of the world around us. He would sit on my back as I carried him through the valleys and across the rising hills. We even ventured towards mountains, climbing to a high altitude where the air was thin and cold, and where we could look across the land and feel like gods, all in search of the different herbs and plants needed for the portal spells. Some of them

were incredibly hard to find. Cassius had to describe them to me, and then I would have to peer in all the nooks and crannies of the world in order to find them. Sometimes I only had a scent to go on. I was impressed by the vault of knowledge that Cassius held within his mind. He must have forgotten more things than most people knew, if he forgot anything at all.

Every time we left, it reminded me of our lives in the castle; where we could do anything we wanted and never have to worry about a thing. We would often find a quiet, secluded place somewhere and make love. It could have been in a lush valley or a cozy cave, or even on the slope of a mountain, just to say that we had done it. He was glorious each and every time. I held his shuddering body close to mine and there was not an inch of his body that I was not intimately familiar with. These moments were beautiful, even though they did not last.

Perhaps that was why they were beautiful.

Every time we returned to the pack we were filled with trepidation, worried that Amara had found them in our absence and was waiting for our returning, standing there proudly wielding her sword while she was

surrounded by the corpses of wolves. I breathed a sigh of relief every time we returned to find that was not the case though. However, this constant threat she provided was a source of stress. It created a dull ache in the back of my skull and I couldn't sleep properly. Cassius was the same, tossing and turning as he was haunted by the things he had and had not done.

Although I had been upset that he hadn't told me about the tomb, I did not hold it against him. I could understand why he hadn't told me the truth, and he was right in that now it did not matter. But I hoped we would not need Amara's tomb. I wanted to get my hands on her again and this time make sure that she would not have a chance to escape. I wanted her to know that she had been defeated and that I was the one who had killed her.

The days were filled with wolves training. The watches were vigilant. There were some complaints from people who were tired already, although in truth they were more tired of the fact that they were going to have to do this for the foreseeable future without a break even if she never decided to attack this place. Brandon reminded them that if she never attacked then it was still

a good thing they remained vigilant, for if they slipped for one moment then it could cost them everything.

But nobody could be vigilant all the time. There was always a link in the chain that was the weakest, or one that buckled under stress, and so it was with the wolves. They trained hard, but training could not compensate for every weakness.

It was inevitable, we should have known, but the longer time went on without any sign of her the more we began to believe that we would have more time.

Then we heard a scream.

It was the middle of the night. The moon was full and gibbous. It should have been a good omen, but unfortunately that was not to be the case. Cassius and I bolted upright in bed. He was caught in the midst of slumber and was dazed. My senses were keen, and tiredness fled my body immediately as the rush of anger and adrenaline surged through me. We looked at each other for a moment, wondering if we had truly heard the sound or if it had just been something borne from our nightmares. We had both heard it though, and it was as doomful as the tolling of a bell.

We flung off the blankets and raced outside. Other wolves were already pouring out of their homes. I shifted, knowing what awaited us. I had no idea how many there were though. The air was filled with the sickly scent of ash and brimstone, but the vampires were notoriously elusive and I could not pin down how many there were. Cassius was behind me.

There wasn't time to do anything but fight.

I rounded a corner and saw her standing there, like a demon risen from hell. She wore a scarlet robe that billowed out around her, contrasting with her alabaster skin. The moonlight shone upon her, making her look ethereal. She wore a band of metal across her head, a subtle crown for one who usually liked ornate things. But there was nothing subtle about her sword or her cackle. As I saw her she was in the process of pulling out a sword from a body. Blood spurted out in a plume and splattered on the ground. She breathed it all in and licked some of the scarlet remnants from her blade, reveling in the dark chaos of it all. Fear lined my body and swam through every part of me. There was no escaping her, and she seemed more hellish than she had done before. I knew

that getting into a position to kill her this time was not going to be as easy as before.

“Stop your advance, otherwise you will lose your lives too, although if you would like to sacrifice yourself to my blade then you are more than welcome,” she called out in a rich, melodic tone. It sounded sweet and cloying, twisting between my ears. I had to fight away the instinct to listen to her. I looked down at her feet. There were a few wolves lying there, bodies sliced and severed by her sword. Blood pooled, making her look as though she was walking upon it. I felt sick to my stomach.

The wolves halted their advance, none of them wanting to give up their lives to her so easily.

“There is only one I want. Cassius. Bring him to me,” she called out, her words echoing through the wolves’ village. I gritted my teeth and twisted my neck to look back at Cassius. I wasn’t going to let her get anywhere near him. I charged forward, running past the stationary wolves, determined to make a blow count. In the distance I heard Cassius shout out towards me, telling me to stop, but it was too late. I didn’t care that

she was some vampire queen. She was still vulnerable. I had her in my paws once before. I could have her again.

As I approached I knew she recognized me. A smile twitched on her face as she braced herself, holding the sword in two hands, waiting to swing at me. I darted from side to side, trying to make it as hard for her to predict what was happening as possible.

But then my momentum was halted as something came in from the side and crashed into me, sending me veering away. Another vampire? No, I wasn't hurt. I looked around and saw my father, shaking his head. I growled at him, annoyed that he had interrupted my attack.

Amara laughed.

"Stop this," Brandon announced, walking forward, looking as though he held no fear within his eyes. Amara's laugh faded into a soft chuckle, and then it disappeared entirely. She regarded him with a cool look and arched her eyebrow. Her gaze ran up and down his body.

"Oh my, aren't you a handsome Alpha? I do love the drive and the passion of the young. I could make

good use of you,” she said, her words light and lilting.

“You’re not going to make use of any of us. You’re not welcome here Amara.”

Annoyance flickered in her eyes as he used her name.

“Then I shall leave presently, just as long as you give me Cassius.”

“I can’t do that. He’s under my protection. But we have no quarrel with you. You can leave now and this will be an end to things, but if you stay-”

“If I stay then all of you will end up like them,” she pointed the tip of her sword at the fallen wolves, and the threat in her voice was not mild. I pushed myself away from Dad and shifted back into my human form to join Brandon.

“He’s mine Amara. He’s given himself to me,” I cried out. Amara’s withering gaze turned towards me.

“You can believe that if you like, but he was mine long before you were even a twinkle in the sky. He has been mine all this time, and he will be mine again. Cassius, Cassius come out here my beautiful boy,” she

called out. The way she spoke about him rankled in my soul. How dare she try and claim him as hers.

“You should go back to wherever you came from Amara. Time has moved on. We’ve all moved on from your kind,” Brandon said, using his most commanding voice. He looked every inch an Alpha, just like his father.

“You can never move on from this war,” she spat, her face darkening. Her expression shimmered like ripples upon a lake. My hands tensed. I wondered if I could be quick enough to run up to her and find a point of weakness. If I was swift enough then perhaps I could tackle her and start attacking, but the blood-hued sword warned me away. With a flick of her wrist she could end all that I was. Just one vampire was as good as an army. They were such deadly creatures, and even after all this time they could elicit fear from those who they opposed. I could feel it seeping into the air from the wolves around us, and I knew Amara must have been able to sense it as well. She would have reveled in it, drinking it in like the sweetest nectar.

“Then attack us. Attack us and be done with it. Stop standing there and come and end this,” Brandon

challenged, shifting one of his legs back and getting ready to transform into a wolf. I knew what he was doing; he was hoping that Amara would let her rage get the better of her and rush forward into the fray against all these wolves, giving us the advantage again. But Amara had lived too long to make foolish mistakes like that. She knew exactly what Brandon was doing and wagged a finger in the air.

“Tsk, tsk, Alpha, do you really think I’m going to make that kind of mistake? I must admit if you had caught me shortly after my return I might well have taken you up on that offer, but I’ve had time to think and plan. You’ll have to do better than that to outwit me. But since I’m feeling in a generous mood I shall give you a choice. You can either give Cassius to me right now and I’ll leave, or I can cut my way through your little pack and leave this ground stained with your blood, and then I’ll take Cassius anyway. I’m going to give you a piece of advice; I always end up getting what I want one way or the other, so if you value the lives of your pack then you know what you have to do.”

I glanced towards Brandon. He couldn't have been thinking of doing it, could he?

“Cassius is under my protection,” Brandon said through gritted teeth. I wondered if he was beginning to regret making that decision. Perhaps Naomi had been right all along. Maybe Cassius and I should have just moved on to another place... but no. Amara would have followed our trail here somehow. She would have torn this place apart. There was no reasoning with her.

Amara sighed and for a moment her regret seemed genuine, but I knew it must have been false. “Then you have made your choice. You will fall like so many others have fallen before you, but I suppose you have your lies about the moon to comfort you, don't you? I'm sure right now you're thinking that you will be able to sit with your ancestors again in the great beyond,” an undercurrent of derisive laughter laced her words. “It's all so sweet how naïve you are. I should have expected nothing less from wolves though. Even after all this time you haven't gotten any smarter.”

Her hands curled around the hilt of her sword and her body prepared for an attack. I could see it coming,

and knew she was trying to rile us up, trying to make us lose focus. I had to keep telling myself that even though she was a vampire we still had a numerical advantage, and beating her wasn't such an impossible thing. We just had to get everything right and make sure every strike was true. I felt the wolf prowling within me, growling and snarling and ready to be unleashed. All the anger churned as though I was a volcano, and it was just about ready to erupt. I wasn't about to let her keep goading us like this, biding her time and controlling the flow of the moments. I had pinned her down once and I would do so again. She was not going to take my Cassius away from me.

I stepped forward and began to shift, crying out a great howl that would rally all the wolves to my cause. A lot of us might die, but I thought that if enough of us attacked then eventually she would be overwhelmed.

But then before I could move another muscle Cassius spoke.

"Wait!" he said. I turned just as I had been about to embrace my wolf. My eyes were already golden, my breath heavy. He strode from behind the line of wolves

that guarded him, so vulnerable. His steps were stilted and his words were halting. I could almost hear the rapid drumbeat of his heart from here.

“I can’t allow you to do this Amara,” he said.

She laid her eyes upon him. There was a whole swirl of emotions within her gaze. In a way I knew she loved him, although it was a perverse kind of love that was forged from all the dark impulses a person could have. She still believed she owned him, and I longed to disabuse her of that notion, but I feared that Cassius was about to do something foolish.

“You do not get to choose what I do. It’s time to return home Cassius.”

“And you’ll leave these people alone if I do so?”

Amara narrowed her eyes at him, as if trying to decide whether he was telling the truth or not. My breath caught in my throat, a choking thing that seemed to take the strength away from my knees.

“I shall.”

Cassius turned to the wolves, to me. He was speaking to all of us, but I knew his words were meant

for me alone.

“I want to thank you all for protecting me and offering me shelter. I was not deserving of such kindness, and yet you gave it to me anyway. I cannot in good conscience stay here and watch you lose your lives because of me. I have lived a long time, some would say too long, and I do not want to steal the opportunity away from any of you. Let me do this thing for you now. Too much blood has been spilled already. I have too much of it on my hands. Let me be the one who protects you,” he said.

“No...” I gasped, staggering forward. It felt as though I had been stabbed in the heart and all my strength was draining from me. Our eyes locked and I saw the watery sadness in his gaze. I reached out to him.

“I’m sorry Willow, but this is the only way to protect you all and I... I need to know. I need to know how she came back. I love you,” he said.

Amara then stood behind him and placed her hand on his shoulder, a gesture that made me sick to my stomach. I trembled with rage and shook my head, wanting to wrest the threads of destiny in my hands and

pull them taut, but instead they were slipping through my fingers.

“I told you he was mine, little wolf. He always has been, and he always will be,” Amara said in a sing song tone that turned into a mocking laugh, and that laugh would be lodged into my mind for the rest of my days. But I wasn’t about to let it end like this. I cried out again and lunged forward, shifting into a wolf as I did so. I reached out with my claws, extending them as far as they could as I thought that if I could just lay a paw on him then he might be able to stay. It wasn’t over. It didn’t need to end like this, it didn’t...

There was a burst of smoke and the smell of ash and brimstone filled the air. Amara and Cassius were gone. There was a void where they had stood. I turned back into my human form. My hand fell onto empty grass. It was still warm from where they had stood, but Cassius was no longer there. I collapsed on the ground and almost wasn’t aware of my father coming to cradle me in his arms. The world looked as though it was melting all around me, and there was a deep howl emerging from the pit of my stomach. It was the most

pitiful, painful thing I had ever heard and it was all coming from my broken soul.

Chapter Fifteen

Cassius

In a whisper of smoke we were back in the castle, just as it had happened centuries ago. Amara was still as impressive as she had always been, carrying herself with such confidence and grace. The title of King had never suited me well, I thought, and I had only ever been king of an empty castle. She, though, she had ruled over an army of vampires and had a regal air about her. I was just happy that we were greeted by an empty hallway, having been afraid that an army of vampires were going to greet me.

But it was just us two for the time being, and I bristled with fear. I knew well what she was capable of, but at least the wolves were safe. I had a faint hope that I would see Willow again, but only a faint one. Although Amara was angry with me, I didn't think that she would kill me. This gave me a chance, a slight chance, but a chance nonetheless.

She turned to face me and cupped my face in her hands. I was taller than her, but this didn't make her any less intimidating.

“Oh my sweet boy, what have they done to you?” she said as she kissed me on each cheek, looking dismayed.

“It was my choice,” I replied.

Her eye twitched. “You really rid yourself of the gift I gave you?”

“It was not a gift, it was a curse.”

She walked away from me and took her seat on the throne, laying her sword across her lap. The ruby gleamed as though it winked at me. “Even after all this time you still hold a grudge.”

“Vampires have long memories, you should know this.”

“Oh, I do Cassius, I do, and I have not forgotten what you did to me, to all of us. You turned on your own kind.”

“You were never my kind. I was just turned into this thing, and I could not let you go through with your plans. I could not let you conquer every world.”

She leaned back and looked unconcerned. “And where has that gotten you? By my estimation it allowed

you to enjoy a few hundred years of solitude here, until you welcomed that wolf bitch into my castle.”

I flinched as she referred to Willow like that, but I managed to control myself, breathing through the anger. I couldn't attack her. She'd slice through me like butter and it would all be over. If I ever hoped to see Willow again then I was going to have to be very careful indeed.

“I love her.”

Amara laughed as though anything I felt was a joke. “You know nothing of love Cassius. Vampires aren't capable of love. We just hunger.”

“Then I hunger for her.”

“You debase yourself by admitting these feelings for her. She is a wolf, and now you have made yourself into something lesser than what you were. I am disgusted by you. There was a time when I was proud of you Cassius, when you were my greatest creation. But now you have gone and turned into this,” she looked at me with derision and opened her palm, gesturing towards me with her slender fingers.

“I’m sorry to have disappointed you,” I said dryly. She sighed and shook her head.

“Well, at least we are together again. The world is back to being balanced.”

“And what do you have planned?”

“I’m going to pick up from where I left off. It was very clever of you to steal the book by the way. It kept me occupied here while I could have been busy doing other things, but I wanted to bring you back so you can see that you cannot stop me. I am inevitable, and this future I have planned has been in the making for centuries. Did you really think you would be able to stop it?”

“I thought so. How did you like your banishment by the way?”

Amara scowled. “It was worse than death, and only my bitter hatred for you kept me from losing my mind. I was floating in that void without anything to distract me, just the same thoughts rolling around and around in this endless spiral, but I was not going to allow it to consume me. They used to call you the butcher, didn’t they? You’re much worse to your own kind.”

“Maybe so, but it needed to be done. This vision of conquest you had isn’t healthy Amara. You need to let people live their lives. All you’re doing is condemning people to misery. You’re making people suffer, just as you suffered once. You’re no better than the people who did this to you in the first place.”

“Don’t you dare compare me to them,” she hissed, leaning forward. Her hands were like claws as they gripped the arms of the throne, and strands of hair fell around her face. I saw a glimpse of the madness, the same madness that had made me doubt her plans before. It had only gotten worse over time. “All I wish to do is liberate people and give them the strength to protect themselves. I want to make them all powerful, for when we are vampires nobody can hurt us.”

“There was a time when I thought you might be saved Amara. There were times when I even questioned what I did, wondering if I should have tried to reason with you or persuade you that what you were doing was wrong. But I see that there is no changing your mind.”

“Why would I change when I am right? It is only a simple matter of time now before I raise an army and

take my rightful place as queen of the vampires again. This castle shall be full as it once was, and from this throne I shall hold the entire cosmos in my hand.”

She spoke grandly, holding her hand out and then closing it into a fist, which was just about what she had planned for the world. I swallowed my fear, remembering what it was like to be around someone with such a deluded state of mind. The only problem was that she actually had the means and the drive to see her plans through to the end. And it was all my fault. I had missed something. I thought my plan had been flawless, but there was one chink in it, something I had not anticipated and I needed to know. It nagged and gnawed at me.

“Tell me then Amara, before you put this grand plan into action again, tell me how you came back.”

She wore a smug grin as she stared at me. “Did you really think I wasn’t going to have some plan in place to bring me back? You should have known me better than that Cassius, and it just goes to show how little you really know. You always did think you knew everything, but the

truth is you only ever knew what I had taught you, and some things I had kept for myself.”

“So tell me now then. You’ve won, apparently, so what does it really matter?”

“It was the sword,” she gazed down at the weapon, caressing the ruby. “I imbued this ruby with the power to pull my soul from another dimension should the moonlight ever touch it without me wielding it. It was like a beacon drawing me home, offering me another chance at life. For others this blade has meant death, but for me it’s been something else entirely.”

I felt sick. I thought back to the sword I had left on the throne in full view of the moonlight pouring in through a window. If I had just left it where it had been...

Amara laughed, pouring salt into my wounds. “You see Cassius? I am always one step ahead of you, which just goes to prove that I am the superior vampire, that I am your queen. I am the only one deserving of this title and you may have tricked me for a time, but the simple truth of the matter is that I shall always return, and I shall always emerge triumphant. Soon enough the whole

universe is going to know this fact as well, and we shall begin with your little wolf friends.”

“No, no you said that you were going to leave them alone. That was the agreement we had.”

“A Queen does not make agreements,” Amara stepped off her throne and came towards me. I backed away, holding up my hands, but her strides were long and she loomed before me, exposing the full horror of her vampiric features as her eyes became black and her teeth extended to sharp daggers. Her voice hissed as though a snake was leaping from her throat. “I shall tear them limb from limb and hold their beating hearts in my hand, squeezing them until there is nothing left. I will rid the world of them, the only question is whether I will start with your little bitch or end with her. Perhaps I will steal that pendent from her throat and leave her in a cage, after all, that was my property to begin with.”

“Leave her out of this.”

“No Cassius, I won’t. You need to be taught a lesson after your betrayal. Did you truly think you were going to get away with this with some mere punishment? I am not even going to be so easy on you and just make you watch.

I am going to make you take part in this. You are going to stand by me once again and you are going to become the vampire you once were. You are going to be just as devoted to me as you always were. I don't care about all this time we have missed out on. You are still mine. You have always been mine, it just seems like you need a reminder of this."

The words dripped from her mouth as she advanced towards me, the darkness threatening to swallow me up. I raised my hands to try and defend myself, even though it wouldn't do any good. The first time she had found me I had been desolate and desperate. I had wanted to find any way out of life, and I had clung to the branch that Amara offered me. I had taken her gift willingly, not knowing any better. But now I did. Now I knew to fight it off with everything I had. I tried to hit her, but she caught my wrists and pinned my arms back. Her grip was like a vice, her fingers digging into my skin. I shook as I put all my strength into fighting her away, but still it wasn't enough. I arched my neck back. Saliva dripped from her fangs and her hot breath washed over my neck. I closed my eyes, wishing for something to take me away, wishing for someone to

save me. I really wanted to open my eyes again and see Willow standing there, thrusting Amara's sword into her back, but there was nothing to stop Amara from getting what she wanted.

I howled in pain as I felt her fangs pierce my skin. I shuddered as she sucked, knowing that all I had worked for had been taken from me. She was making me hers again. She was taking away all that I had become, and as I felt her dark poison coursing through my veins I thought to myself that this answered the question as to whether the potion would protect me from becoming a vampire again. I felt it all being pulled away from me, all of this joy and freedom that I felt with Willow. I was being pushed back towards a fate that I had tried to escape, but perhaps there had never been any escaping from it. Perhaps Amara had been right and this was the only direction for my life. Maybe I always had been hers...

I closed my eyes and let the pain wash through me. I could feel myself changing inside. It was as though spiders were dancing in my blood. I coughed and choked, the strength being drained from me as she continued

sucking my blood, giving me back something that only she could, and I was just as I had been when I was first changed, helpless and powerless, with everything stripped from me.

And I wondered if Willow would ever find it in her heart to love me again.

Chapter Sixteen

Willow

“No... no! No we must find him. Where are they? Where has he gone!” I was in a rage. I beat the ground with my fists. My tears dripped down, and saliva trickled from my lips as sorrow welled within me. It twisted along with the rage and I felt as though I was going to explode. I clawed at the mud and the grass, somehow expecting to find them, even though they were gone. The scent of ash and brimstone was beginning to fade now, but the aching pain in my heart was always going to be there. My eyes stung and I felt so impotent. Even if I had changed into a wolf I wouldn't have been able to do anything. Amara had taken him, and I hadn't been able to do a thing about it.

Dad eventually dragged me away, as the other wolves looked at me with pity. I was sitting in his home when Brandon came to see us.

“Is she any better?” he asked my father. I glared at him with sharp eyes.

“I’m right here Brandon. I’m not an invalid,” I snapped.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a halting tone. “Listen, this isn’t what any of us wanted to happen, but it was his choice.”

“No, it wasn’t. He was doing this because he thought he had to, because he feels guilty about all the things he’s done over the years. He’s just trying to be a hero, but he didn’t have to be a hero. I would have protected him. I would have made sure that she wouldn’t have hurt him.”

“And how many wolves would have died in the process Willow? He did what he did because he wanted to save us all. He was a good man.”

It was scant comfort to hear Brandon admit this. “You’re speaking like he’s dead.”

There was a moment of awkward silence that hung in the air. “Willow...” Dad began in a soft tone, the kind of tone you always used to break bad news to someone.

“He’s not dead Dad. She wouldn’t just kill him like that. You don’t know what she’s like. She’s vindictive.

After everything Cassius did to her she'll want to make him pay. He's going to suffer, and I can't stand by and let that happen," I said, rising up and heading towards the door. Dad and Brandon turned towards me.

"What are you doing?" Dad asked.

"I'm going to get him. I'm going to get the book and I'm going to head back to the castle. That's where she would have taken him. I love him. I'm not just going to leave him there, and after what he did for you, you should come with me as well," I said. A fire had been lit within my heart and I wasn't about to let it die. I felt light headed and nauseous, and in truth I probably could have done with a good sleep, but when Cassius was in danger I couldn't afford to waste any time. I didn't even want to hear what Brandon and Dad had to say to try and dissuade me. I turned away from them and marched out of the house, but as I did I felt a lurching sensation within me and the world seemed to spin. The stars weren't where they were supposed to be, but then I realized that it wasn't the world that was all askew, it was me. Somehow I had fallen without realizing it and my head spun. Was this Amara's doing as well? Had she

found some insidious way to bring me to my knees? I needed to save Cassius. I needed...

My strength faltered as Dad and Brandon rushed out to help me. But the starless darkness closed in on me and there was nothing I could do to fight it. My eyelids grew heavy, as though they were weighed by anchors, and they shut out the world. Was this what death was like?

*

I opened my bleary, tired eyes. There was a sharp ache in my mind, as though someone was scraping a dagger through my skull. I was hungry and thirsty, and I ached all over. I blinked frantically in an effort to regain my vision, and when I did I saw that I was in bed. The mattress was soft underneath me. Sunlight drifted in through the window. My tongue felt swollen, but I thought this might have just been from the thirst. I made a small whimpering sound, and as soon as this happened Dad came bursting into the room.

“Oh Willow you’re awake,” the words rushed out of him in a frantic breath. “I was so worried. We all were. Here, you must be thirsty. I’ll go and get you some food.”

He poured a glass of water for me from a jug that sat upon the bedside table. I sipped it slowly, resisting the urge to gulp it down eagerly. The water trickled down my throat and soothed me. Dad came in with some bread and cheese, which I thought was about all I could muster. I nibbled on these things, continuing to sip water, and my strength slowly came back to me.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You collapsed. You’ve been unconscious for the better part of a week.”

“A week?” my voice rose sharply. “But Cassius...” I went to swing my legs out of the bed, but as soon as I made a sudden movement there was a swirling feeling in my mind, and I felt as though everything was all in the wrong direction again.

Dad placed a hand on my arm. “Willow, you need to listen to me. You need to forget about Cassius for the moment. I know it’s hard, but-”

“Forget about Cassius? You know I can’t do that. I love him!”

“I know you do, but you’re in no state to go chasing after him. What you’ve been through... you need to recover.”

“I don’t have time to recover Dad. I need to get back to Cassius. He needs me. He can’t fight back against Amara by himself. I need to help him. We promised we would always do everything we could to help each other. We’re meant to live our lives with each other Dad. This is my future I’m talking about. He’s the only man I have ever loved, the only one I want to love. He gave up immortality for me Dad. I owe him everything.”

“But he’s not the only one you owe,” Dad spoke slowly, trying to calm me down. I was breathing heavily, getting myself worked up and agitated. I looked into his eyes and tried to calm myself. “There’s something you need to know Willow. When you collapsed we had the healer look over you. At first I thought it was something as simple as you being overwhelmed with what had happened, but the healer found that something had changed within you. You’re going to have a baby. You’re going to be a mother.”

I couldn't quite believe that it was real at first. I blinked twice, then three times. Cassius and I had been talking about this, but I almost hadn't expected it to happen this quickly. I immediately reached down to my stomach, feeling across my womb. I couldn't tell any difference, but the healer must have been able to.

“So you see, you don't just have to think of Cassius now, you have to think of your child as well. I know this isn't how you wanted any of this to pan out, but he left a part of you with him and that counts for something. I don't think he'd want you to risk your child.”

There was a haze in my mind as I tried to reorient myself to this new information. In truth I didn't know what Cassius would have wanted.

“But I can't just leave him there,” I said weakly.

Dad wore a solemn expression. “Willow, Cassius made his choice. It might not have been the one you would have wanted him to make, but he made it all the same. Sometimes we just have to respect what people choose to do. You have to think about other things now. You're responsible for another life, a life that can't choose anything for itself yet, and sometimes that means

sacrifice. I don't know Cassius as well as you do, but he struck me as a man of honor and I think he did this so that you would be safe, and I'm sure if he knew you were with child then he would want the same for them as well."

"But... but it's not fair. This child isn't going to get to know its father."

"It will, through you. You're going to tell them all about Cassius because you're a good storyteller, just like your mother was. I know it's not the same, and I wish that I could do something else to help, to change things, but the child has to come first. It has to."

I felt sick inside. What he said made sense, but I almost didn't want it to be true. Every instinct I had told me that I had to go and find Cassius and bring him back so that our child could know it's father, but it was one thing to risk my own life, quite another to risk the life of the child. Anything I did now, I had to think about them too. It dawned on me that as much as I wanted a baby, I wasn't ready for it. Panic flared within me.

"I can't do this. I can't do this by myself," I said, shaking with nerves. Dad perched on the bed and

wrapped his arm around me, holding me tightly. I fell into him, shuddering and glad of his presence. He kept telling me that I wasn't alone, that I had him and Brandon and all the other wolves, but it wasn't the same. None of them were Cassius, my rock who had taught me to love and to appreciate myself, the man who had shown me so much of the world and had allowed me to embrace my wolf.

And now I had to leave him to die.

*

The healer had condemned me to bed for a while as I regained my strength. It was a combination of exhaustion and stress upon my body. Pregnancy and a fight against a vampire were not conducive to a relaxing life, so I rested. But all I could do was dwell on everything that had happened. Thoughts raged through my mind, stampeding like wildebeests as I was pulled in every direction. Every moment I stayed in bed it felt as though I was letting Cassius down. He was back there in the castle, no doubt being tortured by Amara. I knew that time worked differently there as well. How much time had passed for him? Had he forgotten about me already?

Was he upset that I hadn't come to rescue him? If he had known that he was a father then perhaps it would have been different, but there was no way for him to know.

Not unless I went to him.

Eventually I became well enough to walk outside. The warm air caressed my skin and the breeze tugged at my hair. The air was sweet, the world bright. It was a far cry from the broken, dying world that Cassius and I had inhabited, and yet I felt a longing for that place. I considered that castle my home, even though I had grown up in this village, because the most important parts of my life had happened there. It was where Cassius was, and sometimes I wondered if it would have been easier had Amara killed him right in front of me. At least then I would have known his suffering was over, and I did not have to be lost in this limbo of not knowing what had happened to him. It occurred to me that Amara may well have planned it to be exactly like this, wanting me to experience something similar to what Cassius had condemned her to.

I tried to move on. I tried to picture a world without Cassius, a life where I could be happy without him, but I

could not foresee this happening. There was a hole in my heart without him and it would never be filled again. I could live, I could smile, but it would all be tinged with a bittersweet feeling that he was not there to share the moments with me. Even raising my child would not be as fulfilling as it should have been.

Cassius had given up immortality for me. He had done so precisely because we wanted to have a family, and now he wasn't even going to enjoy the fruits of his sacrifice. We were supposed to have decades together and watch our love flow through time until it trickled away and we became whispers on the wind. Instead we had been cruelly taken from each other, and if he had died then I could accept that there was no coming back, but when I knew that he was still alive I felt awful for not going after him. We had made strong promises to each other, but were those rendered moot because of the changed circumstances?

Dad had said that Cassius had made his choice and I should respect that, but was it really a choice if he felt forced into it? He knew how dangerous Amara was, and he didn't want any wolf killed in his name. But that

didn't mean we should just let this be the end of it. Didn't we have a choice as well? Did my wishes not mean anything?

But then there's the child...

I found myself idly stroking my abdomen, trying to connect with this unknown life that was growing inside me, trying to think about what it might have wanted me to do. It was important to protect it, yes, but should I not try and set an example for it as well?

I thought long and hard, and eventually I went to see my father.

He was sitting with a book, looking pensive. As my shadow fell over him he looked up and caught my gaze.

"Dad, I need to speak with you, and I need you to listen," I said, hoping that this time he wouldn't turn me away as he had done before. His lips parted slightly, but then he thought better of speaking. He seemed to have learned from the past. He closed his book and showed me inside, closing the door behind us. I paced around the room, too nervous to sit down. I wrung my hands and tried to keep my voice calm, for the nerves were bubbling inside me.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

I decided there was no sense in trying to delay the inevitable. He was going to be angry with me no matter what, but I had to try and make him understand. “Dad, I’ve decided that I’m going to go and help Cassius.”

I thought he was going to erupt with anger, but instead he remained sitting and stared at me. This was somehow worse.

“I thought we agreed that you were going to stay here because it was safer for the baby?”

“No, that’s what you suggested. But I’ve been thinking about it and-”

“Willow, you do realize that you can’t just think about yourself anymore right?” he cut me off. I glared at him, my nerves being tinged with anger.

“Dad, I really need you to listen right now,” I said, and he took heed of my warning tone. “I get it, okay? I’ve been thinking about it a lot and I know on the face of it the sensible thing to do is to stay here where it’s safe and keep my baby protected. I can completely understand all your reasoning, and I even get the idea that Cassius

would want us to be safe as well. But the thing is that nobody gets to make a decision for me other than myself, and I know what you're going to say," I held up a hand to stop him before he could speak again, "I know that I have to think about this child, and I am. The thing is that I've been doing a lot of thinking. All I've been able to do while in bed is think. I've been thinking about the life that I'm going to have without Cassius and the stories I'm going to tell our child. When I get to this point in the story what am I going to tell them? What example am I going to set for them? I want them to know that their mother is strong and brave, and that they should always do everything they can to protect the people they love. I don't want them to think that I have forsaken their father. When they ask me if I could have gone to fight for him what I am going to tell them? When they say that they would have wanted me to take the risk, how can I explain to them that I was just trying to put their best interest at heart? I can see them resenting me for it. I can see them blaming me for the fact that they never knew their father, and that is not a burden that I want to bear."

"But it doesn't have to be like that Willow. Those aren't the only options. They might be grateful. I'm sure

they'll understand. You can't decide what to do based on what you think your unborn child is going to think in ten or fifteen years."

When I speak my words come out in a terse and anguished tone. "That's not the point I'm making Dad. I'm trying to say that I want to be true to myself. I don't want to change myself, and I don't want to have to second guess my actions. When I tell this story to my child I want to make sure they know that I did all I could, because that's the type of person I am. I promised Cassius that I would always fight for him and always protect him, and I'm never going to be happy unless I go after him."

Dad stroked his jaw and looked surly. "Okay, so say you do this, then what happens? What if Amara takes you and kills you, or worse, turns you into one of them? What if Cassius is already dead and she has laid a trap for you? There are so many ways that this can go wrong Willow. I've only just got you back. I don't want to lose you again."

"I've thought about it Dad, believe me. I know it's a risk. I know that it seems like the wrong play, but I just

can't live with myself if I leave Cassius there. I know he would do the same for me, and if I'm going to raise a child then I want them to be like this as well. I have to believe that they would want to do everything possible to find their father. So I'm going back to the castle. I know the chances of defeating Amara are slim, but they're not impossible. I can do this. I can bring Cassius back."

He stared at me for a long time. I thought he was going to chastise me for being stupid. I thought he was going to tie me to the bed and keep me in the camp until the baby was born.

I was wrong.

He wore a grim expression as he nodded. "Then I suggest that we find Brandon," he said, and we walked out of the house. I had to have much the same conversation with Brandon, who was about as enthused as my father was. I don't know if it was because Brandon felt as though he owed something to me, or because he had officially taken Cassius under his protection, but he agreed to bring a group of wolves with us. The castle was like a weapon for Amara and our chances of survival were slim, but I had to try and get Cassius back.

“Forgive me,” I whispered as I placed my hand on my abdomen. I truly hoped that I would not end up regretting this, and that I would not be casting my whole future into the flames.

Chapter Seventeen

Cassius

“Now fling it off,” Amara said.

“Yes, my queen,” I replied. The words scratched against the back of my throat. They were like an old reflex that had been lurking under the surface of my mind. I held the vials and the books over the edge of the castle. Gargoyles looked down at us, their stony glares judging me. I did not hear their whispers again though. The sky around us was bleak and grey, the pale sun hiding behind the perennial mists that shrouded the world. I hesitated before I opened my fingers, letting the vials drop to the abyss below. The books followed as well, the spines opening and the pages fluttering as though the wind was perusing the pages. They plummeted down and quickly disappeared into the darkness. Amara came to stand beside me, putting a hand on my shoulder. For a moment I thought she was going to push me over.

If only things could have ended that easily. Sadly, she had more plans for me.

“See, now isn’t that better? Now we don’t ever have to be troubled with that pesky potion again. It was a mistake for you to ever drink it, wasn’t it? No other vampire shall have to slake their thirst with that. Now no vampire can ever rid themselves of this gift, and you will never be mortal again.”

“No, my lady,” I said through gritted teeth. I had no doubt that she could see the sorrow in my eyes, and she likely reveled in it. Now even if I did reunite with Willow again I would be forced to live an eternal life... but that possibility seemed distant. I was sure the next time I saw Willow it would be as Amara marched me and the rest of her army (which was thankfully yet to be raised) towards her village, ready to soak the land in the blood of wolves. I shuddered at the thought, but I was glad that Willow had stayed away from the castle. I had worried that she might try and mount a rescue mission. All I wanted was for her to enjoy her life. Perhaps I could delay Amara enough so that by the time we attacked the village Willow would be dead. That might make it a little easier to stomach... just a little.

I hated what had become of me. Amara knew she had me wrapped around her little finger. There was nothing I could do to her now, not unless she let her guard down, and I wasn't anticipating that to happen anytime soon. I had found my hell, and I found myself wishing for death to come to me.

“Now, are there any other relics or potions that we should get rid of? You've had enough time to peruse the library, haven't you?” she asked.

“I can't think of anything, my lady.”

“Hmm, well, if you do then you be sure to bring it to my attention. It was a noble cause to try and create a vault of all the knowledge of the world, but I don't think we need to keep anything that could cause us harm. We vampires need to look out for each other. But now that this has been settled I believe it's time for us to think about the future. We need to raise an army. It's going to be difficult without the book you stole, and I still haven't forgiven you for that by the way. It was hard enough to track you to that infernal world. I am going to need you to sire new vampires as well. We need to work as quickly as possible if we are to achieve the goals I have set for us.

I have wasted too much time already. We must leave this world and find new vampires.”

“Are you sure there is no reasoning with you?” I asked. I received a slap for my troubles. Pain stung upon my cheek. If she had done this while I had still been a human she would have left a sunken hole in my face.

“Do not dare to try and lecture me on the ways of peace. I have seen the true nature of the world express itself again and again and again. There is only one way forward, and that is to be the strongest, to impose your will upon others, otherwise they will only try and impose their will upon you. The weak get crushed, and I will never be weak.”

Again. I heard the implied word at the end of her sentence. So much of who she had become was tied up in who she had been and what had been done to her. She had not been able to move on from it, and instead wanted to punish the world for the crimes that had been committed against her. I decided not to comment on it, having had enough punishment for the day. If she flew into a rage then she might well have thrown me off the edge of the castle and down into the chasm below. I had

always been afraid of death, and that was still the case now.

But I had to try and think of some way to delay her. I couldn't allow her to build this army, because once it became established it was going to be impossible to stop. The world would be sent into a dark age again as vampires swarmed across the land, all fueled by her ruthlessness and rage. Perhaps I could find someone to help, perhaps some of the victims would not be as helpless as she believed.

"Follow me," she said, turning on her heels and walking back into the castle. I did as she obeyed, my footsteps just behind hers. The sword hung from her hip. It served to remind me of my failure, as well as the fact that if she was attacked she had a way to defend herself. Even though she turned her back on me I knew she was not defenseless. If I lunged forward and tried to kill her she would be able to turn the tables on me. I might have shown great prowess in violence and murder during my life, but my powers were still secondary to hers. She was the one above all, and I knew I could not defeat her in a straight fight. I did have a plan, but it required a specific

set of circumstances, and I wasn't sure such a situation was going to present itself.

As we walked through the castle my heart sank. Everywhere I looked I saw reminders of Willow. I remembered how I had first shown her the potion she could drink to nourish herself, as this barren world did not offer much in the way of delicious food. I thought about the music I created and her voice, a rich voice that soared through the castle and for a moment made everything glow brightly. I thought of us dancing, kissing, of falling into a bed with her and having her show me something entirely new after all these years.

“In time you will forget all that has come before,” Amara said, interrupting my thoughts. I winced a little, fearing for a moment that she might have had a window into my mind, but it just happened to be coincidence that she had spoken of something I had been thinking about. “It will be like a bad dream, fading into the mists of time. You do realize that the love you thought you had for this wolf was born from loneliness, yes? Vampires and wolves do not mix at all. There has never been a pairing of them in all the years.”

“Of course, my lady,” I said.

“It’s going to be well Cassius. Things are going to be as they should be. There is nothing you need to worry about. You shall see the world as it was always meant to be, with strong vampires spreading across all the continents of the world. It’s funny isn’t it, to think about all the people out there who are living their lives without knowing what’s coming next? That is real power you know, to bend fate into what you want it to be. That is what everyone else lacks.”

I nodded and swallowed a lump that had appeared in my throat. These words reminded me of a conversation we had had before. Not long after that I poisoned her and banished her and the other vampires. I did not have a recourse to do so this time. There was nothing I could do to stop her, so I stood there, mute and helpless. I wondered if Amara remembered the same thing, but if she did she did not make a mention of it.

“Cassius,” she began, but then her head tilted to the side. Her eyebrow arched. I sensed it too. My heart sank. Tension ran through my body. Amara reconsidered what she had been about to say and wore a wry smile. “It

seems we have a guest. Why don't you greet her and make her feel welcome."

Amara patted me on the shoulder. I was crestfallen. Why had Willow come here now? Why had she put herself in danger for me? I trudged away, glancing at the walls that had ears and eyes, knowing there could be no secrets in this castle, not from Amara. And now I was about to have a fatal reunion with the woman I loved, a woman who may not be long for this world.

Chapter Eighteen

Willow

I felt nauseous after having been through the portal. A bitter taste lingered in my throat and the world spun a little as I crawled out of the pool and got to my feet. I looked up at the familiar room. The only thing that was different was that there was no book on the pedestal. I hadn't brought it with me for fear that Amara might steal it. This was something of a one way trip; either Cassius and I would return (and he would know how) or I would meet my end here, and I would have the entire afterlife to rue my decision.

As I got to my feet I looked around, expecting the others to follow straight after me. I waited and waited, but there was nobody. I went back to the pool, staring into its dark depths, beating my fists against it, but I only succeeded in splashing some water about. I rocked back and clenched my fists in frustration, gritting my teeth. Somehow Amara was responsible for this. It had always been a long shot, thinking that we could come into this castle without being detected, but it was the only play I

had. I just hoped that my Dad, Brandon, and the other wolves were okay.

Since there wasn't anything I could do for them now, I had to try and put them out of my mind. I was here, alone, and Cassius depended on me. I looked to the doorway, knowing that I only had a short amount of time before Amara came to find me. I wondered if she would try to play with me first, or if she would just try and end it as quickly as possible. I stepped forward and began to embrace my wolf, knowing that I would have to count on her if I was to make it out of here alive. I tested the cord upon which my pendant hung. It was strong, and would not break easily. Amara had almost torn it from my neck before. I was not about to let that happen again.

I then caught the scent of a vampire in the air. I braced myself for battle, but it was not Amara who entered the room.

"No," I gasped as I saw him, changed into what he had been when we had first met. His skin was pale, the spark in his eyes faded, his clothes darker than before. He was a vampire again. "Cassius... what has she done to you?" my voice ached with emotion.

He gave me a wan smile. “What she did before. I am a vampire again,” he said.

My heart broke for him. After everything we had been through to make him mortal she had just undone it as easily as cutting a sword through a ribbon. Breath escaped my lungs for a moment, but I rushed towards him, clasping his hands.

“It’s okay Cassius. This doesn’t matter. We can still get through this. We can find a way to defeat her. I’m so glad you’re alive. There’s so much I have to tell you. I’m-”

“Not welcome here,” Amara said, striding casually up the stairs behind Cassius. I felt him go rigid with tension at her appearance. He took his hands away from mine. Amara draped her hands across his shoulders and gave me a withering look. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Anger boiled inside me. “What have you done with the others?” I glared at her, my hands clenching into fists. The wolf was pressing under my skin now, eager to break free and resume our fight. Amara acted as though we were having a friendly chat.

“Oh, it’s a simple protection spell to block any unwanted visitors from coming through. You only made

it because of that pendant. It belongs here you see,” she said.

“It’s mine,” I growled defensively, almost daring her to try and take it.

She waved a hand dismissively in the air. “Oh don’t you worry Willow, I’m not going to take that trinket from you. I have no use for it myself, of course, no, since you are here I’d much rather just take your life.”

She spoke about it as though it was just a mundane thing.

“No, you can’t. I won’t let you. Cassius, I came here to rescue you. We can still do this. We can still beat her,” I said desperately.

Amara just laughed. “It’s been a long time since I have met someone so naïve, but I suppose that is always a trait your people have had. I think it’s time for us to be done with this. We have plans to accomplish, and it’s not going to be possible with you hanging around. I think the best thing to do is to kill her, isn’t that right Cassius?”

He bowed his head. “Yes, my lady,” he said, and that was the moment that I knew I had truly lost him. He

was a loyal servant again. Somehow she had twisted his mind or cast some gruesome spell on him, making him act this way. Was there anything I could say to change his mind? One thing, perhaps, but I dared not reveal the truth about our child in front of Amara. She might try and take it for herself. The last thing I would ever want for our child was to be raised as Amara's. Perhaps it was better that I should die.

And there it was, my grand plan to save Cassius foiled in the first instance. There was no surprise to turn to my advantage. If I attacked then Amara would just defend herself, and she might even have enough control over Cassius to make him join the fight as well. I did not want to chance that, for if I fought him then I might as well be dead. I should have listened to my father. I hated myself for letting down my child. I just thought... I thought there had been a chance. I never realized it would all end like this. This wasn't how Cassius and I were supposed to end up. We were in love... but maybe all this time love hadn't been enough.

"Take her to the edge of the castle and fling her off the side. We do not have the time to make an example of

her. Once we are done with her we shall return to her village and make slaves of her pack. We shall turn them into our willing servants and they shall help us conquer the world. This will be the end of the wolves and the rise of the vampires. The war shall finally be at an end, and there can only be one victor,” she spoke like a mad tyrant and I wasn’t sure I had ever truly known fear until that moment. I stared at Cassius, who averted his gaze from me.

“Perhaps, my lady, it might be more fitting if we took her to the tombs. She always had a dislike of that place,” Cassius said.

Amara considered the matter for a moment as I shuddered. “Ah yes, perhaps that would indeed be more poetic. There are plenty of tombs down there, and there will be more dead to come. We can line the tombs with the bodies of our victims. Perhaps it would be better to keep them as trophies rather than letting them fall into the abyss.”

I shuddered as Amara drew her sword and pointed it directly at me.

“Walk,” she said. I, like Cassius, had no choice but to obey.

*

We left the stone walls of the castle and entered the tunnels that had been carved into the mountain the castle had been built upon. The darkness consumed us. The twisting tunnels were cold, and I was filled with the eerie sense of dread that had come into my heart before. I kept waiting for an opportunity to attack, but none presented itself.

The tunnels opened into a wide cavern. Pillars of stone held up the ceiling. Stalagmites jutted out like daggers, and shadows lurked all around. If there was one place in all the world that was fitting for a vampire, it was this one. Rows of tombs stretched out as far as the eye could see. Some were simple stone ones, others more ornate. I had first been in here chasing a clue that could reveal Cassius’ secret. He had been lying to me then, and even now he kept secrets. It was only recently that I had discovered the truth about these tombs, how it was the only way to kill...

As the thought entered my mind my heart skipped a beat and my breath caught in my throat. I glanced towards Cassius, who still looked like a dutiful servant. But was he really this way, or was this just a part he was playing in order to lure Amara down here? I wanted to believe that our love was strong enough to endure him being turned into a vampire, but I was afraid that it was just wishful thinking on my part. I was afraid of looking at him for too long in case Amara should suspect anything, but even if he had truly changed, this was still my best chance of killing her.

I just had to wait for a signal, any signal.

Chapter Nineteen

Cassius

Had she seen the look in my eyes? Did she understand what I was trying to do? It felt awful having to shun Willow and not welcome her into my arms, but this plan was only going to work if Amara believed I was truly hers. It was always easier to make someone believe what they wanted to believe, and that was what I was counting on with Amara. However, I feared that Willow might not understand that I was trying to deceive the vampire queen, and there was no chance for us to exchange a secret message. I had to hope and pray that she would understand.

I had been worried that Amara would see through my suggestion, but she had been eager to bring Willow down into the tombs.

“Now end it Cassius. I want you to choose a tomb for her, some simple thing that is never going to be used,” Amara said.

“Perhaps we could use your tomb for her my lady. It’s not as though you are ever going to need it. It would

be a strong statement to condemn her into your tomb,” I tried to keep my voice as even as possible. It was easier to do as a vampire. As a human I would have been shaking with nerves, and most likely would have given the game away. So far Amara hadn’t noticed that anything was amiss.

She turned towards her tomb and wore a pensive expression, as any vampire should. She reached out and leaned against the high tombstone that was decorated with rubies, and the ornate inscription that had been carved into stone.

“It has been a long time since I have seen this. I never thought there could be a fate worse than death until you condemned me to that infernal limbo. But you are right, I shall never die. I can’t. I’m too valuable to the cause, I know too many things. If you couldn’t kill me then what chance does anyone else have? Yes... yes,” she turned her back to the tomb and faced Willow. “I want to come down here and look upon your face for eternity. I will always remember this sweet victory, and how pitiful you were. You thought you could defeat me, but I hope now you see that you never stood a chance. Your love

was nothing compared to the power of the vampire's bite, and you will die knowing that the world will be consumed by darkness. There is no hope for anything that you value."

I pulled the lid off the tomb as she spoke, opening the gaping darkness. "It's ready," I said, looking over Amara's shoulder towards Willow. I tried to communicate everything I could into that gaze, and if our love was worth anything then she had to see the meaning in my eyes. This was our one chance, because if it failed then Willow would be dead and I would be a broken man, and what would be left for me other than to break the world again?

But Willow did see. Before Amara could do anything, Willow lunged forward and embraced the wolf. Her momentum carried her like a spear and she clashed against Amara, sending her reeling back. Amara lost her balance. Her arms wheeled around her as she tried to fight gravity, but although she was a powerful vampire she could not do everything. I reached up and yanked on her hair, dragging her down into the pit that she had built for herself. Willow reached down, sweeping low to

take away Amara's legs. Amara fell back and collapsed into the pit. As she realized what was happening she shifted into a bat. Smoke burst out of her and she started to fly away. I grabbed hold of the lid and started to drag it. Stone scraped against stone, but there was still a crack and Amara was going to escape again... but then Willow's great paw smashed through the air and caught Amara, swatting her back into the tomb. Amara was thrown off course and I managed to pull the lid across her tomb, locking it into place.

I fell back, stunned that it had actually worked. I was just waiting for something else to go wrong now, for her to find some other way to escape. There was a flap of wings and then the beating of fists. The tomb shook as she tried everything she could to get out of there. She even tried to scrape her sword against it, but nothing would work. Then I heard a muffled scream emerge, a scream that soon went silent, and then there was nothing more.

I turned and looked at Willow, who now shifted back into her human form.

"Is it over?" she asked.

“I... I think so,” I said.

“So all along you planned this?”

“I thought it was the only way. I just had no idea how to get her into the tomb without her becoming suspicious. When you arrived I saw an opportunity, but I couldn’t tell you in case she learned the truth. If she realized that I was trying to give you a hint then she never would have come down here. She would have punished us both.”

Willow nodded. “I’m glad you kept it a secret, although you gave me a damn good scare.” I crawled over to her and clasped her hands. She pressed her body against me and relief coursed through my body. We shuddered now that it was all over, and I never thought I could feel this good in a place such as this.

“Did you really think I was hers?”

“I didn’t know what to think,” she admitted.

“You should know that I could never lose sight of what is important to me so easily.”

“But she... she turned you again,” Willow said, her voice faltering.

I nodded slowly. “Yes, she did. It was practically the first thing she did when we returned. I suppose she wanted to make sure I would be tortured for eternity. I think she thought that if she had to suffer for so long then I should have to suffer as well.”

“I’m sorry Cassius. It looks like you’re going to have to drink that poison again,” she said, half joking. I offered her a weak smile.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to be possible Willow. She made me throw the vials that remained away, as well as the books with the recipe. I’m afraid I’m stuck like this.”

“Oh,” she gasped, raising her hand to her mouth. I hugged her tightly, feeling as though I let her down somehow.

“I’m so sorry Willow. I know that this isn’t what you wanted. I know we tried to fight against this and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry that I’m not going to be able to give you a child,” as I said this I noticed her twitching. She pulled away from me, wiping stray tears from her eyes.

“I’m not crying because of that Cassius. I’m crying because even though we beat Amara she still managed to

take something away from us. We're not going to be able to grow old together now. You're going to be like this for the rest of your life and I'm going to have to leave you. It's just... I had gotten used to the life we wanted to live together."

"I know, me too, but if there's one thing we should have learned it's that we're never going to be able to live the exact life we want. But look at it this way, at least we're together again. We could have lost each other forever. I wasn't ready for that."

"Then why did you go off with her?" she asked. Her voice was filled with bitterness. There were complicated emotions running through each of us.

"Because I thought it was my only chance to keep you all safe. I've done a lot of bad things in my life Willow, and for once I just wanted to do something good. I wanted you to be proud of me, but I have to admit that I'm glad you came back here."

"Good, because I have some news as well, and I think you're going to be happy about it," she said, and then elaborated. As I listened my eyes widened and my heart leaped in my chest. I felt elation the likes of which I

had never known before, and I couldn't quite believe that what she was saying was true.

But it was.

I was going to be a father. "I guess I made my time as a mortal count," I remarked, a dazed look on my face.

"I guess you did," she chuckled, and then nuzzled her head against mine. It was easy for us to lose sight of the anguish that we had experienced at being apart from each other. I took her in my arms and kissed her madly, before I reached down to her abdomen and felt the part of her where life was growing. She peppered me with kisses. I felt the salt from her tears rushing down her cheeks.

"It's finally happened," she whispered. "We're going to be a family."

"Yes, we are, and now we truly don't have any vampires to worry about. Our child is not going to be brought up in a world defined by war," I said.

Willow drew back at this and looked around. "But she is going to have to know what vampires are, and she's going to have to grow up even when you're not

growing older. One day you're going to have to watch her grow old and die as well. Cassius... you're going to have to live through our entire family tree. One day you'll be alone again."

I rose from our sitting position and walked among the tombs, glancing back just once to check that Amara's tomb was still sealed. Given her determination to survive I knew I was going to have to check her tomb routinely, despite being confident that death had come upon her. I then moved to my own tomb, brushing my fingers along the plain stone. It was cold to the touch, like death itself.

"I won't Willow, because the moment you die I will come here and I will seal myself in my tomb," I said in a hollow voice.

"But I don't understand. If that was possible all this time then why did you not just agree to do that in the first place?" she asked.

I smirked. "Because I was afraid Willow. I have always been afraid to die. That's one of the reasons why I wanted to become a musician in the first place. I wanted to leave something of myself behind. I wanted people to remember me, because I thought the only way to live

forever was through art. And then the longer I lived the more difficult it became to let go. I didn't think I would ever be able to willingly invite death to me, I thought I would always turn away at the last, and so I could not trust myself to make that promise to you. I thought the only way I would ever die was if I had no choice. But I can promise you now that the moment you leave my life I will come here and I will say farewell, and I will give myself to the endless sleep that beckons us all. I will not live without you, because there can be no living without you. But I hope that it is many years until then, because we still have a great many things to accomplish.”

“Yes, we do,” she rose behind me and took my head. She brought me in for a kiss, and it was as though the sun spread through my body. “And before we return to the village I want to do one last thing...”

Chapter Twenty

Willow

We would never come here again, of that I was certain. Before we left I wanted to enjoy a memory of the life we had been able to live together, without interruption, without intrusion. I led him through the castle rushing through the hallways. I surged forward as a wolf, while he flew as a bat. We ended up in our bed chamber. The familiar mattress creaked as the bleak light passed through the window. I wasted no time in stripping myself of everything but the pendant. His hands were upon me eagerly, his lips brushing against my collar bone and his hands running across my supple skin. I groaned as he held my breasts, and I felt his arousal pressing against me. I reached back, twisting my head, searching for his lips. He brushed the hair away from my face and then we tumbled down in a mess of limbs, continually searching for each other, always yearning for more.

He was on top of me and I pulled his clothes away, revealing his naked skin. I kissed and licked him, breathing in his scent, needing all of him inside me. We

rolled about. I gathered his hands in mine and sucked on his fingers before plunging them down between us, guiding him towards the parts of me that were most intimate and sensitive. Bursts of pleasure rolled through me and a smile widened on my face as I gave myself to these sensations. My body arched as he brought his fingers back and forth, fanning flames that swept through me like the breath of a dragon. The inferno crackled and reached into the deepest parts of me. Sweat prickled on my skin and trickled all over me, leaving me a glistening mess. I twisted and writhed as this exquisite delight careened through me. I swam in ecstasy and clung to his body as he slid down me, his tongue joining his fingers in this beautiful dance that caused orgasm after orgasm to spin through me. It was as though he wove gold from ordinary thread, and I was shining as brightly as a star.

I dragged my nails across his skin and heard him wince with pain. The bestial, feral part of me curled out like plumes of smoke and left me hollow, yet there always seemed to be more that resided within me. I groaned and whimpered as my head lolled from side to side. He kissed me and licked me and teased me, filling

me with all this tormented delight that was so sweet it was intoxicating and addictive. I wanted more, I wanted it all, and I wanted it from him.

I pulled him away, digging my fingers through his hair. I kissed him, rolling him onto his back. His lips burned with the flames he had scorched me with. Damp, liquid heat simmered on my thighs and slipped along his lips. His breath was lost as I fell between his thighs and began making love to him with my mouth. I spread my hands all along his body, feeling the angles of his muscles and the glory of his expansive body. He was so masculine, so broad and strong and everything that I wanted from a man. He lay in my mouth, my tongue wrapping around him, my lips sucking gently, back and forth as strands of my hair caressed his thighs and stomach. He groaned and grunted as we shared this passion, and I brought him to the breaking point before he grabbed a fistful of my hair and twisted me around. I smiled, loving when he got a little rough with me. He pushed me to the edge of the bed and hung me off half way, my arms and head dangling over the side, my breasts open to be groped by him. He came over me like a shadow, holding the side of the bed, plunging himself

inside me. I felt his hardness, his arousal slam into me and as he thrust all the blood rushed to my head, making me feel exhilarated and delirious. The world had truly turned upside down because of him and I was being left breathless. I wrapped my legs around him, enjoying the ride and the danger of almost falling off the bed and crashing to the floor.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tightly, watching as he buried his head in my breasts and kissed the soft skin, his tongue running in between my cleavage. His hips moved like pistons and between the shadows of our bodies I could see him entering me again and again, the point where our bodies became one, this hallowed union that had been shared by us so many times before, and yet was always so intense, as though a star had burst within us and was coating us with its celestial heat. I pulled my head up and pressed my forehead against his. I stole a kiss as our breaths swirled together, our bodies and essences coming closer and closer until we were truly one being. I could feel an echo of his thoughts within me, and I knew that he would feel the same of me. I couldn't even tell the difference between our ecstatic moans. They came at the same time,

at the same rhythm, and we shuddered with the same kind of intensity as the orgasmic feelings were released within us. They came pouring out, sweet and true and clear, rendering us mute and breathless.

And then we were still.

I rolled back into the middle of the bed, the blanket clinging to my body. He was beside me, handsome as ever.

“You know it’s never going to be like this again,” I whispered.

“It’s not?” he asked with an arched eyebrow, a playful look in his eyes.

“I mean, it’s going to be that good again, but it’s not going to be like this. We won’t be able to just disappear and do this whenever we want. We won’t have a whole castle to ourselves.”

“No, we won’t, but that isn’t necessarily a bad thing. After all, this child of ours is going to have a wolf inside it and it’s only natural for a wolf to grow up inside a pack. I wouldn’t want to deny that for them. Besides, I think I’ve spent enough of my life alone. It’s time to try something

different, and your pack isn't so bad. I just hope they're going to welcome me now that I'm back to being a vampire."

"I'm sure I can talk them around. I think they're going to want some assurances that no more vampires are going to emerge though. Nobody should have to live in fear all their lives."

"I suppose they will," Cassius said. He had a thoughtful look on his face and I wondered what he was planning, but for now I didn't ask. It was enough for me to know that I was with the man I loved, and that our future was going to be tied together. It may not have been exactly the way I wanted things to shake out, but I was still with him, and we were still going to have a baby together. And being in the pack wasn't going to be such a bad thing. I would make sure that our child had a better time of it than I did, of course.

Chapter Twenty One

Cassius

Willow and I stood in the portal room. I remembered the spell to get back to her pack. That was etched into my heart. I stood at the window, looking out upon this world for the final time.

“I have spent years thinking about this moment, but I wasn’t sure it would actually arrive,” I said.

“Are you sure you want to leave? If it’s going to be too difficult...”

I turned away from the grey sky outside and shook my head. “Don’t be silly. I have spent too much time in this world. It was a prison for me, and it is time for something new. There are too many bad memories here.”

“But some good ones too,” she said, as she took my hand.

I smiled at her and kissed her. “Yes, definitely some good ones. But it is time to make some good ones elsewhere, good ones where we don’t need to be encumbered by the past.”

“It is a bit of a shame to see a lot of that knowledge disappear though. I know you’ve salvaged some of it, but there’s a lot of history within these walls.”

“Some history needs to be forgotten, I think, and people seem to be getting on alright without it. Besides, the only history we need to think about is the one we are going to create together. I’m ready to go, if you are?”

Willow nodded.

We stood at the edge of the pool. I spoke the words to activate the spell, and the pool shimmered with arcane energy. There was just one thing left to do now before we left. I looked to the roof and spoke another spell. As a vampire my connection to this castle had been restored, and there was one destructive spell that was supposed to be used only in the most dire of emergencies, when the castle had been overrun by enemies and there was no hope of vampires emerging victorious.

I spoke the words with a heavy heart, knowing what it meant. For better or worse this place had been my home far longer than anything else. Most of it had been alone, true, but it was still an important part of my history. I had also fallen in love here, and I would not

have had the life I had now if it wasn't for Willow and I having this sanctuary where we could be alone. But, like everything else, it needed to have an ending. It could not stand forever. It had taken me too long to learn this lesson.

The old walls began to shake and crumble. Dust was shaken loose from between the stones, and it felt as though thunder emerged from the very heart of the castle. This fortress that had stood for thousands of years would now be destroyed by the last vampire king, and the stones would fall down and block the tombs below. It would be rubble, and soon enough this dying world would take its last breath and everything would be gone completely, and my last act here was an act of destruction. Willow and I stepped through the portal as the castle collapsed, falling into ruin, and I knew there was no going back.

*

We emerged in a clearing, surrounded by chests of books, some relics, and my tomb.

Peter and Brandon came rushing up to us, hugging Willow tightly.

“What happened? We tried to get through, but every time it was as though something was pushing us back. When you didn’t return we thought the worst,” Peter said, not letting go of Willow. Brandon then looked at me.

“You’ve looked better,” he said dryly.

I pursed my lips and nodded. “It’s all over now,” I said. “Amara has been dealt with, and I destroyed the castle. I just brought a few mementoes with me,” I added, looking at the things we had sent through the portal before us.

“I was wondering what these were,” Brandon said. My gaze was drawn towards the tomb, knowing that one day my fate was going to be sealed within it. There was nothing I could do to escape that now. I had promised Willow that I would leave this life for her. I had already invited death to me, and he would make sure he was there to fulfil my promise when the day came. There was a sense of relief in my soul. I suppose much of the anguish came from worrying about when it was going to happen, but now that I had actually made the decision it

seemed more natural, and it wasn't something that I had to let consume me.

He ordered some wolves to come and help us carry these things back. I warned them to be careful with the tomb. More time had passed here than had back in the other world. Willow was welcomed back with open arms, and while some people were a little wary of me given my appearance, they had not forgotten the sacrifice I had made in leaving with Amara so that a battle could be avoided. My reputation was finally being healed.

We headed to our small house. I knew that something was going to have to be done about this, but then we walked passed it. I was confused. Peter then led us to his house. I thought this was going to be a little crowded, before Peter revealed that he was going to swap houses with us. He said that we were going to need the bigger space, and he said that Jessie would be happy for us to have this place as well. He and Willow apologized to each other, and I assumed that there had been some arguments about whether she should come and rescue me or not. I can't imagine Peter would have approved of it, especially not when she was carrying a child. Frankly I

didn't know if I approved of it as well, but I was hardly going to argue the point now. I was just glad to be back with her. They seemed to be on better terms now though, and were not eager to fall into an argument again.

Eventually they moved off. Willow and I were in our new home. A vampire was going to make his future among a pack of wolves. It was a strange story, perhaps the strangest one ever told, and I had never thought I would end up here. But, I would not change it for the world. I was with the woman I loved, and that meant everything to me. After so many years of being alone I was finally settled and now that Amara had been dealt with I did not have to worry about a thing again... other than being a good father.

Hmm.

Willow noticed my troubled expression. "What's wrong?"

"Well, it's just that now I know we're definitely having a child I'm suddenly filled with all these..."

"Doubts? Worries?"

"Yes."

Willow placed her hand on my chest and smiled. “I think we’re both going through that. But it’s okay. As long as we’re there for each other we’ll do right by the child, I think. We just have to try and avoid the mistakes of the past.”

“And create some new ones in the process.”

“Probably,” she laughed, before turning serious once again. “But I want to make sure we listen to our child and we don’t try and make them feel like they need to be something they’re not.”

“We will, and we won’t hide anything from them either. They’re going to have the best and the worst parts of us, you know, so we’re going to have to be prepared.”

“Oh I know, but when she’s naughty she’s your child, and when she’s well behaved she’s mine.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Definitely,” Willow laughed and we fell into kisses, losing ourselves in love. And that first time we forgot that we were in the middle of a wolf pack, so we didn’t even try to keep quiet. We just let our feelings flow as we had

done all the time before, and there was nobody who could get in the way of our happiness.

Epilogue

Willow

It had been a year since we had left the castle behind, and thankfully there had been no sightings of vampires, aside from Cassius, of course. The world was at peace, and we were at peace with it. The stars were aglow in this early evening, and the moon was full and sensual. I cast my gaze up towards Mom, knowing that she was looking down on us, hoping that she was proud of me. Then I looked out towards the crowd. Brandon was there with his new mate, her abdomen swollen with new life. Dad was there as well, waiting to hear the new storyteller of the pack. I stood before them all, the nerves being gradually swept away by excitement. There were two other people who were special to me in this pack; the man I loved and my daughter.

Cassius was sitting with her on his lap. He bounced her on his knees, holding her arms as he waved them about in the air. She did not understand what any of this was about yet, but she would be taught soon, and I hoped that something of these stories would be lodged in her memory so that when she looked back on this time it

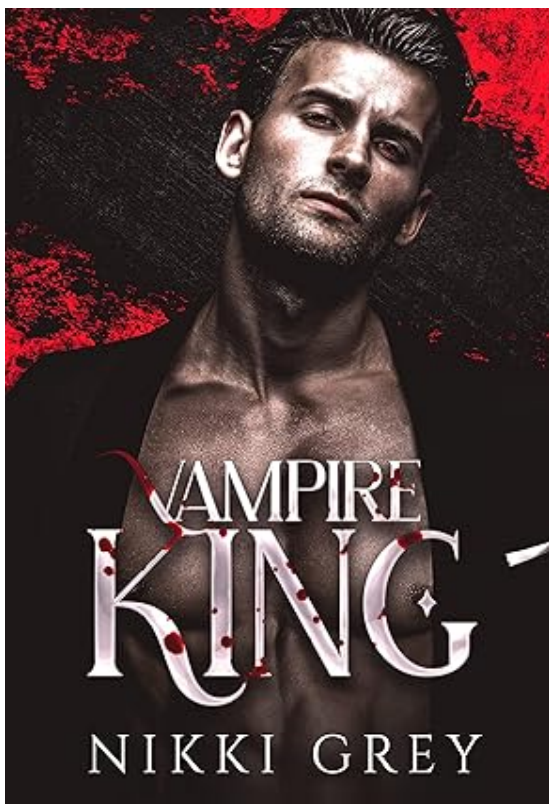
brought her comfort. He looked perfect with a child, becoming even more handsome than he had before. They were my family. I swelled with pride at the thought, never having been as excited before. Amid all the anguish I had experienced I had ended up in a good place, and I was pleased.

He mouthed 'I love you,' to me. I smiled and waved. Then, I opened my mouth and began a song that had first been sung many years ago. It was a song of love, of joy, and these were things I wanted to echo through the world to my daughter.

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a shifter, being a human feels like being an ugly duckling
in a goose pond.

When those I trusted the most turn their back on me,
when those you trust betray you, who becomes your

protector?

The vampire king?

The... enemy himself?

He offers me a deal, and I know it is my only way out. I have to accept.

He wants to find the secret well.

I need someone to keep me safe.

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Chapter One

Bianca

“You think you are one of us, but you will never be a shifter,” I hear their voices echoing all around me, like daggers falling and aiming for the place where it hurts the most.

The woods aren't my friend. Not tonight. Not after all the nights I spent here, listening to the hooting of owls or the soft murmuring of the stream, as the moonlight oozed from above, sprinkling us with its sparkly dust. All of that is forgotten now. All I see, all I hear is hate where there is supposed to be no hate, because I have done nothing wrong, other than be myself in a place that seemed to have accepted me as I am.

I was wrong. So dreadfully wrong.

“Why do you even stay here, huh?” I hear another voice, and someone from behind pushes me forward so forcefully, I almost fall down. But I manage to regain my balance quickly, and I remain standing. I plan on standing for as long as I can, because that is what they

want. They want me on my knees, to admit that I am beneath them.

“I don’t want to fight you,” I say, much more softly than I wanted to.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Gala, the unofficial leader of this shifter torment pack mocks me with my own words, twisting them into a grimace.

I know these shifters. Every single one of them. I’ve known them all my life. We’ve never been friends, but I thought that we were at least tolerating the other’s presence. It seems I was wrong, once again.

This supernatural town inhabited solely by shifters has been the only home I’ve ever known. I don’t have a mother or a father. I don’t have family. I don’t have anyone. It’s a life I’ve grown accustomed to easily, because I never had anything else to compare it to. You can’t miss what you never had, is something I was once told, and the older I get, the more I realize what this truly means.

Sometimes, when I see other shifters with their parents, I feel a pang of jealousy. I wonder how come I can’t have that. How come I can’t have someone who

loves me so much that they would do anything to protect me, to keep me safe from all harm?

Maybe I did something in my previous life, and now, I'm not deserving of someone like that in this one? No explanation makes sense.

My mind comes back to the present moment. I need to stay on my feet. I'm outnumbered. It's five against one. I could maybe take on one, but that would leave four more. I'm not as strong as they are. I'm not as fast as they are. I'm not as skilled in fighting as they are. I guess they're right. We can pretend as much as we want, but I'm not one of them and I will never be.

I know them all. I know the redheaded Gala, with her fiery hair and even more fiery tongue. I know Cassius, the dark curly haired boy who once lent me books from his dad's library. I also know Willow, the soft-spoken Willow who is here because Gala is her sister, and she would follow her sister to the pits of Hell, if she had to. She won't even look at me, but just by being here shows where she stands. On the opposite side to my own. I know the other two as well, but I don't even bother thinking about them.

This isn't the first time I've been accosted by them. I thought they would eventually leave me alone, if I didn't antagonize them, if I just kept my mouth shut and didn't tell anyone about their bullying, but the situation has been worsening. I never mentioned anything to the shifter leader. I don't want him to think that I am turning my back on them in any way, the only family I've ever known. But this... I can feel it in my bones that tonight, they mean business.

I can see it in their eyes. Their bloodthirsty eyes. They don't think I belong here. They don't think I should be here at all and they will make sure I disappear. Maybe I never existed in the first place. That thought settles deep inside of me, frightening me even more than the look in my enemies' eyes.

At that moment, something crackles in the bushes. They all turn their heads in that direction. A soft growl is heard. None of us knows where it's coming from exactly or what animal made it.

"Gala?" Willow whispers softly. I can hear fear in her voice. I don't want to say anything, because my voice might sound the same.

“Shhh,” Gala shooshes her, as always.

Once again, the same growl, only louder. They all take a step back, looking around, their eyes wide and cautious.

A wolf? A bear? There haven't been any bears around here in years. But, whatever animal that is, it is my friend.

“This isn't over,” Gala snarls at me, pushing past me and hitting me hard with her shoulder. It might leave a bruise, but I know that it's far less than what she was planning on doing to me tonight.

They run away, leaving me alone. I swallow heavily, staring in the direction where the growl came from. The bushes rustle again. I dare not run. I am too close. The rest managed to escape a fate of being mangled to death. I might not.

Instead, I take a small step backwards. Then another one.

Suddenly, the bushes spread open, and a man appears. His dark complexion almost blends into the darkness around him, his charcoal curls falling over his

head. The moonlight is illuminating only a part of his face. The part with a deep scar that looks like it healed a long time ago.

“Did I scare them away?” he asks, leaning against a tree. “Looked like you needed help.”

“I...” I start, unable to finish my sentence with a coherent thought. “Who are you?”

“Your savior, it seems,” he tells me, walking over to me.

I notice he inhales deeply, staring straight at me. It almost feels like he is trying to steal my scent. I want to forbid him, but I don't dare say anything. I don't know who he is. I've never seen him before. That means he doesn't live in the town. I'm sure I would have noticed him otherwise.

His tall, muscular build is striking even in the darkness. He rakes his fingers through his hair, but the curls just fall back to their original place, defying his wishes. Now closer, I see the scar more visibly. His eyes are a striking light green, as if the sun itself is shining from inside of them, turning his irises into sunflowers.

“I didn’t need any help,” I say stubbornly, hoping he can’t read the trembling lies in that statement.

I don’t want him to think I’m an easy target. First the shifters, and now him. I don’t know what he wants, but whatever it is, he won’t get it. I’ll fight him til the last breath in my body.

“Didn’t seem like it,” he corrects me.

“This happens often,” I say boldly, raising my voice a little, to make him believe that despite what he thinks, I had the entire situation under control. “They know what line they shouldn’t cross.”

That was exactly what I’d been afraid of tonight, that they would cross that very line and something terrible might happen. Him appearing was truly a God send, but I would rather die than tell a perfect stranger that.

“Are you sure?” he asks, tilting his head a little to the side, as if to take a closer, more intimate look at me and decide on something he’s not willing to divulge. His eyes are looking at me as if I’m dessert.

“Yes,” I snap. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go back to town.”

“You live there?” he is quick to ask.

I face him, keeping a safe distance. You never know.

“What if I do?” I ask back.

“You’re not a shifter,” he points out something we both know.

“How can you tell?” I ask, shocked.

Not even shifters can tell if someone else is a shifter or not just by looking at them. It takes more to know. Much more.

“I can tell a lot about you, just by looking at you,” he tells me, as if reading my mind.

This is where I’m sure that I need to go back. Gala and her pack of wolves are gone, but that doesn’t mean that I’m safe. This guy is another kind of danger. A threat. I need to get back. Right now.

I take a trembling step back.

“I really have to get back,” I tell him. “Someone will be looking for me.”

“Yes,” he nods, smirking at me.

I can see his scar more clearly now. Curiosity takes over me. I want to get closer to him, take a closer look, but I don't dare diminish the safe distance that is between us. He can't reach out for me from here. But if I get closer to him, I don't dare think what might happen.

The story of his scar has to be mind-blowing. I've never seen anyone with something like that on his face. Yet, it doesn't seem to diminish his wild beauty. In fact, it only makes it more striking.

Once again, I feel like my mind is an open book to him. Instead of me coming closer to him, he nears me. There is a scent about him that fills my nostrils to the brim. Earthy, musky. He smells like the woods, wild and ferocious. More dangerous than anything I've ever encountered before.

Then, why can't I run away? What is keeping me frozen in this place, just waiting for him to devour me?

He is so close now that our noses are almost touching. I can feel his hot breath on my lips. It is spilling over me, tempting me to do... something. But what? I dare not act on any of the impulses, desires that he awakens inside of me.

Using the last morsels of common sense I have left, I manage to fight off his magic, and I pull back. He grins at this superhuman effort.

“Go back home, sweet human,” he murmurs so softly, that it sounds like a playful growl. The same kind that frightened Gala and her pack away.

I take another step back, feeling more bold. Maybe he’s a shifter from another town, come for an unannounced visit. I’ll talk to the leader about him. He’ll know.

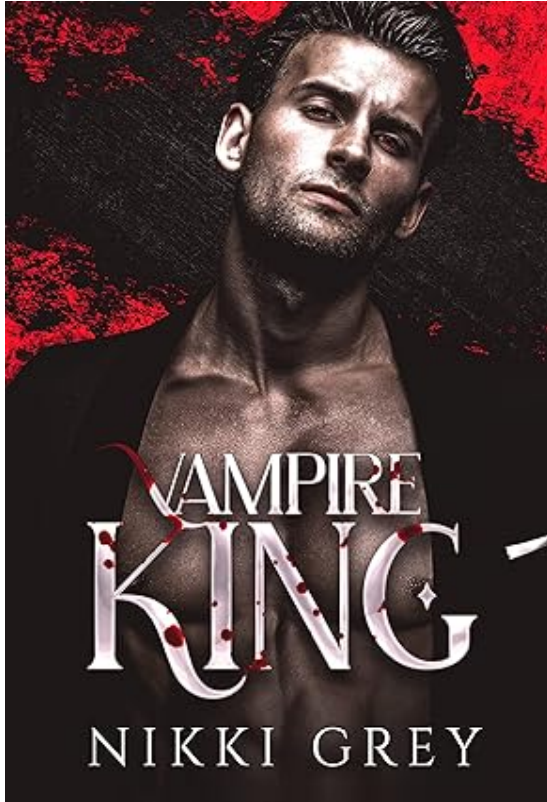
“It’s late,” I say, as if my excuse to leave matters at all. He is still grinning.

I turn around and start running back to town, back through the beaten paths that I’ve taken so many times before, and yet now, they seem like a whole new path altogether.

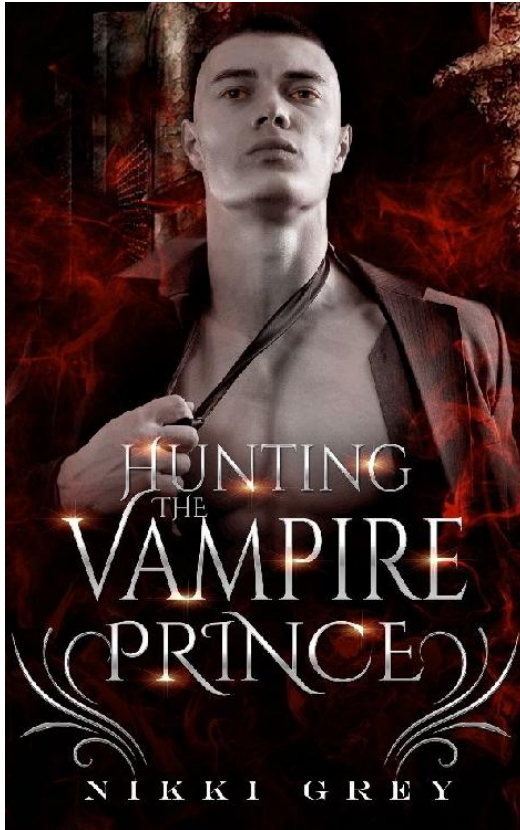
I keep running until I am breathless, until I know that man's grin isn't following me anymore. When I finally stop, I see the outlines of the town, the houses, the street lights. It is a sight I know, a sight I recognize.

But, if that is so... then why does this path back still seem new and undiscovered?

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“Hunting The Vampire Prince: Enemies To Lovers
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It's my job to kill the vampire prince. But he saves me instead.

My parents' jewelry store has gone bankrupt.

Now we have to pay an enormous debt, or our whole family will be killed.

My friend shows me how to be a bounty hunter – an easy way for someone like me who's skilled at fighting to earn money.

When I take on the bounty on the fourth vampire prince of Romania I'm led to believe he's an evil man who

murdered his brother and is plotting against the king.

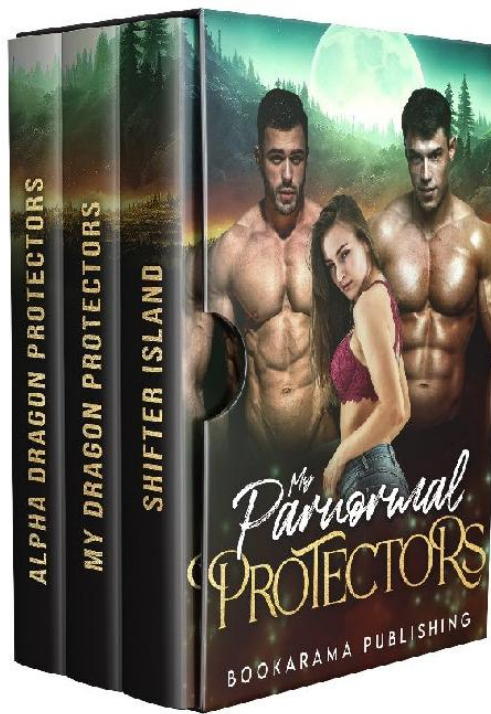
But what if he's actually a good person?

What should I do about the attraction I feel towards him?

I've never been intimate with a man.

How am I supposed to kill the handsome gentleman who saves me from certain death?

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(Click the link or enter <https://mybook.to/MyParanormalProtectors> into your browser.)



My protectors are two hot shifters.

My mate rejected me.

My family disowned me.

Alone, I soon find myself in danger.

Just as my life flashes before my eyes, they emerge.

Broad-shouldered, mysterious Alpha shifters.

The two of them smell of power.

They promise their protection if I come with them.

I should be afraid of these two bad boys.

I should reject their proposal.

But what choice do I have?

They can give me safety.

Plus, as much as I hate to admit it, they awaken my own beast.

My lips ache for their bruising kisses.

My body yearns for their touch.

I want them to claim me.

Make me theirs.

One thing is clear:

This menage is inescapable.

The question is: Will it break me or rescue me?

My Paranormal Protectors Box Set:

Three fiery heroines. Six infuriatingly protective Alpha shifters. Three shifter romances by Lilly Wilder.

No cheating. No cliffhangers. HEA guaranteed!

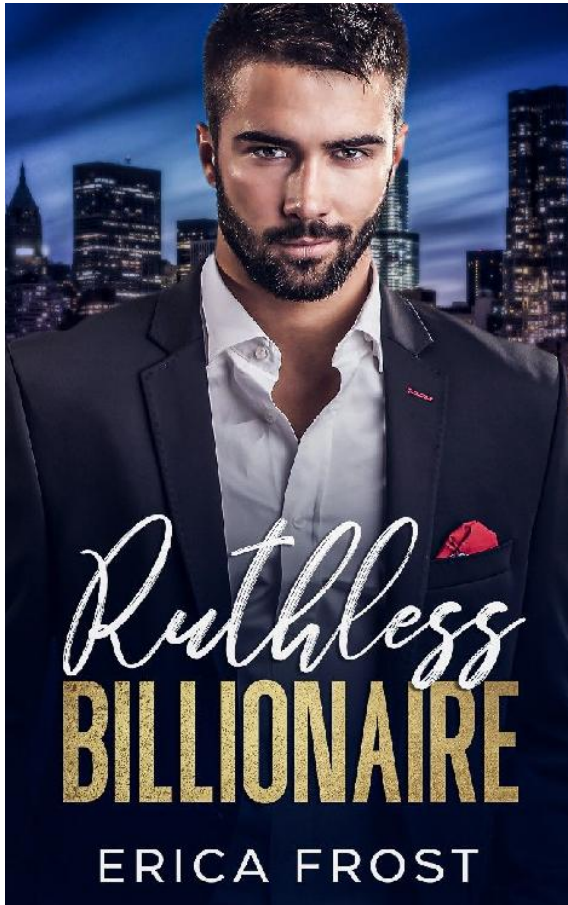
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browser.)



Falling for my ex's billionaire brother.

When I dated my ex, I loathed his older brother.

A bad-boy billionaire, Jesse Stanton seemed like the type to do anything for success.

Now, Jesse is being accused of murder.

And who does he ask for help?

Me. The girl he teased for being a goody two shoes.

Although I've only recently started working at the detective's office, solving crime is my passion.

I can't just stand by if there's even a tiny chance that Jesse is innocent.

Before long, I find myself sneaking around dark corners with him.

Pretending to be his girlfriend to get information.

I try to ignore Jesse's strong body, his sexy smirk, his irresistible eyes.

All of this is fake, I tell myself.

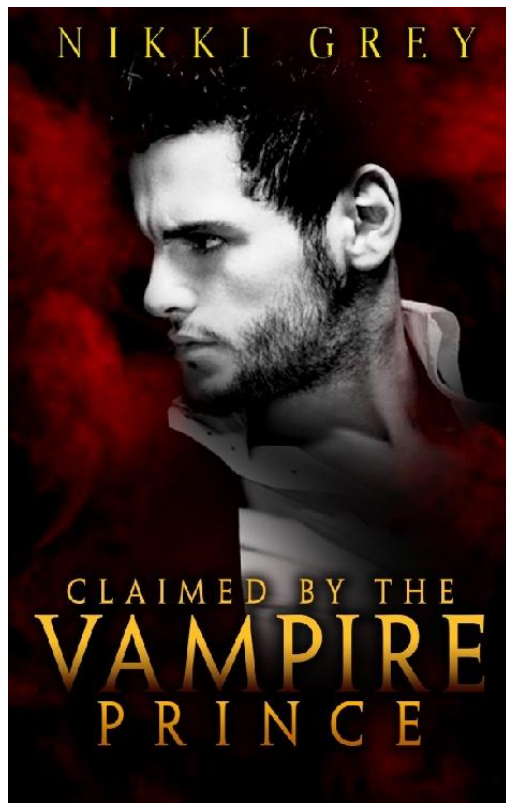
Yet every fiber of my body hopes the billionaire is innocent of the crime.

And only guilty of stealing my heart.

Come Stalk Me!

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When the vampire prince I was promised to goes missing, I'm eager to leave the vampire town.

But I'm not quick enough.

The vampire prince's brother Raphael finds me.

Tall, dark, and handsome,

Raphael oozes sex appeal and charisma.

I've never met anyone as electrifying as him.

His eagerness to claim me makes me shiver with trepidation.

I've never been with a man, especially a sensual, experienced vampire.

His fangs send shivers down my spine.

His kisses drive me hungry with need.

His touch awakens my wild side.

I can't wait any longer.

My brain is telling me, no, but my heart and body want to give myself to Raphael.

Will my head or my heart win out?

And can there even be a future for a human girl and a vampire prince?

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