

TAKEN BY THE
VAMPIRE

NIKKI GREY

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Taken By The Vampire

**Paranormal Protector
Romance**

By: Nikki Grey

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Foreword

My Vampire King needs to protect me from the Wolves that want to bring me home.

I and my vampire king had a world to ourselves. Cassius had helped me discover the wolf inside, and with him I continued to grow. We explored new worlds, and we explored each other. Our love for each other deepened.

He was my king and my protector in our dark world, but soon enough we would have to protect each other.

The life I left behind was not done with me. The wolf pack took an affront to Cassius kidnapping me, and now Brandon was after him. I had been arranged to be Brandon's mate, and now that I had discovered the wolf, did he want me back?

My old life was calling. Could I listen? Could I leave Cassius?

After all, wasn't a love affair between a wolf and a vampire mere fantasy?

Taken By The Vampire

Chapter One

Willow

The sweet air streaked past me. The sky was a brilliant blue. I could feel it all. Every time I breathed in, I was greeted by a cloying scent that burst with so much vibrancy. All the colors of the world were vivid. There were shades of flowers that I had never seen before, blurring past me as I ran as quickly as my legs could take me. This was all still so new to me, being a wolf. It was something that had been my birthright. I was supposed to have changed when I became a teenager, but unlike my peers the wolf inside me had not awakened. They all became a part of the pack, understating this deep bond we had with nature, while I was left behind, an outcast.

It had taken a vampire to rescue me from that. Cassius had found me after searching different worlds for a suitable companion. It had not always been a steady thing. Mistrust and secrets threatened to interrupt our attraction before it had a chance to spark. I was just as much at fault for this as him, for I had always found it difficult to trust others given how everyone I had ever known had teased me about being different.

Cassius didn't though. He worshiped me for exactly who I was, and I don't think me being a wolf mattered to him in the slightest. It just so happened to be the bargain I had struck with him for coming to his castle. I was his companion, and he helped awaken the wolf inside me.

He helped awaken many other things as well, like my heart. At first I had feigned affection to win his confidence as I worried he had nefarious intentions. But there had always been something between us ever since we first met. He was a vampire who had lived a hundred lives or more, and I was just a young woman still trying to figure out where she belonged. We couldn't have been more different, but perhaps that is why we worked so well together. We offered each other something that we lacked.

But now I did not lack anything. Now I could feel the warm air drifting across my fur, my long tongue lolled out and tasted the dewy moisture lingering in the air, while my beady eyes drank in the idyllic scene before me. The grass was long. Leafy trees stood tall and upright, the branches stretching out as though they were

ready to encompass the world, the green leaves fluttering a little as the gentle breeze caressed them.

My howl echoed through the glade and my breath deepened. My heart thumped in my chest due to the excitement. I had always resented my peers for being able to access their wolves and then treating me as an outcast, but now that I had experienced it for myself, I knew why they had wanted to share this with each other. All my senses had been turned up to their most intense level. The world became alive to me in a way that it had never done before, and the only thing I was aware of not being able to sense was my vampire king; Cassius.

I strained my neck around either side of me, trying to see if he was flitting behind in his bat form, but I saw nothing. Vampires were notoriously elusive and these games we played helped me hone my hunter's instincts. He should have been behind me, but for all I knew he had left and returned to the castle, giving me this world to myself.

Then I noticed movement in a tree above. I circled the trunk and pawed at it, thinking it unfair that Cassius

would hide amid the branches when I found it difficult to climb.

“You’re looking in the wrong place, again,” he said calmly. I turned quickly. He was standing behind me, as though he had been there the entire time. I sniffed the air, catching the faint scent of fire and brimstone that he carried with him. Then I shifted as well. I closed my eyes and embraced the wolf, sending her back into the depths of my soul. Even though I was shifting forms she was still with me. The pain of transforming was matched with an aftermath of elation, as though a shot of adrenalin had been injected straight into my heart. My skin tingled, naked skin that was now smooth and exposed rather than being hidden by a thick coat of fur. My eyes were back to their natural shade rather than golden, and I was standing on two legs rather than all fours. Cassius’ gaze dropped to my body. I tilted my hips to the side. There had been a time when I was shy in front of him, but there was no reason to be shy any longer. I smiled and laughed a throaty laugh. I twirled an errant strand of hair around my fingers. The only thing I wore was an amulet that rested against the hollow of my throat. It was this that gave me the ability to access my wolf.

“Do you like what you see?” I asked casually.

I could feel Cassius’ gaze running up and down my body, sending tingles shooting through every part of me.

It was as though he was reaching towards me with his mind, but I actually felt his fingers caressing every part of me. With everything I knew about vampires this shouldn’t have been happening; but I had learned that vampires had spread various myths about them to obfuscate the truth and provide opportunities for them to take their enemies by surprise. I was not Cassius’ enemy, but he still surprised me.

“You know I love it,” he said.

I had closed my eyes to enjoy the sensation of these feelings running through me, my blood turning hot, my mind growing hazy. When I opened them again, he was standing right in front of me, barely leaving any distance between us.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I murmured as I draped my arms around his neck. A smile twitched upon his face. I fiddled with the clasp of his cloak. It fell around him in a puddle, an inky stain amid the emerald green of the grass.

I placed a hand on his chest, feeling the cool skin. I trailed a line across and my gaze ran down his long, muscled body, settling on the manhood that brought me so much pleasure. I shifted my position, stepping closer to him pressing my body against his. I watched and felt arousal swim underneath his flesh, making him harder and bigger. My heart raced as I licked my glistening lips and then kissed him. Our lips met in a burst of pleasure, our breath swirling in this paradise. We were naked and free, like Adam and Eve in Eden, although there was no serpent here to ruin our joy.

As we kissed we sank down into the soft moss, our bodies melting into the embrace of nature. Our tongues danced and my hands roamed down his body. His did as well. As my fingers curled around his thick shaft and began stroking him, he toyed with my nipples, sending wild and jolting sensations. My feminine scent sizzled in the air and his mouth moved across my neck, breathing in everything that spiced the air. A yearning moan escaped my lips as my grip on him tightened. I heard him grunt. His terse moans were always music to my ears. I loved how I could make a man like Cassius, a man

who had experienced all that life had to offer, feel this way.

As he put it; he had experienced so many things in life, but he had not experienced me.

I ran my fingers across the rivers that brought him strength and the smooth tip. I felt all of his strength and arousal and lust for me focused in this one part of him, this part that scorched my palm and looked like a weapon.

I gasped in tight, soaring moans as he played with my voluptuous breasts. His lips moved down, kissing my soft skin. Sometimes he would tease me by dragging his sharp teeth along my skin, but I knew he wasn't interested in turning me. He wanted me for me, not to become my sire. We were only slaves to our passion for each other, and whenever we were together it flowed out, erupting between us in an incandescent burst of heat that flooded our souls and made us feel as though we were drowning in fire. I gasped as my heart was seized and clutched by these glorious things. His long, slender fingers danced down my body and soon he was playing with me as well. He explored the damp heat that

simmered in between my legs, and we looked down and watched as we pleased each other. The warm breeze sailed over us and the world was open to us. We were the only live things in this place. We had everything to ourselves.

A dreamy mist rolled over my eyes as the passion took a hold of me and I surrendered to it, feeling myself falling into this abyss that we created together, tumbling down as the world spun and my soul felt as though it was being taught something new and profound. My skin became flushed and with his kisses and his hands it felt as though he was all over me, before suddenly he was falling down my body and leaving a trail of kisses behind. I knew where he was going and my body was taut with anticipation, and when his lips found their way between my legs all that tension was released and everything shuddered through me. He placed his hands on my thighs, digging into my supple skin, while his tongue danced. I lost my grip on him, of course. Now my hands fell to the ground. They clutched grass in tight fists and ripped it out. My hair hung down as I opened my mouth and let the erotic pleasure flow through me in hot and frantic bursts. There was a raging storm within me and

Cassius was stoking it and turning it into a manic frenzy. He was so artful in the way he touched me, always knowing exactly what to do to bring this pleasure crashing within me. He was a magician, he was a master of me, he was so many things and I was so much more by being with him.

A lancing shock ran through me as he twisted his tongue in such a way that caught a sensitive part of me. My eyelids fluttered. The world became a blur. He was everywhere; inside me and around me and on top of me. My chest heaved as I gulped in breaths and my heart thumped as though it was going to break free of my chest. My skin burned, yet I did not want to douse the flames of our passion. I wanted more. I needed more. I begged him. I looked down and I watched him lap and kiss and stroke me. I felt him inside me, such simple gestures bringing so much intense pleasure, and then I shook and shuddered and I held onto his scalp as he brought forth something else. It almost felt like the wolf inside was ready to erupt, but instead it was something else entirely. A terse shriek punched the air as I pulled him away. I grabbed him and drew him up, kissing him and feeling my lingering heat and wetness glistening on

his lips. I thrust my tongue down his throat and then I rolled him onto his back, my gestures rough, my wolf strength flowing through my body, and he seemed quite content to not fight back at all.

I left his lips bruised as I sank down and took him in my mouth, wanting to worship my king, my protector. I licked him up and down, tasting the coolness of his flesh, leaving him dripping with my saliva. His skin was paler than any man I had ever known before, but this gave him an ethereal otherness that I found alluring. When I looked up into his dark eyes I knew they were eyes that had seen other women, and I was determined to vanquish his memory of them all. I wanted to be the one he remembered. I wanted to be the one he loved.

The only one.

I murmured as I took him as deep as I could, gorging myself on every inch of him that I could before I couldn't help myself any longer. I needed more than this. I needed to feel him inside me. The wolf was prowling within the depths of my mind, howling at me, for me to take what I needed because I was proud, I was strong,

and I did not have to wait for anyone else to tell me what I was capable of.

I straddled Cassius. I ran my fingers through his hair and dragged them down his chest, leaving faint marks where my nails dug into his skin. I growled and felt myself becoming overwhelmed with this kind of passionate and animalistic sensation. It was overwhelming and intoxicating and I longed for it so very often.

I lowered myself onto him, feeling him coming inside me, our bodies melting together and becoming one. I groaned as the pleasure blurred with the pain and created these wholly new sensations that were wondrous and soaring and not innocent at all. I caught his lips in mine as I began to rock back and forth, my hips rolling in a frantic motion, grinding against his body, getting him deeper and deeper inside me. Yes, he was my vampire, my king, my protector, and nobody was ever going to take me away from him.

The pleasure raced through me and I flung my head back, howling to the empty sky as I gave him my body and took everything that he had to give me.

Chapter Two

Cassius

We lazed under the shade of the tree. The sun was balmy, and the long grass fluttered as a breeze passed by. I could feel it on my skin. It was an odd sensation, reminding me of times before when I had indulged in things like this. Before Willow had come along my life had been barren, as had my world. She had brought so much color into these two things, so much so that I wondered how I had been able to survive before her. I suppose in a way I hadn't; my heart and soul had been empty, and it was only my desperation that had managed to draw her to me.

I watched the glistening drops of sweat trickle along the curve of her hip. She was nestled against me, her body a raging inferno of heat compared to mine. Her hair cascaded in ringlets down her shoulders and chest and spilled across my shoulder. Her breath whispered under my chin. Her arm was draped over my chest, her leg hanging over one of my own, her thigh covering my manhood, clinging to me as though I might vanish at any given moment. I never would though, not from her.

“This is perfect,” she murmured. I kissed her forehead and squinted at the sky.

“I thought you might like this world.”

“Are we really the only two here?”

“I believe so. I suppose there could be some primitive lifeforms elsewhere, perhaps on the other side of the planet, but if they cannot find us then what could matter?”

“Maybe we should move here.”

“And how are we going to get the castle here?” I frowned.

Willow chuckled. “Surely there’s a spell for that?”

“If there is then it’s buried in the library somewhere.”

“Oh, so we’re going to have to go on another research trip?”

“Well, the last one worked out well,” I said, glancing down at the amulet that hung from her neck. It rested against her skin in such a way that it seemed a part of her. I suppose in truth it was now.

“Yes, it did. Cassius... how does it feel to become a bat?”

I glanced towards her.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that all these sensations I’m experiencing are new to me and it’s all so thrilling and exciting, so much so that I’d love to share it with someone and, well, you’re the only one here. I just wondered if you changing into a bat was the same as me turning into a wolf.”

I sighed a little. “I’m not sure that it is. When I take on the form of a bat I just change, only using it because sometimes flying is faster than walking. Well, actually almost all the time flying is faster, but it does tend to wear me out more quickly. It always takes more effort to flap wings than it does to walk around... but I digress. Then again, I’ve never actually known what it is to be a wolf.”

“It’s like the world changes, like you’re seeing things for the first time. It’s as though there are things that have been hidden from you all your life and only now are they being revealed.” She spoke with a sense of

awe and rapture. For wolves this kind of thing had always been personal and profound. It wasn't something that I could properly identify with. I turned my gaze back to the sky.

"I'm sorry that I don't know what it feels like," I said.

"Is it really not like that for you when you turn into a bat?"

"What you have to remember Willow is that you werewolves are creatures of nature. Your wolves are tied to your souls. When we become vampires it is because something has been taken from us. I'm not sure that is conducive to a good experience."

"I suppose not," she sighed.

"You sound unhappy."

"It's not that, it's just... like I said, it would be nice to share this with other people who understand what it's like. I always knew it would be important, but I had no idea it would have this much impact on the way I felt and saw the world. I suppose I should have known, given how everyone else reacted when they embraced their own

wolves. I always hated them for the way they treated me, but now I can kind of understand it. There was no way I would have been able to comprehend all of this without going through it first.”

“You’re not making excuses for them are you?”

“No, of course not,” she said hurriedly, “I’m just saying that I think I can see it better from their point of view. It’s okay though. I just thought I’d ask.”

She settled against my chest, although my thoughts began to whirl. It had always been a risk to bring a werewolf here, to help her find this creature inside her. Werewolves and Vampires had always been natural enemies. While I didn’t think that Willow would ever turn against me, I was worried that this new creature inside would recognize that she did not belong to me. Wolves were always meant to be in packs, after all.

“It’s only natural that you should be feeling this way. Your wolf is going to influence the way you think about the world. It might give you desires towards things that you never wanted before. If you feel a pull towards your own kind its perfectly natural. Wolves are not meant to be alone.”

She raised her head and spoke in a sharp tone. “I don’t want that. I’m happy with you Cassius. You know that, right? I love you.”

I studied her face for a moment, basking in the radiant beauty that came with her saying those words to me. “I love you too,” I replied, punctuating my words with a kiss.

“You don’t have to be worried about me leaving. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good, I should hope not,” I replied. She was in the motion of standing. She towered over me. I looked up to appreciate her beauty from this angle. She was a work of art, no matter from which perspective I looked. Her skin was flawless, and she was imbued with a ferocity that I had not encountered for years. Her wisdom, as well, belied her youth. With her I could forget that I was an ancient being who had lived for too long, a man who was mocked by time, or perhaps had made a mockery of time. She blessed the moments we shared with excitement and enthusiasm, and simply made the world a better place. Before her I was cold and lonely, whereas now I felt fulfilled.

She even helped me cope with my guilt.

She stretched her arms and then swayed her body to the right, and then the left, accentuating all the womanly curves she possessed. A smile drifted across my face. I did not need to see the twinkle in her eye to know that she was fully aware of what she was doing. She turned away from me. I followed the gentle line of her spine that ran to the small of her back, and then rose to two full cheeks. She couldn't have been more perfect if she had been sculpted by a master craftsman. As I gazed at her I could not believe my luck that she had fallen in love with me and, after so long, had filled my life with meaning and purpose.

She reached up and plucked a fruit from the branch. It was red and ripe. There was an audible crunch as she bit into it. When she turned to face me again some of the juice trickled down her chin.

“You know, as much as I'm glad you have that potion to keep me nourished, I do miss having food like this.”

“Feel free to take some back with you, I don't think anyone is going to mind,” I said, gazing around at the

empty world.

On second thought that description was not quite true. This world wasn't empty or hollow. It was a young world, fertile and filled with life that wanted to burst and flow and spread through the air. It was a world that had yet to be jaded by time or ravaged by predators. It was a world whose existence was gentle and pristine, and that never had to worry about time running out, because it still had eons left.

“I know you can't move the castle, but have you ever thought of moving to a place like this one? A world where you're not just waiting for it to die?” Willow said as she took another bite.

“I am the last vampire, and as such it is my duty to sit upon the throne.”

“I know that it's your home and everything, but you have to admit that this world is beautiful. I'm just saying, it might be time for a change. Sometimes you need to freshen things up. Having the same old scenery all the time might explain why you were in such a mood when I arrived.”

“I wasn't in a mood,” I frowned.

“Cassius, you were even starting to hear the gargoyles speak to you. If I hadn’t come along then you would probably have been the last crazy vampire.”

“I wish I had never told you that. I didn’t tell you these secrets to make fun of me,” I said, feigning wounded pride. Willow laughed and descended to her knees again. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed me on the cheek, smiling as she did so. She smelled of love and fruit and of all the good things in the world.

In the back of my mind a hollow, dark whisper flashed, a last message from Amara, the woman who had turned me into a vampire. She had cursed me a thousand times over for what I had done and promised that I would never be happy. I was pleased to say that I had proven her wrong, but still knew that usually Amara got what she wanted. I had succeeded in protecting the world from her and the other vampires, but there was still an itch at the back of my neck that I could not scratch, and I wasn’t sure if it would ever go away. All I could do was try to push the thoughts out of my mind.

Willow was certainly helpful in doing that.

“Oh, I’m sure you can put up with a little teasing. I just mean that this world is so bright and so filled with life. It might be nice to have a fresh start somewhere else. I mean, have you thought what you’re going to do when your world finally dies?”

I sighed. “Not really.”

A strange look came upon Willow’s face then. She turned away from me and I could tell that something serious was on her mind.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just thinking about the future. Is there ever a point when you’re going to get old and die? I mean, I don’t mean to sound morbid, but even wolves age. Is there going to be a point where you’re not going to recognize me?”

I rested a cheek against her palm and turned her head towards me. “I’ll always recognize you Willow, and I’ll always love you.”

Her lips twitched. It wasn’t quite a smile. “But it’s true, isn’t it? There’s going to come a time when I look older than you.”

“It’s just the way vampires are. It’s why this is a curse.”

“And what’s going to happen then?”

I looked at her and wished that sometimes reality didn’t have to come and collide with our happiness. “Then I’ll keep on loving you. I’ll always love you Willow, no matter what happens. I’ll love you even when all the stars have faded from the sky.”

“But I won’t be here,” she looked directly into my eyes and I was chilled by the intensity of emotion that she displayed. “I won’t be here, and it’s not like I’m going to get a chance to mourn you. It’s going to be you mourning me because that’s the way it has to be. That’s the way it always is with vampires,” her voice was empty as she spoke. I remained quiet for a moment.

“There’s no sense talking about the future. All we can do is enjoy the moments that we share together. Thinking about these kinds of things is only going to upset you.”

“It’s just hard Cassius. It’s hard to think that there’s going to come a time when I’m not around anymore, and you’re still going to look like that, and you’re still going

to be sitting in your castle waiting for your world to die and then eventually I'm just going to be a memory." I went to speak, but she thrust a hand in the air and she looked shaken. "It's okay, I'll be okay, I just don't like thinking about this kind of thing. When it's just me and you things seem perfect, but when we start thinking about the future I just... I don't like where things are going to lead."

I replied to her in a small voice. "One thing I learned a long time ago is that you can never know what's going to happen in life. I never believed that I would be turned into a vampire and end up living for generations upon generations. We don't know what's going to happen. Perhaps there is a way for you to live as long as me, or maybe something will happen and I will die. Goodness knows I've made enough enemies over the years. Of course, I've happened to outlive most of them but..." I trailed away as I realized that my words weren't helping her at all. She had let go of the fruit. It dropped and rolled away from her. She drew her legs into her chest and looked subdued.

I reached around her, hoping to comfort her with my embrace. I kissed her shoulders and the top of her arms, while I breathed in the sweet fragrance of her hair.

“Look at me, I’m in this gorgeous world and all I can think about is how everything is going to end,” she said, apparently shaking the grim feelings away.

“This world does seem too beautiful for that,” I agreed.

She cocked her head and then looked at me again. “Is that why you’ve never gone back to the world we came from; because of your enemies?”

I pursed my lips. “That world stopped offering anything to me a long time ago.”

The memories of that place were like ghosts now, haunting my mind. It seemed so distant in the past. There was the part of my life that happened before I became a vampire, the part that was stained with failure and desperation and a rancid sense of unease. Then, the other part, the part where I made a name for myself, where I perfected my skills and tempted women to my bed, making promises to them that I would never keep,

and then to make a new life for myself when the old one became tattered and long in the tooth.

“I feel the same way,” Willow said. I wasn’t sure if she was being completely honest with me, but I was too distracted to think about it too much. She had gone through a drastic change and it was understandable that she was having trouble adjusting. Usually she would have had elder wolves and peers to help guide her through the learning process, at least that was the case from what I understood about wolves. She only had me though, and although I knew much about a lot of things, I did not know the inner workings of the lycan mind. I hoped that she would be able to feel at ease soon enough, and that she would be able to enjoy the moments that we could share with each other. The last thing I ever wanted her to do was to live in regret.

We both agreed that it was time for us to depart this world. We returned to the hole in the air I had created. We stepped through the portal and returned to the cold, grey world that I called home. The hard walls of the castle stood strong, and the air was chilly. I thought she might have needed some time alone, so I bid her

farewell until later. I kissed the back of her palm, and then disappeared into the shadows.

Chapter Three

Willow

I shivered as we passed back into the castle. My eyes adjusted to the bleak dimness. Cassius walked away, fastening his cloak around his shoulders again. I went to a chair and picked up the dress I had left here. I stepped into it and fastened the clasps, embracing the warmth that slipped over my skin. I gazed at the still pool, the ripples in it had faded into nothingness now. It was strange to think that this place was the conduit to other worlds. Here is where I had first arrived, and here was where I had spoken to Clea, Cassius' previous companion.

I sighed and chastised myself. It was my own fault for allowing these thoughts to get the better of me. I should have known better than to think about the future. There were some things that were impossible for me to change and so I shouldn't have wasted time in thinking about them. Cassius was a vampire. I was a werewolf. He was doomed to eternal life. It was just a matter of fact and there was nothing that could be done about it, so why was I letting it get under my skin?

Perhaps it was due to the fact that I had finally become a wolf and things hadn't changed as much as I had expected them to.

I stepped outside and walked through the castle, heading out to the main courtyard. There was a stone table sitting in the middle of the courtyard, and the grey walls prevented me from toppling down the sheer sides of the mountain into the abyss below. Above me stood the tower, with black windows looking like the eyes of demons, all brooding and suspicious. Gargoyles jutted out, their ugly, twisted faces staring into the night. Cassius had told me that in his loneliness he had started hearing them speak to him. He had been here for so long. I pitied him, knowing how much of a toll the silence must have taken on him. He carried so much emotional weight around with him and I wish I had been able to be there to save him earlier. Was it going to be the same once I left him? Was he one day going to feel the urge to find another companion? He had promised me that I was the only one who could cope with him, but what if there was another and she simply hadn't been born?

Jealousy flared within my mind and I felt like lashing out. The thought of someone else walking through the halls of this castle, pretending to be his Queen drove me mad. The anger took over me with such fury that I gritted my teeth and curled my hands into fists. I dug my nails into my palms and crescents appeared on my flesh. It was only when I reminded myself of this that I breathed deeply and felt the tension drain away. I looked up at the gargoyles.

“It’s pretty silly of me to be jealous of someone who isn’t even born yet. It’s not as though I’d actually be able to be jealous of them anyway. I’ll be dead, and I’ll be just like you, stone cold.” I then caught myself and smirked. Perhaps I deserved this, considering how I had teased Cassius about speaking with the gargoyles.

At least they weren’t speaking back at me yet, although as I looked at them their gazes seemed to shift and I didn’t like the way they peered into my soul. I turned away from them and gazed out at the bleak horizon before me. Many people might well have thought of this world as death. It was certainly shrouded in misery. The trees were black and brittle, while the

ground was dusty and dry. If there were any rivers then they were only a trickle of black ichor. A few scavenger animals were around, all of them lean and gaunt because they could barely find enough resources to survive. This was the home of the vampires, and all of them had been dealt with by Cassius. This was the way every world went eventually, the sun fading above, the temperature dropping, slowly and inexorably being coated in darkness until it was swallowed up entirely. I wasn't sure how much time it had left. I'm not sure if Cassius knew either. Would I be there to witness it? I hoped I would, because it wasn't the kind of moment that Cassius should be alone for, but it was impossible to escape the fact that I was just a blip in his life. He was everything to me, and I was just another memory.

No, that wasn't fair to him. He had been clear about the way he thought of me, and the way he had treated me. He loved me, and I should cherish that love. It just... there was something that felt as though it was missing.

Absently my hand had risen and was fumbling with the amulet. Ever since we had found it, I had not taken it off. It was the only thing that allowed me to bond with

the wolf inside me. For some reason there was a block inside, and I had no idea why. This amulet allowed me to be whole. I didn't like being beholden to an object to understand this feeling, but it was better than not feeling it at all. I just wish I had been able to experience this back with the pack. Perhaps then things would have been different. I cast my mind back to a different time, a time before all this happened, a time when I was even younger.

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I was forced to wear a dress that was itchy and did not fit quite right, but because the ceremony demanded it I had to wear it. Mother had spent all night trying to raise the length of the dress, but even so it dragged along the floor. Father didn't care much. He was beaming proudly, pleased with himself that he had arranged a marriage between his little girl and the Alpha's son. I knew of Brandon, of course. I was a quiet child and he was brash, but I had always admired how strong and quick he was. He used to make a show of climbing trees and nobody in the pack had managed to beat him. When

he eventually became a wolf, he would be a force to reckon with.

Then again, that was said to be true for each of us.

Mother braided my hair and placed a small twine crown atop my head. She then sprinkled some herbs in front of me. My nose twitched and I sneezed. I didn't think this was entirely necessary, but mother said that tradition demanded it.

Tradition demanded a lot, I thought. I wasn't yet sure what to make of this ceremony. It was to declare that I and Brandon were going to marry when I came of age. I didn't like the idea of having my future laid out before me, as though life was just a series of stepping stones that I had to pass without ever being able to fashion my own path. Even when I expressed my doubts about this, they were all swept aside and I was told that eventually I would thank them for this, that one day I would see the wisdom of this.

It seemed like the kind of thing parents told their children. There was nothing I could do about it though, short of run away, but there was no point in running

away from wolves because they would have been able to find me without any problem at all.

So I entered the small hut. The Alpha was there, sitting on his throne. His wife was beside him, and standing before him was Brandon. A number of the pack elders were there as well. Brandon glanced towards me. I smiled at him, but he didn't seem to care and just looked away. He was picking his nails and looking to the ceiling, acting as though he wanted to be anywhere else. I could understand his frustrations, but it wasn't my fault.

I noticed his father mutter something to him. Brandon straightened his posture and stopped fidgeting. I reached them and stood beside Brandon. We were both only children, yet we were dressing up as adults and stealing time from our futures, making a decision now that we would never be able to escape from, for such agreements were iron clad.

At least, that's what I thought at the time.

The Alpha bowed his head to me.

"Today is a proud occasion. It's an occasion where we celebrate the future of this pack. Every Alpha knows that time is fleeting, and preparations should be made to

ensure the safety and the continuation of our pack. Brandon, you are my son and one day you shall have the honor of being the elder. It will be your job to lead the clan into the future, to make wise decisions, and to sire an heir who will eventually take your place. In this way the chain of our ancestry can remain unbroken and the legacy of our blood shall never be forgotten. You carry with you the glory and the honor of each of our ancestors, and you shall tell your children our stories as well, so that they may continue to learn and cherish the past, while always keeping one eye on the future.”

He then turned to me.

“And you, Willow. You have been chosen to be betrothed to Brandon. You will stand by him and help him raise powerful sons and daughters, strong wolves that will see this pack grow from strength to strength. You will stand by him, support him, and you too will help the traditions of this pack to continue. You shall learn everything there is about being a noble wolf because there are many people who will look to you as an example and for inspiration.”

He stepped back and looked to us both.

“You two will make a formidable pair. When you are adults you shall make another oath together, both as humans and as wolves. You will howl together and promise your hearts together, and when your blood is shared you will give rise to a new generation of wolves. But in this moment here you will promise your futures to each other.”

Brandon and I turned to each other. We repeated the vows he gave us, promising to nurture our affection and that we would face the rigors of the world as a team. We promised that we would always respect each other and save ourselves for each other, and that when the time was right, we would give our bodies and our souls to each other. Brandon was instructed to take my hand, and then he was told to kiss me on the cheek. The adults then all clapped, and just like that Brandon and I were betrothed.

It wasn't as if it changed anything though. Brandon never really acknowledged me while we were playing, although people's attitudes towards me changed. Some of the other girls had hoped to be chosen and so were sour when they realized that I was the one who had been

picked. I lost some friends that way. I decided myself that when I inherited the wolf pack the first thing to go would be some of these traditions, but of course that moment never came.

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A tear rolled down my cheek. I blinked and then wiped the tear away, cursing myself for being so sensitive about things that had happened in the past, about things that no longer mattered because it was a world away.

It still stung though.

I remembered that moment well, the moment when all my other friends had gotten their wolves. Father and Mother used to pace around the room, agitated that I hadn't shown my wolf yet. They kept begging me to try hard, as if I wasn't trying hard already. I strained so much that I felt like something was going to snap inside. I didn't like to think how many nose bleeds I created because I was tensing my muscles so tautly. Mother was praying to the Moon and consulting all kinds of old guides in the hope that some ancient remedy might work. She forced me to drink all kinds of potions, each one more bitter and pungent than the last, all to no avail.

They started to become angry towards me, as though this was all my fault. I kept telling them that I was trying, but they just weren't having it. I think one of the reasons why they were angry was because it was a poor reflection on them. Perhaps there was something wrong with their genetics, although Mother kept lamenting that she must have done something to displease the Moon.

Tradition couldn't wait forever. Eventually the Alpha had to call me into the hall and tell me that the oath was broken. He seemed sad about it, but I doubt any tears were shed. Brandon was there as well. This time he was taciturn and barely looked at me. A few words were spoken by the Alpha and that was it, the betrothal was broken and another oath was announced, this time between Brandon and Naomi, who used to be a friend of mine and was one of those who became standoffish when I was first chosen. She never came and asked me how I felt though, or commiserated with me. It was as though I had stopped existing for the vast majority of people. Since I couldn't shift into a wolf I was nothing but an outcast.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I reminded myself that I didn't need them. I didn't need anyone but Cassius. He was the man who loved me and he would protect my heart. I could give it to him safe in the knowledge that he would never betray me or humiliate me. He was a good man. However, part of me did wonder what might happen if I saw my wolf pack again. Would any of them apologize to me now that I could finally show them my wolf, or would they find some other way to ridicule me?

I suppose there was no way for me to find out. I had another future for me now, but more importantly I had another present to enjoy. There were still so many moments I could share with Cassius and it was important that I remember this fact. I did not want to ever let him think that I was not grateful to be here with him, nor did I ever want him to think that I would prefer to be somewhere else.

Chapter Four

Cassius

Now that I was back in the castle I was thinking more deeply about what Willow had said. In all these years I had never seriously considered moving from this place. It was the last vampire stronghold, and so it seemed fitting for me to remain here. I had seen plenty of other worlds during my existence as well, so the idea of flitting through the portal into different realms was exhausting. Doing that very same thing with Willow gave me a different perspective though. The things that were mundane to me were all fresh and new and exciting to her, especially with her newly developed wolf senses. No matter which portal we went through there was always something new to learn, and she was always so excited to learn it.

Perhaps it was wrong that someone as effervescent as her should be shackled to a dying world like this. I had actually made efforts to spruce the castle up; pulling old tapestries out of storage and hanging them over the walls to offer a little color and break up the drab, monotonous grey. I suppose the aesthetics of the place hadn't been at

the forefront of the designers' mind when this castle had first been built.

Should I think about moving?

There were plenty of worlds to explore, and I could not deny the allure of building a small home with her somewhere else in the world. But this castle was the last bastion of vampires. There were so many things stored here that needed to be watched over, and if anyone else should ever find their way here and it was unguarded... I shuddered at the thought. Besides, inevitably the time would come when Willow's life would fade away and I would be forced to return here. It struck me that somehow this place wouldn't be so lonely if I could look around and picture memories of her, as well as knowing that she was laid to rest close by. Perhaps it was selfish of me to think like this, but as vampires we were always trained to keep one eye on the future.

But it did raise an intriguing possibility to me. I dreaded to think about the possibility of Willow dying just as much as she did. Mourning her was as unpalatable to me as much as dying was to her. I had always boasted that this castle held all the secrets of

creation, so why not the secret of immortality? There surely must have been something in the library that would allow Willow to keep living so that we would never have to know the pain of losing each other. I wasn't necessarily in favor of this as I had explained all too well the drawbacks of being immortal, but perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if she were here to experience it with me. I would have to raise the prospect with her later.

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I was sitting at the piano, playing a long rapture when I noticed that Willow was joining me. She was wearing a scarlet gown that showed off her buxom physique and flowed out around her as she walked. Her hair was tied up, exposing her slender neck. I missed a note as her appearance shook me. She laughed and then began singing as she came to stand beside me, putting a hand on my shoulder. I lost myself in the melody as the joyous sound of her voice soared around us. It made the music come alive in a way that it never would have had she not been there. I closed my eyes and let myself fall into the sweet joy of her song, the notes rising to the high ceiling and settling there, bouncing around the acoustic

angles of this chamber. My piano rang out loud and clear, the low notes hammering the depths of the castle, while the high notes went to dance with her voice. And she... she looked breathtaking as she sang, taking on this new appearance where it seemed as though she glowed.

I used to think that falling in love was only something that happened once whenever you were with a person, but being with Willow had shown me how empty and shallow my dalliances with love had been through the years. I fell in love with her more than once. My emotions swelled and she brought a sense of renewed life to my previously barren heart.

When the song finished she bent down and kissed me deeply. I sighed happily and enjoyed the lingering hint of sweetness on my lips. She then sat down and draped her arms around my neck.

“So, what are we going to do tonight?” she asked.

I smiled. “The same thing we do every night.” I clicked my fingers and the piano began playing of its own accord. I rose from the stool and wrapped my arms around her, falling into a dancing rhythm. We swayed and spun around the chamber, throwing our heads back

and laughing. We were alone in our paradise, but that could not take away from our joy.

By the time we ended her hair had broken free of its trappings and errant strands hung loosely against her neck. Her flesh was flushed and her cheeks rosy, while her mouth was open in laughter. I sank to a chair and clicked my fingers again. The song stopped, and we were plunged into silence.

I shouldn't have stopped it.

"I was thinking about what you said earlier," I began.

The smile fell from her face. The skin in between her eyebrows crinkled. "You don't have to Cassius. I just misspoke, that's all. I didn't mean anything by it. I'm happy here."

"I know you are, but sometimes there's no harm in keep an eye on what's to come. I was thinking that if you wanted we could look to see if there's anything that could make you immortal."

She spent so long before answering that I wondered if she had heard me correctly or not. "Willow?" I

prompted.

“Sorry, I just... it’s a lot to take in. I didn’t even think there would be anything like that.”

“Well, I don’t know that there is, but if there is something then the chances are that it will be in this castle. I don’t want to think of a life without you, Willow. I have already experienced many years in this castle without you, and those years were hell. If I have to do it again then it will only be worse because I’ll have known what it was like to be with you, and to be deprived of that would be enough to make me throw myself off the parapet and down into the abyss.”

“I think after all this time your survival instinct wouldn’t let you take it that far, but I appreciate the sentiment,” Willow replied with a smile, and then she pursed her lips. “I suppose that there’s no harm in looking, but you’ve been quite frank about the downsides of eternal life. I thought you were telling me that to warn me off it.”

“That was eternal life without you,” I replied with a quick smile. She laughed and blushed.

“Why my King, you are so charming. But would we risk getting tired of each other? I admit that I am not experienced in the ways of love, but there are times when I wonder if the reason why some relationships fail is because people spend too much time with each other. I would hate for us to reach a point where we feel we can no longer be happy with each other and thus want to leave each other.”

“I can’t see that happening Willow. One of the reasons why all my relationships failed was because I couldn’t be open with them. You know everything about me and you’re still here. If you love me now I can’t see why you wouldn’t love me in a thousand years, and the same is true for me.”

She brushed a lock of hair away from her face. “I guess there’s no harm in looking, but I don’t know if I can really promise you forever. I’m going to need to get my head around it first. How can anyone imagine forever?”

“I know it’s not easy.”

“I was just thinking about the past earlier. There was a time when I got annoyed because I thought the

future was being written for me. Do you know I was supposed to have the responsibility for keeping the tradition of the wolves alive? I was supposed to give birth to a new generation that would learn from the past and sprint into the future.”

I nodded slowly. “You were going to be a mother,” I said. I choked on the words, knowing that it was something I could never give her. So much was taken away when you became a vampire.

She walked over and took my hand. “I’m not unhappy with the way my life has turned out. I don’t regret leaving. I know that people can never get everything in this life, but as long as you get enough to be happy, then so be it. Besides, like you said there’s no knowing what might happen. There could be a child out there who is just waiting for parents like us.”

This made me do a double take. “You’ve actually thought of having a child with me?”

Willow shrugged. “Why not? I think you’d make a great father. It’s not anything that I’ve been planning, I just thought, you know, if one day we come across someone who needs taking care of, then we might be a

good fit for them. After all, who would dare threaten them if they have a vampire and a wolf as parents?” she chuckled, but I couldn’t tell how serious she was.

“I’ve never been a father before,” I said. In all my other marriages I had always made an excuse as to why I did not father children. Sometimes, shamefully on my part, the women were driven crazy because they thought it was their fault. I hated that I could never explain to them the true reason. I wish things had been different.

“Then it might be an idea for you to do something that you’ve never experienced before. Even someone who has lived a hundred lives can still be surprised,” she spoke with a twinkle in her eye. Indeed, she was proving to be most surprising and I wondered what else she had in store for me. The future was certainly going to be more thrilling with her by my side, no matter if it brought anyone else into the castle. I was certain that if I only ever had her for company my life would be fulfilled, and I hoped that she felt the same way. I had yet to know if there was any way to make her immortal, but if there was then we could live out our lives in harmony.

She was sitting on my lap again, stroking my cheek and hair. She looked towards me with those deep eyes and then she said something that provoked my thoughts.

“You know Cassius, there is something else we could look for, something for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if there isn’t a way to turn me immortal then perhaps there’s a way to turn you mortal. You could finally be free of this curse, and then we could live a normal life together.”

I looked at her strangely, forcing myself to nod and smile. My throat clenched though. It was true that I had bemoaned my immortality, yet it had shackled my heart and I had grown so used to living that I did not know if it was ever possible to relinquish my grip on life. I had become so used to existing that the thought of it ending was chilling. In fact, I found the thought so troubling that I had to rise and excuse myself from her company immediately, rubbing my temples as I walked away.

Chapter Five

Willow

I hadn't really meant what I said, I mean, I didn't think it was going to cause such upset. He had never seemed fond of his immortality, always calling it a curse and saying how much had been taken away. It sounded horrible, having to fake his death and leave his family behind, as well as watching those he cared for shrivel and die before his eyes. I couldn't really blame him for coming to this castle and wanting to shut away the rest of the world. The only pain that could have been greater was the one of loneliness, which he had vanquished thanks to my presence.

Yet when I suggested the possibility of losing his immortality, he had been shaken and left my company immediately. It was now the middle of the night and still he had not come to bed. Being a vampire he did not require sleep, of course, but he still shared the bed with me at night, and we kindled a flame of passion together. Tonight, though the sheets were cold and there was an empty shadow where he should have been. My hands wandered around my body, wishing they were his. I

yearned for his seductive kisses and his mysterious eyes as well as the sensations that felt as though shooting stars were rocketing through my soul and leaving me in complete and utter bliss.

But what was left was only a whisper instead of the screams that I was used to hearing, the cacophony of two souls in complete and utter harmony.

Had I been mistaken? Was there something amiss? I had let myself plunge into love with Cassius after being willing to trust him, but was there something else I should have been questioning? I didn't want to doubt him, but at the same time if there was a chance for us to spend eternity together then shouldn't I face any doubt and put it to the test, otherwise I would be like him and end up lamenting my fate. Eternity could only be paradise if it was shared with someone on a deep and profound level.

One problem with Cassius that I had noted during the course of our relationship so far was that he had spent too much time by himself. He was used to silence, to solitude, to never having to explain his thoughts to anyone. It often led to him being somewhat guarded

where emotions were concerned, and on occasion I was required to pry them from his grasp as though I was digging up some ancient gem that was in the clutches of a stone statue. It wasn't Cassius' fault, it was just human nature, or perhaps I should say vampire nature in this instance. He had been without a companion for so long that it sometimes did not occur to him that I might not know what was going through his mind, or that I might like to know.

There was clearly something troubling him, and now it was left for me to decide if I should let him have this time to figure things out by himself, or go and find him directly.

I chose the latter.

Perhaps it was the wolf inside me, but ever since I had embraced the primal instinct I felt myself becoming more direct and more passionate. When Cassius and I had first made love I had been timid and unsure. Those feelings had quickly diminished, and even more so once I had fully accepted the wolf as a part of me. She filled me with this urgency and more often than not I was the more passionate one between the two of us, losing myself

into a heated frenzy that commandeered my entire body and soul.

So I swung my legs out of bed and I wrapped a robe around me, protecting me from the chill that seeped in through the stone walls. They could guard from arrows and armies, but a gentle chill could whisper through the defense of the keep without any problem at all.

With my newfound improved senses (the wolf had the effect of enhancing my senses even when I was in human form) I did not have any need of a torch. The shadows held no mystery for me, so even in the dim light I was able to find my way. My footsteps were light against the stone floor. I wore thin slippers to protect the flesh of my feet from the cold. I strained my ears to listen for any sound of Cassius, even though I knew it was likely futile. The simple truth was that Cassius would not be found by normal means. Vampires were elusive and if he wanted, he could have hidden from me for days. Many of the stories may have been made up by them to make them seem more daunting, but I had heard tales of the vampires from my own parents that spoke of how

intimidating they could be, and how just one of them could decimate a wolf pack if given the chance.

I shuddered as I walked these empty halls, thinking about how this castle would have once been filled with so many of them. Despite any personal feelings I may have had towards Cassius, my gut feeling as a wolf was to hate them and feel uneasy anywhere vampires lingered. Unfortunately, this feeling had been exacerbated by the embrace of my wolf as well. I kept telling myself that it did not matter, because the vampires were not coming back. Cassius had done away with them, sending them into some nether realm that was beyond time and space, confining them to their own reality because they were about to wage war on anyone who was not a vampire.

Cassius had saved so many people's lives, and he would never get thanks for it. I thought that was incredibly sad.

I searched through a few rooms, beginning in the music hall as I thought he might have wanted to tinkle on his piano. They were all empty though, and I was forced to think about Cassius and how well I knew him. I couldn't very well search the entire castle because that

would take all night and all day, the immense structure hiding rooms within rooms in an endless labyrinth. It even went down to the pit of the mountain... and then it hit me. If Cassius had his mind on death, then where else would he have gone but to his tomb?

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I made the journey down to the tomb area, retracing my steps from when I had been here before. Then, I had drugged Cassius and sent him to sleep while I searched for a diary that a mystery note from the previous companion, Clea, had pointed me towards. It had been a personal low for me, a nadir that I had not been able to apologize enough for. When I thought back to it now I hated myself for being so willing to turn on Cassius, for being so easily misled. I swore that I would never do that again.

The grey stone of the castle had given way to that of the mountain, which was darker, obsidian. It looked as though the castle melted into the mountain. The caves were drenched in darkness and the chill was even worse here, creeping through my skin into my bones. I felt more alone down here than I ever had in the wolf pack

with them all turning their backs on me. This was a place that was devoid of something essential in the world, a place where death was allowed to encroach, but never be invited in.

I rounded a corner and saw the tombs stretching out in a seemingly endless graveyard. Each of them was empty. Each of them was a reminder of how Cassius had banished them from this place. Amara's was ostentatious and gaudy, but Cassius wasn't sitting beside hers. He had his back to me, sitting near a humble tomb with just a narrow stone rising up from the coffin.

"It's late. I thought you were going to come to bed," I said gently.

He angled his head towards me, although he did not look at me fully. "I'm sorry. I got lost in thought. You shouldn't have been worried. You should have just slept."

"You know that I find it hard to sleep without you being around now. I've gotten too used to your presence," I smiled, trying to be charming and a little playful. He wasn't taking the bait though, and simply sighed and settled into his silence. I stepped closer to him, gazing at the stone coffin. The heavy lid was not

pulled away, which I found reassuring because I thought it was morbid to gaze into the depths of one's own abyss.

“Is this really a healthy thing to do?” I asked.

“I'm not sure. Probably not, but I am doing it all the same.”

I looked at his coffin and then around at all the others. “I would have thought that you'd have a bigger coffin, given you're the last of them, given all that you had done.”

“Like Amara you mean?” he glanced across at her tomb. “I remember when she first showed me down here. She was so proud of what she had built. She kept tinkering with it all the time, chipping a bit here, sculpting another bit there, adding another inscription or another little detail. I don't think she was ever going to be satisfied with it, but then she ends up not using it at all. I think that's part of the reason why she hated me so much. She didn't even get to lay at rest in the place she had prepared.” He took in a deep breath. “But no, to answer your question I didn't want anything so extravagant. As far as I was concerned when death came for me it didn't matter where I lay because I was going to

be hidden from view, and it wasn't as though I've done much with my life that is worth remembering. I think it's better that I should be forgotten."

"I disagree with that. But I didn't come down here to talk about your tomb. There's something troubling you. Is it something to do with what I said earlier, about finding a way to make you mortal?"

He looked to the floor, and I knew then that this was exactly why he was down here. I folded my arms across my chest and regarded him with a stern look. I was tired, and I hated being in this place because it made my stomach churn. These factors went some way to explaining my irritability. "I only thought it was worth looking into. I figure if I'm going to be immortal to live with you then it's only fair that you look into being mortal as well. Maybe I was wrong, or maybe you're just not willing to make that sacrifice for me."

I know that was unfair, but the words had already left my lips before I could stop them. Cassius flashed me a steely glare. I hope he saw the apology in my eyes. He collected himself and composed his thoughts, speaking to me in a voice that was like a whisper. Like the library,

this was a place that required a certain amount of awe and respect. It seemed wrong to have a full-throated conversation.

“You have to understand Willow that for a vampire we are taught to taunt death and make a joke of his relentless chase. To become mortal would be to welcome him. It would go against everything that I have been taught, everything I believe in.”

“Doesn’t loving a werewolf also do that as well?”

He inclined his head. “A fair point, but that is not such a fundamental shift in my perspective of the world. To actually lose the immortality would be...” he stared at his fingers, “it would mean that all I am, all I have created would be lost from this world.”

“Which is the same as every mortal. You know, for someone who was complaining about living too long you’re awfully reluctant to look into this,” I said, and then it twigged. My eyes widened and I was so pleased with myself at realizing the truth that I lost the sense of decorum and ended up blurting this out in a loud voice, one that echoed through the caverns of the mountain.

“You’re scared of dying aren’t you!” I exclaimed.

Cassius scowled at me and looked around, as though we were going to disturb something. “You shouldn’t say things like that. He might be listening.”

“Who?”

“Death.”

I tilted my head. “Wait, you really believe he exists? I thought it was just the general concept.”

“Either way, something is there. There’s a cessation to all life that cannot be ignored. There is something moving through the cosmos like a wave that eventually penetrates all life and brings it to an end. To actually welcome this is something that runs contrary to all the beliefs I have cultivated over my entire life.”

I studied him for a few moments. “Then maybe those beliefs need changing, or at least challenging. You’ve been stuck with the same thoughts for years. They’ve become rooted in your mind. Maybe it’s for the best that you try to untangle them and think of things in a different way. It might not be so bad.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder. He continued to look pensive. There were times like these when I

recognized the distance that lay between us, the chasm of the years that was impassable. There were so many thoughts that had gone through his mind, more than I could comprehend, and he had faced death in many different ways. Could I ever think of something as insightful or surprising that had not occurred to him? I was not sure. But I could at least make him forget about things for a while.

I ran my fingers across the back of his neck, gently playing with his skin. I kissed him and whispered in his ear. He responded and looked up at me, smiling. Our hands met, our fingers entwined, and I gently coaxed him away from this ghastly place. We returned to the castle in silence and found our way to the bedchamber again. Then we slipped underneath the blankets and gave our bodies to love.

Chapter Six

Cassius

The night was long, as they all were. Darkness stretched across the hours. It was so inky and black that often it seemed as though daylight was never going to emerge again. The pitiful excuse for a day that existed in this world, anyway. I glanced across at the sleeping form of my paramour, my partner, my love. We had not needed to formally validate anything so I could not call her my wife, but in my heart that was exactly what she was. I had been married before, but never had I given my soul so freely to another person. Never had I allowed anyone else to gaze into the vulnerabilities that I had and see me not just as a vampire, but as a being with fears and dreams and doubts.

The blanket was draped around her slender curves. She had her back to me. She slept naked. Moonlight spilled in through the window and flowed over her body, giving it a silver sheen. She looked ethereal. I reached out a hand, but as my fingers hovered over the surface of her flesh she stirred and murmured. I did not wish to disturb her, so I withdrew my hand. Long, deep breaths

flowed out of her. She looked restful, and I envied her this.

I wondered if I could, in all good conscience, turn her immortal, if we found a way. I could not turn her into a vampire of course; it was not possible to turn a werewolf. Their souls were already bound to the Moon and they could not be stolen no matter what happened. They could only die.

Sometimes I wondered what she might think if she knew what I had done to her brethren in the past. Occasionally when she was in her wolf form I thought back to a time before when I had been sent into a battle, a willing soldier against a savage foe. I remember feeling smug as I saw them searching the air, trying to catch my scent, only to swoop down and kill them before they even had a chance to realize I was there.

Willow had never asked me if I had fought against werewolves. I had implied it, and she certainly knew enough about the historic rivalry between our people to assume that at some stage I had partaken in the conflict, so perhaps she has decided it is better not to know. I

suppose there is no changing it now, and she doesn't have much love for her people anyway.

She looks so gentle there, with her hair falling along her milky skin, like a piece of art come to life. Without her it is fair to say that I am nothing. I was just a whisper before she came along. But now... now I think of the future and I wonder what it holds for me.

But to look at the future, I sometimes turn my gaze to the past. Another curse of the vampire is that we remember so many things, painful things that continue to stab at our minds and stay with us forever, never allowing us to be free.

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I remember the first night with my first wife. She was a pretty young thing, naïve to the ways of the world, dazzled by my wealth and fine clothes and large house. Her father had practically begged me to marry her, although at the time there were plenty of fathers who wanted their daughters to be joined with me in matrimony. Anna had the unfortunate fate of being the one I chose. She had an uncanny resemblance to Imogen, the first woman I had ever been infatuated with, and so I

mistakenly thought that I could rectify mistakes of the past. But Anna was, of course, not Imogen, and I was not the same man I used to be.

I was not a man at all.

Amara had tried to warn me that it was a mistake, but she could not dissuade me.

I took Anna as my wife and I promised myself to her. I lied as I said I would love her until death parted us, because I knew that death was only going to take her from me and not the other way around. That night I made love with a woman for the first time in my life. Anna seemed terrified and frozen. She whimpered and cried out in pain, while in my mind I was somewhere else, years before, imagining that Imogen had chosen me over all the other men. It was a shock when I opened my eyes and saw Anna below me, wincing in pain, feigning ecstasy.

It was not my proudest moment. Perhaps that was the first time I saw that I had truly become a monster, with an empty heart inside my chest.

Anna draped herself around me and told me that it would be better the next time, that she would be better. I

held her and reassured her that it was fine, for I knew that it would never be perfect. She would never be Imogen.

It took me longer than I care to admit to free myself from the tethered feelings that I had given so willingly to Imogen. When I think back now I can only see myself as a naïve fool who did not know any better, who filled his heart with idle thoughts of romance and grand sweeping gestures, but the truth was that by the time I married Anna, Imogen had died so there was no way I was ever going to see her again. I should never have cursed Anna with a life with me, but by this point it was too late.

And it wasn't long before the troubles started. Anna and I tried for children, which invariably failed. She became distraught, thinking it was her failure. I tried to seek solace with Amara, who had experience in these situations.

She laughed and told me that this was a harsh lesson I needed to learn; that I should never form attachments with mortals because it would only end up hurting them. I should either use them and be done with them, or turn them if I truly wanted to spend my life with

them. It was a lesson that I would not learn properly until many years later, because I kept making the same mistakes. I could never have turned them though, not after what Amara had done to me. I never wanted anyone to feel the same way I felt.

But love has always been a difficult thing and I have never quite mastered it, until now, perhaps. There are so many different facets to it, and I find myself wondering if Willow would have fallen in love with me had she met me all those years ago, when I was a younger and weaker man, filled with arrogance and pride. It is quite a grim thought that it has taken me hundreds of years to grow into a man who is capable of being loved.

I never seriously considered the thought of being a father until Willow mentioned it. It has been so far from my thoughts for so long. There were times when I discussed it with my wives, but I was only ever half involved in the conversations, my mind on something else entirely. The world can be a cruel place. Many poets and thinkers have bestowed majesty and grandeur to the mortal experience, vaunting the qualities of life and suggesting that it is the pinnacle of all that is and all that

could ever be, as though they are salesmen hawking the latest product, claiming it is essential for everyone.

I am not so sure it is. Life is a jumbled mess of chaos that hurts more than it heals. It is barbaric, with humans careening through life without control or order. They are like marbles jingling around in a net, colliding and crashing without rhyme or reason, and yet they claim that this is something to be marveled at, that somehow they are above the animals because they have this precious grasp on consciousness, that life should be cherished because it is the only thing there is. Without existence we are, literally, nothing, and yet as I think on this matter I realize that I am really no better than them.

After all, look at me, I cling to life because it is the only thing I have. I live far beyond the lifespan of any mortal man, and the whims of life have lost their virtue. It is rare that I am surprised by anything. I live the same day over and over again, and it is only the woman I share my life with who gives it meaning. I suppose a child could do the same, if ever there was one who would fit into our lives. I am not sure that this castle is a suitable place for a child to grow up, and what kind of parent

would I be? What kind of maudlin lessons would I teach, and what shape would I form a mind into?

Even with these questions there was a part of me that wanted to give Willow something that I had never been able to give any other woman. I wanted her to see how special she was and make sure she knew she was adored, for even though she might have been happy with the circumstances as they were, I knew people had a propensity to change. There may come a time when she would want a child and it would become a matter of importance to her, so much so that she might end up leaving me for someone else who could give her what she wanted.

At this thought I scowled and my hand curled into a fist. I stared at the ceiling, but I glanced over at her, hating the thought of her ever leaving me. I had waited so long for her and I loved her so fiercely that it was clear no other man deserved her, no other man could ever treat her the way that I could treat her. I clenched my jaw, ready to wage war for her, before telling myself to breathe and to calm down, because none of this had to

matter. I did not need to work myself up over something that had not happened yet, and may not happen at all.

But still... I thought of all the women I had called my wives and how I had lost them all. Would Willow truly be any different? Could I be any different?

It was these thoughts that kept me company through the night, for I was never given a chance to sleep.

It was just another thing that being a vampire had robbed me of.

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Morning arrived. Sunlight came slanting through the window, illuminating shards of dust that hung in the air as though they had been caught and frozen. Willow turned and opened her eyes slowly. Seeing her eyes appear was akin to seeing the sun rise on the horizon. A bewitching smile stretched across her face and she murmured as she adjusted her position, rolling onto her back. The blanket shifted down, tantalizingly showing me all of her breasts apart from the rosy nipples. She reached a hand up and caressed my lower neck and

upper chest, pulling me in for a kiss. She smelled of sweetness and of life, and I basked in her glory.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday, Willow, and I think you’re right. It’s only fair that if we look into ways of making you immortal we also look into making me mortal as well. I would not wish to live without you, and perhaps my thoughts on death have become too entrenched over time. I cannot chastise humans for thinking that life is divine but then cling to it as though it is all I have. If my life is ever to come to an end then I hope that it is with you by my side. I could not think of a happier ending than to come to rest with you.”

Willow smiled. “Let’s not think about that just yet. I’d much rather think about all the things we can do before that happens. I’m hoping that either way I have a lot of good years remaining before I grow old,” she said. I smiled. I had watched other people age. At first the changes are subtle, almost unnoticeable, but then the creases and wrinkles appear, the soft winces and hunched shoulders become more apparent, the hair loses its luster, and in the end they are but a withered shell of what they once were. People are flowers caught in bloom,

and then wilt as the last years of their lives approach. In some of them beauty faded as well, although I knew that this would not be true of Willow.

Her beauty was as perennial as the stars.

“So where are we going to begin?” she asked, her fingers dancing down my body.

“Well, the library would be a natural place to start. There must be some piece of wisdom that has truth to it,” I replied, my words faltering as her hand slipped under the blanket. I caught the twinkle in her eye and the sly smile.

“I think I’d prefer to remind you of what you have to live for Cassius. Let’s remind ourselves to seize the day,” she said. I watched as her head disappeared beneath the blanket, and then my body was seized with pleasure. Her breath washed over me and then her lips grazed against the most sensitive area in my body. I fell back, swallowed by the bed as her hair fell over my thighs. I watched the blanket move as she drew her head back and forth while she made love to me with her mouth. I closed my eyes and surrendered to the pleasure,

feeling it flow through me until she had taken everything
in a shuddering, hazy burst.

Chapter Seven

Willow

I felt alive. I felt invigorated. There were some days when I felt as though I could take on the world. The wolf blood inside me boiled and raged and inspired me to rush though the world and take whatever I could. Unfortunately the world we inhabited did not offer much in the way of hunting, so I had to ask Cassius to create a portal to another world. After giving him so much pleasure he was always glad to oblige. We could start on our new project later. For now, I needed to hunt.

I knew it was a desire that Cassius did not share. He might have even been disgusted by it, but it was a fundamental part of my nature. After he brought me to his castle, Cassius had provided me with a potion that gave me all the nutrients I needed, and meant that I did not have to worry about food. I had gotten used to the potion's pungent aroma and its bitter taste so it was at least palatable to me now, but there was something I missed about the act of eating. As a wolf sometimes all I really wanted was to sink my teeth into a juicy piece of

meat and feel the gorgeous taste sweeping through my mouth.

So, he indulged me, and that was how I found myself in this world. It was a grassy forest. The sky was dark, the sun low. The forest was alive with scents and sounds. It reminded me a lot of the place I used to call home. I remember sitting there watching as the wolves all gathered for a great hunt, streaking away as a pack, ready to hunt together and help each other. I used to sit in the camp and listen to the echo of their howls. I could figure out where they were in the forest as they communicated with each other, but I never joined in a hunt myself.

And now I hunted alone.

Sometimes Cassius did come with me, but he just flitted above me through the trees, watching more than taking part.

Like sex, I thought that hunting was something that would be more enjoyable when shared with another person, but in lieu of any other wolves I was forced to wring as much pleasure from it as I could myself. It might have been part of why the thought of having a

child had occurred to me. I did not want to make Cassius feel bad, as I knew that he could be sensitive about the things that had been taken away from him due to his vampirism. However, having a child might allow me to find companionship with someone else, someone who could understand what it was to be a wolf, if indeed we found a lost little wolf child.

I warned myself that I should not think about it too much because the odds of it ever happening were slim. Cassius had not actually agreed to it at all, and even if he did it was going to be a challenge to find the right child. It was difficult to rein in these feelings though. Being in love was so thrilling and so exciting that it opened my mind up to the way things could be. All the possibilities of the world seemed to hang above me like ripe fruit from a tree, and it was just a matter of plucking them all.

It was never as simple in reality though, and I had to remind myself that just because I was in love with Cassius it did not mean that we could have everything.

Having each other ultimately would be enough, and anything else would just be a bonus.

But, for now I set those thoughts aside and I embraced the wolf within, ready to sate her hunger for a hunt. I stood amid the trees and stretched my arms out. I felt the air rippled over my naked skin, and then I heard the wolf in the back of my mind. It was a howl that had been silent for many years until I had taken this amulet, and even so I was afraid that one day I would wake again and the howl would fall silent. After I had attuned to the amulet I had tested it; taking it off to see if the wolf would remain.

She did not.

But I saw her in the depths of my mind, the proud wolf stalking out from the hidden part of my soul, ready to claim agency of my body. She was me and I was her, and yet there was something else about her as well. She was the best part of me, unbidden and untamed, without anything holding her back.

I looked directly in her eyes and welcomed her into my heart. I felt the rush of adrenalin and then the cracking pain as my bones and flesh reshaped themselves. Blessings and curses often came hand in hand. When Cassius became a vampire he was given so

much, and yet so much was taken away from him. It was a similar thing with wolves. My body was flooded with pain, yet the end result was always worth enduring the ripping, tearing sensations. My scream turned into a howl as I fell upon my front paws, my milky skin giving way to darker fur. I tasted the air. I heard prey in the distance. I caught their scents rushing around me and all I had to do was to select one to bring home with me. Cassius did not need to eat, but that did not mean he couldn't eat. I thought it would be nice for us to share a meal together, something that was such a rare occasion.

My ears pricked up and I stretched out my powerful muscles, feeling stronger than I ever did in my other form. As I looked around, the forest became less a thing of beauty to be admired with the gaze of an artist, and more an arena to wage war. I had to lay claim to this place and prove myself to be the apex predator, and to do that I had to take down something big. I glanced back at the portal, knowing that Cassius would keep it open for as long as I needed. He waited for me there, my King, but as his Queen I would hunt for him and give my wolf what she needed to survive.

I broke into a sprint, following a trail of a scent. My nose guided me. I sniffed this way and that and fought against the pull of the other scents. This forest teemed with life. I could have spent a lifetime here if I wanted to, losing myself in the act of hunting, gorging myself on all the creatures it offered. Perhaps if I turned immortal then I would hunt for an eternity, feeding myself over and over again with an endless array of delicious meals.

I slowed as I saw my prey. It was a giant boar, with tusks curving from its face like scimitars. It was snuffling along the ground, moving its head from side to side, oblivious to my presence. I lay hidden behind a shrub, pressing my stomach to the ground. My gaze was trained on it. I watched its every movement and inched forward, taking care to not make a noise. My steps were light and I avoided stepping on any twigs. Its scent flooded my mind and I trained myself on it, carefully moving around, stalking it until I had it firmly in my gaze without anything between us.

My sinewy, lithe body moved forward silently. I was so close, and this was the moment where many hunts failed because one movement that was too eager could

ruin it all. I maintained my patience though and by the time the boar realized I was upon it, it was too late. I lunged forward as it started to scamper away, stretching out my front legs. My claws were extended and I sank them into its flesh, dragging it back as it squealed. I was lost in a blood frenzy and pulled it down, sinking my teeth into its neck. A warm river gushed out. It trembled and tried to kick towards me, tried to angle its head and impale me on its tusks, but it was too late. I had claimed its life and as I tore meat from its bones I lifted my head and howled in triumph.

Perhaps there was some wolf out there in the endless infinity of the world who would hear my howl among the stars and know that I had claimed this life.

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I returned to Cassius and lay a chunk of charred meat before him. I arched an eyebrow and smiled proudly.

“You had a successful hunt then?”

I sighed and settled into a chair. In my hand I had a steak. Fire had licked it and now it was warm in my

hands. I tore it with my teeth, feeling the taste rush over my tongue.

“You could say that. I wish you could know the exhilaration of a hunt Cassius. I think a man of your passion would quite enjoy it.”

Cassius smirked. “I save my passion for one thing and one thing only.”

“The piano?” I teased. We both laughed. He fetched a knife and fork and cut his meat into thin slices before eating it. I noticed the shimmer of pleasure that passed along his face. I took another big bite again, leaving the meat severed and ugly. I chewed loudly, something that I knew annoyed him, but I was too lost in the hunger to be polite. Sometimes the wolf lingered even after I had regained my human form.

It was perhaps because of the wolf that I asked him something that had been fluttering around the back of my mind, although I had never been brave enough to speak it.

“You have hunted before though, haven’t you Cassius? Do you ever miss the taste of flesh?”

I knew it was inappropriate as soon as I said it, but the truth was, my curiosity got the better of me. Cassius flinched. He stared down at his plate and then pushed it away from him.

“I’m not sure that’s a question you would like to ask me. There are some things that should remain in the past.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Cassius, you don’t have to hide anything from me. I love you. I know that you’re a vampire, and I know what that entails. It’s not like werewolves are the gentlest beings in existence either. Whatever you’ve done you can tell me. You don’t have to be ashamed.”

“I just prefer to try and forget those times. I had lost myself somewhat. But to answer your question there is, unfortunately, an innate part of me that does crave the fresh blood of a living thing, but thankfully we have the capability to rise above our base natures and I don’t see that changing any time soon. I can survive with the methods at my disposal,” he said. The methods were a potion that gave him what he needed, which had been developed by some vampires many years ago who did not

like being victim to the craving of blood. This was a part of his life that he did not talk about often though, and so I found myself pressing the issue, hoping that since he had opened himself up to the subject we might be able to talk about it in more depth.

“Did you ever feel like you were a monster? I’m assuming that Amara must have taught you how to hunt?”

Cassius ran his tongue underneath his upper lip and then sighed, perhaps knowing that I was not going to let this matter rest. “Yes, she did. At first, when I was weak, she brought me victims. All I knew then was hunger, so I did not question it, but as time went on I began to worry about the state I was in and how much harm I was doing to other people. She had stripped me of many things, but something of my conscience was still intact. She tried to explain to me that mortals were simply vessels we could do with as we pleased. She thought, as many vampires did, that they were lesser beings and were not deserving of any respect.”

“But you thought differently.”

Cassius shrugged. “I had been in the inns and taverns where only the loneliest, most forlorn souls ventured, and I heard their pitiful stories. Each one of them had hopes and dreams and ambitions. Each one of them was a world unto themselves, and to take that away with such casual disregard was callous. I could not bring myself to do it.”

“So how did you manage the craving then?”

This time Cassius reached over and picked up a slice of meat with his fingers, popping it into his mouth.

“Hunting, for vampires, is not the same as hunting is for wolves. You go into an environment and catch a scent in the air. You survey the area and look at what is available to you, and then you choose what is easiest to catch, unless you’re in a particular mood for a challenge. For vampires we can nourish ourselves on a single feast for a long time, and as such we need to choose our targets carefully. Wolves will howl in the night and nobody will give a damn, but if a vampire is seen then all hell will break loose. We cannot allow our masks to drop, which means that we need to pick our victims with discretion. They must be disposed of secretly, and often

that means a private invitation. Wolves do not have to learn to charm their victims and earn their trust,” he offered a sly smile as he said this, for he often enjoyed teasing me about my past.

“So, who did you choose?”

“At first, I chose those who had wronged me. I equated my thirst for vengeance with a thirst for blood. There was a particular man who had never appreciated my music and had always turned me down immediately whenever I auditioned for him. I stalked him for many nights, learning his routine and his habits. I learned he had a penchant for a particular woman in a particular brothel, despite being a man of repute with a family. He used to visit this woman in the night before staggering home. He liked to keep to the back streets to avoid anyone noticing him, so it became quite easy to wait for him. I lurked in the shadows and as he left, I followed him, becoming his shadow. Amara had told me that it was beneficial to strike before they ever had a chance to see me, but I wanted him to see. The awful thing was that he did not remember me at all. I had to remind him of who I was, and he dismissed me as some common thief.

He offered me money, but money wasn't what I wanted. I killed him and then dragged his body to the river and watched it disappear after I had fed on him. I was left staring down at that murky water, feeling utterly empty. Getting rid of him had not done me any good at all, and so I quickly abandoned my plan to take care of everyone on my list."

"You actually had a list?"

Cassius nodded. "I burned it when I returned though. I was not like Amara. I could not pick anyone at random and then snuff out the flame of their life. I thought that if I was to feed on them then I should make sure that I was choosing the right person. So I then thought about the people who I shared the taverns with, the people whose laments I had witnessed over and over again. There were many who struggled with life and simply wanted it to be over. For those who were in too much pain, whether it was from poverty or wounds or illness, I came to them and offered a release. I told them it would be painless which, for the most part, it was. I have always found it curious why wanting to kill oneself is seen as such a sin among humans."

“I suppose because it goes against the base instincts of survival.”

“Indeed, but I saw that these people were suffering and they had no way out. Many of them did not have the determination to kill themselves, so I gave them a helping hand. I thought this way was the most humane. I did not take a life that did not want to be taken. Some people were terminally ill and so I ended their life before they had a chance to lose what they coveted the most.”

“And what was that?”

Cassius considered the matter for a couple of moments. “I suppose that would be the concept of choice. People did not like having things taken away from them without their consent. At least with me they were able to decide whether they wanted to end their lives or not.”

“Do you ever feel guilty or remorseful about what you did?”

Cassius sighed. “Sometimes. I think there are some people I could have helped in different ways, or perhaps I could have used my long lifespan to try and work my way up into a position of authority and change the

system from within, but that wouldn't really have been feasible.”

“Because as vampires you're supposed to hide away from public attention.”

“Exactly. In fact, that's one of the reasons why we returned to this castle. Being in that world as the technology progressed became hazardous. With all the surveillance and devices that made people able to take pictures and videos at the press of a button it became harder to keep ourselves hidden. Eventually we would have been hunted.”

I nodded. “Werewolves suffered from that as well. I remember that one vacation as a child my parents took me to the city. Before we left they told me that people there didn't know about us, and that we had to keep things secret from them. I didn't really understand at first. It blew my mind to realize that not everyone had something extra about them, and when I saw the city I was overwhelmed by how busy it was. There was something happening everywhere, and so many people. I just... it was at that moment that I realized I was in the minority. Being surrounded by wolves made that world

seem normal to me, but when I was in the city I realized that all of those people had no idea about us, that in fact we were just stories they told each other to amuse themselves. I could never quite come to terms with that.”

“That you were in the minority?”

I nodded. “I thought that one day I could stretch my legs across the world and go and visit anyone I wanted. But I couldn’t, not without my past being discovered. I didn’t like to lie to people about where I came from. I thought it would just lead to things being more complicated than they needed to be.”

“You were wise to do that,” Cassius said, his opinion borne from experience.

“But it was strange to know that all the stories I was told, all the things I believed, were just shared between a small group of us and that it wasn’t what the majority of people thought. On the way back I ask my parents why we didn’t live in the city. They told me that it would be dangerous because those people didn’t like those who were different from them, and it would only lead to us being hunted and attacked, and eventually killed. I couldn’t believe it would happen. I didn’t understand

why people would ever want to attack others just because they were different. As wolves, we hunt because it is what our hearts and stomachs require, but we pay due respect to the beasts of the world, and we never take more than we need. If we attack vampires it is due to self preservation and fear.”

“That is precisely why the humans attacked people like us. They became so good at it, in fact, that it forced us all to go into hiding. I dread to think what could have happened to vampires if we did not retreat here. Eventually we would have all been tracked and probably hoisted up for all the world to see. They would have made a good example of us.”

“Well, my pack has managed to hide. I don’t see anything changing there.”

“Perhaps not now, but the humans have a way of spreading everywhere. They’re like locusts. I wouldn’t be surprised if they somehow found a way here at some point. Sometimes they are so naïve and wonderful, and other times they are vicious. Just when I think that I am missing being around them, I remind myself of what they’re capable of, and that helps me to stay away.”

“Did you ever have a war with the humans?”

“I did not partake in a war, but Amara did. It happened a long time ago, when she was first turned.”

“How was she turned?”

Cassius arched his eyebrows and a strange look came over his face. He seemed bewildered that he hadn't told me this story before.

“Amara used to be a nun, if you can believe it. She lived in a convent in England back in a time when the King had absolute power and peasants tilled the land. She lived outside a small village and helped to heal various ailments of the people. They paid the convent in bread and cheese and other offerings like this. She was a devout woman who had promised herself to the Lord and the Lord alone,” he shuddered as he said this, almost as though speaking the word caused him pain. “One year a man moved into a home and said that he was some nobleman who had had enough of the city. He made grand donations to the convent and attended church every week, becoming an integral and beloved part of the community. He also took a particular liking to Amara. As she tells it the other nuns warned her that he was a test

sent by God, but she assured them that her virtue would be able to withstand anything. She welcomed this man into her company and even visited with him whenever he asked for some spiritual healing, as a way to show that she would not be tainted by sin.

As it turned out, this man was a vampire, and Amara was his target. One evening, the evening he had chosen to feed, he told her who he was and what was going to happen. She screamed and tried to run, but before she could he already had her. He turned her and after that she was never the same. She was now a demon, a thing of evil, a thing she had always sworn against. She went back to the convent, but the other nuns could see the monster in her and they drove her away. Amara spent a lot of time wading through the swamps and bogs of England until she resurfaced and then took up a sword, becoming a warrior and pretending to fight for a Holy cause. When the time came, however, she turned on her trainers and killed in the name of vampires, quelling any threats to us through the years.”

“Did you have to banish the one who turned her as well?”

Cassius offered an amused smile at this. “No, In fact the Lord was found brutally murdered years later, his head separated from his body. His maid found him one morning. Nobody ever discovered who had killed him or why. It was one of the great unsolved mysteries of the age, but this is another example as to why vampires needed to choose who to sire carefully. Turning the wrong person could end up being your undoing.”

“As it did for Amara in the end.”

Cassius looked away. “Yes, well, I think that is enough of a history lesson for today. We should perhaps go to the library and begin our studies,” he said. I swallowed the last piece of meat and nodded in agreement.

Chapter Eight

Cassius

It was rare that I should bring up the past in such vivid detail, especially where Amara is concerned. I can still remember her sitting with me and telling me how she was turned. The spite she held for that man had never faded over the years. It was the same sense of betrayal she had for me after she learned what I had planned. She had convinced herself that the only way vampires could survive was by waging war. Her entire life had been shrouded by war. She hadn't been able to step away from herself and look at the bigger picture. It was a shame really. She could have led the vampires into a new era if she hadn't still had the barbaric mindset of a medieval warrior.

Willow had asked me if I felt guilty about the people I had fed on over the years. The truth is I did feel guilt with regards to Amara. I wished there had been some way to talk sense into her or make her see reason, but I was really left with no choice. But still, I was the one who pushed the vampires away. I was the last King, and I was also the one responsible for pushing them into

another realm. Willow and I were both outcasts, but for different reasons. She had been pushed away, while I was the one who had done the pushing. Echoes of war flashed through my mind as I thought about the years that had slipped away. I remember us being given our orders, marching out into clandestine parts of the world as lone soldiers in a shadow war, infiltrating clusters of men who were brazen and bold about their hatred of monsters, without ever realizing that they were staring one in the face. And then, at night, they would sleep an endless sleep as they were slain before they charged into battle. Vampires were masters of war, and Amara had learned that the best way to win was to kill the enemy before they even realized they were in a fight.

Much of my life had been spent in deceit. Lying had been as easy as breathing, and it was all because I had been turned from my natural path into something else. In truth I could understand why the humans hated us, because we were corrupted versions of them. Perhaps they were right to want us all dead. I was happy to call humans an infestation, but they likely thought the same of us.

It was troubling to let these thoughts slip into my mind, however. The old world was bleeding in and I did not wish to stay there for any longer than I needed to. I did not need Willow thinking about the person I had been, and I did not wish to be that person either. I wanted to think about the future and the kind of person I could be alongside Willow, and the key to that might well have been found within the library.

“So here we are again,” Willow said with a sigh. I smiled.

“If you would rather go elsewhere there’s still plenty of the castle to explore,” I said.

“No, we should probably get on with this. Besides, who knows what else we might find? This place is a treasure trove.”

“You won’t say that after you’ve been through a collection of studies of various plant life and the pollination habits of various flowers during the spring and summer seasons.”

I was teasing her really. The library was a room of which I was most proud. Aside from the artifacts kept within the castle, this vault of knowledge was the sum of

all that the vampires had achieved. There were novels and memoirs written by people who had lived for countless years (I had thought about writing my own and begun it many times, but somehow I always became distracted), as well as philosophical musings, and I must say these are interesting as ethics has a distinct viewpoint when looked at through the lens of people who are not concerned with consequences in the afterlife. So much of human morality is based on some arbitrary justice system that is going to take effect beyond the grave. Vampires believe that people must take accountability of their actions in the here and now, so that justice can be done. It's also liberating to live a life freely, without trying to appease some silent overseer. I have recommended some of these books to Willow, but so far, she does not seem to be interested in them.

As we did before, we strolled through different parts of the library. I did furrow my brow and cast wary glances in her direction. The last time we had been looking for something in the library, she had found a note from Clea. My chest still tightened when I thought about what happened with her. As soon as she got the slightest hint that something was amiss she chose to run

instead of listening to what I had to say. Sadly, the same thing had always happened with Willow. Thankfully she showed the wherewithal to stay. I could not check through all the books, of course, but I did wonder if Clea had left anything else behind. I could only shake my head in disbelief. I had never been anything other than honest with the poor girl. In the end everything worked out for the best though. I ended up with Willow, and Clea had apparently lived a long life.

It's strange to think that if Clea had stayed here I would be prepared to lose her now. I shook the thought away, for it only gave me a grim premonition of what the future held for myself and Willow.

I did not think that our search would not be so aimless or arduous than the previous one, however. I had had no previous inclination to search for an amulet that would allow Willow to access her wolf, so it was a tedious affair to forage for the truth. I was, however, interested in different meditations on the subject of mortality, so I had a few good starting points to begin with. I had sent Willow in search of one of them, while I had another in mind. I walked along the book shelves, running my

fingers across the spine before I came across one of the books. I picked it up and carried it to one of the tables in the middle of the room and sat down, waiting for Willow to join me. I didn't have to wait for long. She appeared, swaying her hips in that mesmerizing way she had, hypnotizing me completely and utterly.

It was her dazzling eyes that prevented me from seeing one of the books she was carrying, and I wish I had not been blinded by her beauty.

Chapter Nine

Willow

We were back in the musty library again. Of all the locations in the castle this was the one I had most mixed feelings about. It was where Cassius and I had done a lot of bonding, but it lacked the romance of the music hall or the fresh air of the courtyard, or frankly the interest of the reliquary. I had always found myself more interested in objects than in books. Within the pack we were more about oral storytelling rather than reading books. Although my pack had been in the same location for generations, as wolves we had to prepare to be nomadic and carrying a library of books was not conducive to the relaxed, unpredictable nature of the life we led. It was far easier to pass down stories through oral traditions. It was how I first learned to sing. My mother had been a talented orator, often imbuing the stories she told with a melody to create an engaging and unique experience. When I was old enough, and this was not very old at all, I was added to the performances to perform backing vocals and add a harmony to mother's voice. I watched her use not only her voice, but her entire body for her

performance. Every movement seemed to be organic and natural, but she rehearsed diligently. When she swayed her arm she knew exactly how many degrees she wanted it to arch, or when she twisted her neck she knew how long she wanted her gaze to linger. It was a true artform, and she was a master of it.

Once upon a time I had imagined that I would take her place one day and become a guardian of the stories. I used to absorb them all, losing myself in the various narratives, finding myself lost among the weeds of the details of the stories. I hated the spiteful stepmothers and found myself dreaming about the handsome princes. I was scared and thrilled by the savage warriors in equal measure. I also raised many questions about the inaccuracies within the stories, asking mother how one warrior could appear in this story when he had died in another, or why this princess married the prince when he had done nothing to deserve her love. Sometimes, mother said, it was just because he was a prince.

I never found that reasoning logical at all.

Mom had said that stories weren't always about logic, they were more about emotion. She said that as

long as she could make people feel things with her stories then she was doing her job.

The stories had all blended together in my mind, and I hoped that one day my own story would be added to that canon. I used to think that I would travel among different packs, collecting stories from each of them and sharing that knowledge among the wolves. I wanted to see what common threads there were between them, and also what differences occurred as people added or took away elements of the stories, making them their own.

I never got the chance to do that, of course. It wasn't even because I had never become a wolf within the pack. Once I was betrothed to Brandon I was stuck there. Mom acted as though it was a wonderful thing because now I could stay and share the same stories as she had. I thought she was just telling herself a story. There wasn't much difference in my mind between a story and a lie. The best stories told truths, but in the hands of a master they could sometimes be used to deceive, like with Cassius.

I stared at him through the gaps in the shelves as he wandered over to the table. I took everything he said

at face value because I trusted in the promise he had made to me, but he was telling me things about a world that had existed long before I was born. I found it interesting to learn about the things he had experienced, but it did make me feel so very young. It also helped to make me feel special though, to know that through all of that he had ended up picking me as the one he wanted to spend his time with and welcome into his sanctuary, breaking his spell of loneliness.

Cassius had given me the name of an author to look out for. When I found the book he had written I plucked it off the shelf and was ready to turn away, but then another book caught my eye, as though the title was winking at me. It was a recounting of the Great War. On the cover was etched a vampire standing over the body of a werewolf. I blinked, immediately shaken by the image and what it entailed. I was so taken aback that I almost dropped the book. I wondered if I should put it back, if this was a part of history that I should keep in the realm of ignorance, but the lure was too strong. I had heard so many stories from that war and now I was curious about the stories vampires told themselves about it. Everyone thought they were the hero in their own fight, so what

had they said about us? I also thought that war was a subject where immortality and mortality might well come up, so it could well be relevant to our current project.

I emerged from behind the bookshelves and walked towards Cassius. I smiled as he gazed at me, knowing that he was seeing me as beautiful. I felt more graceful and elegant around him. He saw me as beautiful, and yet I felt more beautiful because of the way he saw me. It was a paradox of creation, but one that I wasn't going to spend too much time trying to figure out because sometimes the solution to the mystery wasn't the most important thing; it was the result, and the result of this was that he looked at me with such depth of love in his eyes and I didn't want anything to take that away.

I settled at the table with him and I knew he enjoyed these books, so we stayed in silence as we turned the pages. The spines creaked a little and the pages rustled, while the soft chill blew around us. His head bowed; his eyes glued to the words he was reading. It was such an immense library that despite having spent so many years in this place, Cassius still had not read

them all. I felt daunted by the amount of stories and wisdom in this place. Somehow, knowing that there was more information here than I could ever absorb in my entire life made me feel small and like there were not enough years left. I did not have the same fear of mortality as Cassius did. As wolves we were always taught to respect death and understand that it is a natural part of life. After all, how can we deprive other animals of their life if we do not understand that some day the same fate will befall us? Eventually the Moon welcomes us all into the great beyond. But despite all this, I did feel somewhat uneasy in knowing that there was so much left unfinished, that there were things out there I would never get to experience or discover. It might sound strange to imagine missing things that I should never know about, but still... it played on my mind.

And then I turned to the book I had found, and I had to steady my heart as I read about the strategy of defeating wolves. This vampire had listed the weaknesses of wolves and ways to outsmart them. According to him wolves were savage, unthinking beasts that were easily overwhelmed by intelligence and could be manipulated

in many different ways. He explained his reasoning by using examples of how some wolves had been defeated, usually where packs had been beaten by a single vampire. It did not make for merry reading and I found my stomach turning. It was quite chilling to read about your own people being fought and slaughtered, and while I had been made an outcast by my own pack, I still felt an affinity for the wolves. The blood of my ancestors ran through me the same as it did everyone else, and the fact that I needed an amulet to bring my wolf out was merely an aberration.

When I read these words I could feel the hatred seeping through them, as though the author had left some of his soul within the pages of the tome. The illustrations were graphic, reveling in the gore of a dismembered werewolf, with guts spilling out and a hungry vampire looming over the slain beast, looking triumphant.

And then I reached a chapter that chilled me to the bone. Perhaps I should have expected it because I knew something of Cassius' past, and perhaps there had been a

reason why I had always glossed over it, but I saw him in a new light.

It was a chapter simply called The Butcher.

*

And now, fair reader, I would like to draw your attention to some of the most impressive warriors in this endless war between beasts and vampires. One such warrior is known as The Butcher due to his propensity for savage brilliance in defeating these creatures. His identity remains elusive, but he has operated for many decades and has proven pivotal in turning the advantage of the war back to our side. Given the accounts I have researched it's clear to me that he was trained, or at least heavily influenced by, the great warrior Amara. The wolves he meets in battle are left with great gashes, and the ground is always soaked in the crimson that slips away from their bodies. He strikes from the silence and kills them without warning, often leaving entire packs covered in death. He slips through one by one and kills the wolves without letting them ever know what has happened, and by the time he's finished he has left a pile

of beastly hearts as a sign that this war is only ever going to have one victor.

Many of the techniques I have described in this book regarding how best to slay a wolf have been directly taken from The Butcher. He has a propensity to attack the weakest part of a wolf and rip it out. He cuts their sinews to prevent them using their strong limbs, and he makes them gag in their own blood to choke their howls into silence. Remember, the last thing you want to do is allow them to howl, for there will always be more wolves coming.

Thanks to the Butcher, however, there are far less of them to trouble us now.

Such are his efforts that I would like to break from my formal narrative and say that I would one day like the honor of meeting him, to look into his eyes, shake his hand, and thank him for his efforts in keeping those terrible creatures at bay. Each of us owes him a debt, because without him those werewolves would have overrun the world, and our plight would be far more dangerous than it already is.

He leaves behind a wake of destruction, and the image you are about to see of him has been sourced directly from eyewitness accounts, so if you ever see the man please allow him to read this section of my book as I am sure he would appreciate knowing how much of an influence he has had on this humble author.

*

I turned the page and to my horror I saw a man I recognized. The picture depicted the butcher standing in a field with blood soaked hands and bodies of werewolves piled around him. My gaze darted up, and then down again. Cassius was deep in concentration. Heat ran under my skin. My throat went dry. I looked at the picture for the longest time, wishing that somehow it would morph into a different shape and prove to be a different image, but instead it only became clearer that it was indeed Cassius.

My heart was in my throat. I was well aware that there were many elements of Cassius' life of which I had no idea about. A man who lived a hundred lifetimes had plenty of shadowy corners in which his secrets could hide, and did I truly have any business investigating

them even though I loved him? Did love give people a right to delve into the hidden parts of other people's lives and expose them, lay them bare for judgment devoid of context or fact?

Yet what other context did I need. I was aware of the stories, of course, although from a different perspective. Instead of this Butcher being lauded as a hero I had always seen him as a vicious villain, a monster whose lust for blood could never be sated and who would never be filled with anything other than the deaths of thousands upon thousands of wolves. The mere mention of the name would send a chill through the pack, as it was said there was not a wolf alive who had not lost a relative to the butcher. There used to be a song my mother sang about this, a song of sadness and sorrow and tragedy, a song where we all used to bow our heads in solemnity and respect for those who had fallen. If there was ever one man who had symbolized the ferocity of the war between wolves and vampires then it was the Butcher.

It was the man sitting across from me.

The man I loved.

Chapter Ten

Cassius

I hummed to myself, happily allowing my gaze to dance across the decorative words, finding a very interesting essay on the nature of how the perception of time could breed a superior mindset among various species, and it proposed that if trees were ever given consciousness, well, there would be an uprooting of nature that the planet would not survive. I glanced up, ready to share this particular item with Willow, when I noticed a strange look had come upon her face. She looked ghostly pale and I worried that something was amiss. Was there something wrong with the boar she had eaten? I knew I should have tried to dissuade her from hunting any old thing. There was never any telling where a feast had been.

“Willow, are you well?” I asked.

When she met my gaze I saw pure, unbridled fear, the kind of fear that I hadn't seen since...

I noticed how her gaze dropped to the book she was reading. I followed it, and there I saw that she had the

page opened to an illustration. She turned the book towards me.

“Is this you?” she asked, her voice trembling and terse. I glanced down, knowing full well that it was, wishing that it hadn’t been. I ran my tongue along my bottom lip and exhaled deeply.

“I admit the resemblance is uncanny, but really this could have been a drawing of anyone,” I said in a blasé manner, hoping to brush away the conversation as though it was a particle of dust in the air.

I should have known it wouldn’t have been that easy.

Willow angled her head around and read a particularly gruesome passage from the book. Echoes rippled out in my mind.

“Cassius, I’ll ask you again. Is this you?”

I locked eyes with her. “Do you really want the truth? It will be easier if you go and put that book back on the shelf and pretend that you never read that. Sometimes through life we become different people, and then we leave them behind. I know that it might not be

possible for you to understand this because you haven't even lived one lifetime yet, but-

“Don't come to me with that patronizing tone! Just because I'm not a hundred years old doesn't mean that I don't have a right to an opinion on anything. This is you!” she exclaimed, prodding her finger against the page, right where my heart was in the drawing. I looked down, and the image seemed to come to life before me. I could remember the way the air sizzled around me, heated by all the spilled blood. A metallic taste was in my mouth, and their painful growls echoed in my ears. I remember my hands trembling so much that I dropped the blade, my fingers so soaked in thick blood that it looked like I wore scarlet gloves.

I strained to keep my tone calm. “You know that wolves and vampires have been at each other's throats for centuries. You should have assumed that-”

“You should have told me!”

“I can't tell you everything I've done and everything I've achieved. If I sat here recounting all the days of my life then I would never get to know you. We would never get to build anything together. We'd just be living in the

past without any hope of finding a future with each other.”

She leaned back in her chair and shook her head, wearing a decidedly perturbed look. “You know this is different Cassius. This is about wolves. This is about my people.”

“People who treated you like an outcast.”

“I know they’re not perfect, but they’re still my blood. I still heard songs about this. I went to sleep as a child afraid that you would come and butcher me in my sleep.”

I rolled my eyes. “I never would have done that.”

“So this isn’t true then?” she asked in a demanding tone.

I clasped my hands together. “I was given a task to do and I did it. We were at war. The wolves had made moves against us and we needed to defend ourselves. I’m not going to sit here and tell you that I’m proud of what I did, but I had my reasons. I wish the whole thing never happened. I wish that a long time ago when the first vampires and werewolves came into the world they had

been able to sit down and form a truce, but they didn't. We were all drawn into it Willow, you were just fortunate enough to escape it because the vampires took themselves out of the world."

I realized then that I had gotten to my feet. I was shaking.

"My mother used to sing a song about you. It was called The Butcher's Lament."

I sank back into my chair. "I'm sure there were many songs about me."

"But this one was different. This one tried to understand how one man could do the things you did and still live with himself. It actually tried to paint you as a tragic figure, a man who was so twisted by hatred that he had long forgotten what it was like to be rational. It ended with you standing alone amid a field of corpses, drowning in the sea of blood that you had created. It always moved me. I never realized that one day I would be meeting that man behind the song. So, which is true?"

"What do you mean?" I grunted, folding my arms across my chest, trying to erect a guard.

“Are you this grand Butcher who should be revered? Or are you the tragic figure who surrendered so much of yourself for the sake of the war?” she asked, flicking her fingers towards the book. It lay between us, angled more towards me, so that this drawing of myself stared back at me like an inky reflection.

“I suppose both can be true, depending on who you ask. Does this change the way you feel about me?” I asked pointedly. Deep down I was worried that everything we had built together would crumble like a castle made of sand, and I was frustrated that yet again the mistakes of my past were coming back to haunt me.

Willow thought about it for long, torturous moments, long enough where I actually began to doubt if our love could withstand this revelation, and so to myself I justified keeping it from her. Then she parted her lips and spoke in her soft, melodic voice.

“It just took me by surprise, that’s all. Sometimes when I’m here I can forget that you’re so much older than me and have seen the tapestry of history being woven around you. But then I read things like this and I

know that there are parts of you that I am never going to be able to understand.”

“All you need to understand is that I am the man I am now, and that is the only Cassius you need to worry about.”

She glanced at the book. “But you have been him before. Could you be him again?” there was a hesitant pause. I glanced down at the table.

“I’ve asked myself that same question many times over. I’m not going to lie to you Willow; I don’t know. Perhaps that version of me is still in there somewhere, but I know it would only be unleashed if the cause was worth it. I’d only be him again if I was in danger of losing you,” I glanced up and saw her eyes filling with moisture.

“You should have told me Cassius. You promised there would be no more secrets,” her voice trembled as crystal tears rolled down her cheeks.

“It wasn’t a lie Willow. As I said, it’s hard to keep track of everything.”

“But this is about me,” she prodded her fingers to the middle of her chest. “I know that I’m an outcast from

my pack, but I'm still a wolf. I always have been and I always will be. That is never going to change. You should have known that this would be important to me."

"And what would have happened if I had told you? Would you have stayed? Would you have been able to look past it? Can you look past it now?"

"Maybe... maybe if you tell me what happened then I can understand."

"Are you sure you want to know? These things are better left in the past. If I tell you then you might look at me differently."

"We all have shadows we'd rather hide away Cassius."

"Even you?" I asked. Her head shot up and she looked at me again. A flicker of doubt passed across her face. I leaned back and regarded her stoically. "That is the bargain I wish to make Willow. If I tell you this then I want you to tell me a secret about you, something you are ashamed of. If we are to move forward then it is only fair that we share these experiences. Let us both cast light into the shadows."

Willow nodded slowly, reluctantly. I knew it was an unfair bargain because I had far more of a past than she did, and so my sins would be greater. But I hoped this would illustrate to her why I did not wish to bring up the past more often.

I inhaled deeply before I began speaking, and idly flicked through the pages, chuckling with bemusement at some of the passages.

“He was clearly writing years after the Great War. I think he was probably afraid that another conflict would arise and was beginning to prepare the wolves for battle.”

“And he used you as the example,” Willow said.

I clasped my hands together and leaned forward. “I was a soldier, Willow. Amara was a passionate woman and she was filled with anger. The wolves made an attack against a vampire nest. They were able to inflict significant damage. The attack had come out of nowhere. For many years there had been an uneasy truce between our kinds, but this was a powder keg that threatened to explode. Humanity had spread across the globe and they were busy erecting great cities. Both vampires and werewolves knew that the time would come when

humanity would dominate the landscape and we would be forced to retreat. Neither wolves nor vampires were going to be the dominant species, so we only had to fight for the scraps in second place. I suppose the wolves thought it was time to make a move before it became too late.

But we were not going to stand for that.

You already know how I feel about death. For the wolves to come and attack us like this, to bring to an end such long lives, to rob the world of such experience and wisdom that has been accrued over the years was risible and showed utter disrespect. We needed to teach them a lesson. So, Amara sent us all out with various tasks and targets. As always we went out by ourselves, seeking to strike with surgical precision, but I was not prepared for what I found. Tell me, do any of your stories tell you of the Mutates?”

Willow shook her head and looked blankly at me.

“Tell me something Willow, how are new werewolves made?”

“New werewolves are born, not made.”

“Indeed, but in human stories sometimes it happens when a bite is transferred, much like with werewolves, yes?”

“I have heard of that, yes. It’s just something they have gotten wrong.”

“I can imagine it must be quite galling for you werewolves to be attributed with a weapon that vampires use, and while I can quite happily put many of these inaccuracies down to the incompetence and sheer ignorance of mortals, this time there is some truth in what they were suggesting.”

“Truth? What truth?”

I sighed a little. “When I investigated the target that Amara assigned me I realized that the wolves were trying something foul. They were trying to bring new wolves in the fold by making them out of existing humans, treating them like vampires would. Only they did this indiscriminately and without proper care. They would sneak into a village at night and ravage the population. Any who survived the brutal attacks would then be turned into a Mutate, a huge werewolf that was more like an ogre than the sleek creatures that you pride

yourselves in being. These were mindless, barbaric things who forgot about all they used to be. Their minds were ripped apart, their bodies transformed with no way to change back, and all they did was lumber through the world and destroy everything in their path. They were a weapon unleashed, and it would only be some time before they targeted other human villages, and eventually humans would begin to wage war on us both. So yes, I decided that this had to end before the ranks of this werewolf army swelled, and before innocent human lives were taken from them, and I did it all myself because it would have taken too long to get help. I cut through their ranks. One by one I piled their bodies up as high as a mountain. I did indeed drown in their blood, only I swam away to the sea and waited for the tide to wash the crimson away. I killed those Mutates and the wolves responsible for it, and then I killed the wolves who tried to defend them. I killed so many things that for a time I thought I had become Death itself.

So yes, I am a monster. Yes, I am the man described in this book, but I did not kill mindlessly nor without cause. If the wolves wish to ignore part of their history then so be it, but if they are willing to call me a

butcher then they should at least recognize what I was butchering.”

“I had no idea,” Willow gasped. “Why didn’t you just say that from the off?”

“Because I’m still not proud of it,” I snapped. “I was never like the others. I didn’t want a war. I thought we should have just retreated when the first signs of humanity’s dominance was asserting itself, but Amara decided we needed to fight for what we controlled. We should have come here then and left that place for the wolves and humans to fight over. So many of us would have still been here if we had, but that was Amara’s way. She wanted to wage war with anyone. So I did my duty for my brethren, but I never forgot the lives I had taken and I never tried to claim I was a hero. I just walked away, alive, as I did from every battle. And I decided that I would let people make their own judgments about me. But I am not that man, and I am not the Butcher. Those are stories and figures that other people have added to over the years, making me more fearsome than I ever was. I am not some monster. I am just a vampire. There is always some truth behind every story Willow, and the

truth behind this one is that I wanted to leave that part of me behind, which is why I didn't tell you. I wanted to focus on the man I am with you rather than the one I was before because you make me better than I ever have been, and if you look at me differently now then I suppose I understand, but it will hurt. I just hope that it does not change your feelings towards me. I can apologize for the things I have done in my endless life, but unfortunately I cannot change them. I have tried to do as best I can to make up for it, and I have tried to protect others. If you still think I am this man though," I gestured to the page, "then perhaps you should try and find solace elsewhere."

Chapter Eleven

Willow

I could feel the emotion in his words. I was trying to understand so many things that all the thoughts careened through my mind. I stared at the illustration, and then at him. Was the man in front of me the same as the man who had existed then? The man who had been through so many other events in life? I bowed my head and closed my eyes, wishing that I could shut all of the bad thoughts away.

“I wish I could have known then how this would have made you feel, but I can’t pluck the stone I’ve thrown out of the air and stop the ripples from spreading across the water as it lands. I can’t take back what I’ve already done,” he added.

“I know,” I said with a soft sigh and a sharp sniff. “I just... it’s a reminder of how we’re so different. You’ve lived all these different lives and been all these different people. You’ve learned and experienced so many things, and it just makes me feel so young. It makes me feel like a child.”

“But that’s what’s wonderful about you Willow. You haven’t been jaded by life. Things are still novel and exciting to you. You look at the world with a sense of wonder and awe, which I lost the ability to do a long time ago. It’s not a bad thing.”

“It is when it makes me feel so distant from you.”
He fell silent as I said this.

“Is this how you feel all the time?”

“No. But it’s impossible to escape the feeling all the time. I know that you’re going to have experiences to draw upon that I’m not going to be able to match. Surely anything that I can think of you’ve heard before, probably from a hundred different people. I can’t offer you anything new.”

“You’re wrong Willow. You’re so wrong. You can offer me something new. You, yourself are new. All that you are is someone I have never encountered before. Everyone is a world unto themselves.”

“And my world is a lot more barren than yours. I am like this place, empty and devoid of history.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. Look at you,” I gestured to the table with a flick of my hand. “You’ve had books written about you. Your deeds have been woven into the folklore of your people and mine, and this isn’t even the end of it. Parts of who you have been exist in other people’s minds.”

“People who are dead,” he reminded me. “I am nothing more than a ghost to the rest of the world. You being here, being with me brings me life.”

“I just feel so young sometimes, too young compared to you. I don’t know how I can possibly interest you.”

He smiled at this. “There are a thousand ways. You are beautiful, talented, intelligent, and fierce. You look at the world in a way that is most uncommon. You are not afraid of facing your fears, and you stand up for yourself even when it might be dangerous to you. You seek the truth, no matter what it might mean for the future. These are all qualities I admire, and you have also reminded me of so many things as well. But the thing I admire the most is the fact that you get to be yourself. You do not have to be burdened with the past. I look back at myself and I see all the mistakes I have made,” he picked up the

book as he said this. “I see the people I used to be, and I am filled with regret. I wish that I could change what happened, but I cannot. I can only try and be better while time continues to swirl around me. I am the one who should feel self conscious around you because everything is new to you. I am old, tired, and surely you must see that to feel your love and your embrace is a blessing for me? You are not the one who should feel guilty or feel as though you are not good enough. I am the one who has been stained and dented by time, who has rusted over the years. You are the one who is brimming with brilliance and freshness, who is like the spring and I am the depths of winter. I am sorry for hiding this from you, but one thing I have not hidden is the way I feel about you. In all my years I have never been as open with anyone as I have been with you. I have never let anyone walk into my heart as freely as you. You have to believe that, Willow. I love you more than anything.”

He had moved towards me as he spoke. I looked up and suddenly he was there, slipping his hand into mine, using the other to brush away wet tears that had spilled down my cheeks. I was just a foolish girl standing before

him, wrapped up in my own nightmare. I dared to look into his eyes and when I did so, I did not see the Butcher's eyes staring back at me, I saw the eyes of the man I loved. I flung my arms around him and peppered him with kisses, feeling overwhelmed with love. When he told me that I was special I believed him. He made me feel grander than anyone else in the world, and I was happy for my place to be with him. He had fought against his nature to be a good man and I admired him for this. Of course, he had made mistakes over the years. What man wouldn't have? I could not condemn him for making these errors over all his years of life. All I could do was love him for overcoming them and becoming the man who stood before me, who offered me his heart so freely and willingly, for he too had forgiven me my mistakes when I had betrayed him.

I lost myself in a breathy kiss. I ran my hands along his cheeks and pressed my lips tightly against him, pushing him back. A small murmur erupted from the molten core of my body and rippled between my lips. My wolf was prowling again. Sharp emotions were at the edge of my mind, ready to be indulged, ready to rush through me with sizzling abandon. The table shuddered

as we crashed into it. He swept his arms across the surface, sending the books scattered to the floor as he lay back. My chest heaved as a haze descended over me and I lost myself to the primal, intoxicating feelings. I kissed him hard and ardently, tearing off his clothes as I did so, eager to get to his flesh beneath. He did the same with me. This cool, detached man always became something else whenever we made love, my body and my soul inspiring him to be more, to feel more, to take more from the world than this barren land offered.

Piece by piece we flung our garments away. Our naked skin caressed each other, sending tingles up and down my spine. The pleasure radiated out all through my body and I descended upon him with laughter peppering my kisses. My hair fell around him, shrouding us, and in this musty old library passion and desire glowed. He shifted back so that he was fully on the table. I straddled him, pushing him onto his back and placing my hands upon his chest, my fingers stretching out over the broad canvas of his manly body. His long arms reached around and stroked the supple curve of my back, twining the ends of my hair with his fingers. He gazed at me with wonder and allure, pulling himself up so that he could

bury himself between my voluptuous breasts. I arched my neck back and looked up at the high ceiling as I welcomed the undulating sensations that crashed inside me, throbbing and pulsating in an ever-increasing rhythm as his hand slipped around, and before I knew it he was touching me, stroking and caressing me in that place that brought so much sweet delight. I squirmed and felt myself falling onto him, losing all sense of self as I drowned in this ecstasy. My breaths deepened and my mouth formed an 'o' as his long fingers reached inside me and curled back and forth. They pressed against me, stimulating all of my sweet spots and making it feel as though there was a swarm of honey bees buzzing inside me, or a storm whirling around in a frenzy that grew ever more intense as every moment passed.

And I could feel him bursting with desire. I closed my eyes, tasting him as our tongues danced, and in this way I could forget all of my concerns, all of my worries, because I could feel his entire body surrendering to me. I shifted my position and looked down, watching that sweet moment where our bodies became unified, where I melted into him and he plunged into me, and then I felt him, so intimate and close.

He had his hands pressed against my back. He rocked gently at first, sending tremors through my body. I wrapped my arms around him as I followed his movements, my hips sliding back and forth. He pressed his head against my neck. Breaths thumped out against my skin. I held on tightly, clinging to him and burying him in my feminine, wolfish scent. His fingers dug into my supple skin. A hint of pain blurred with the pleasure, and I felt alive. My eyes flashed with desire and I turned his head towards me and kissed him harder. I started to take control of the rhythm, showing my vampire king how much I wanted him and how good he could make me feel. The pleasure rushed through me, trickling along my body in dewy drops of sweat that spilled onto the table below us. Our bodies screamed as I lay atop him, all of my heat boiling over and spilling out of me as he reached so deep inside me I knew that he was touching my very soul. He held me close as we fucked, he lost nothing of his passion despite all the years he had lived, and I was filled with a youthful fervor of wanting more and more, this hunger made more urgent by the wolf inside me.

Pleasure drenched my mind. It ran up and down the middle of my body and stretched out to my fingertips, making me tremble and shudder. The waves ebbed and flowed. My mind and heart opened, welcoming this radiant, coronal flame that possessed such a fierce intangible heat. Our mouths were locked as I draped myself over him and followed the path of tension to its inevitable climax, taking his body and making sure that he emptied himself inside me. The warm heat exploded like a jet and soaked me through, leaving me fulfilled and hot and longing for more.

I grabbed his hand and led him back through the castle. We ran naked through the halls, our bare feet leaving soft echoes. I took him to bed and we tumbled among the covers, losing ourselves to twining arms and loving lips and then he drifted down my body and used his mouth to send me to heaven, and I was gone. Whoever said that vampires were from the pits of hell were wrong, because what he was doing to me was divine. I wanted more and more of this soaring heat that captured my soul and made me feel loved and adored, and I knew that nobody would have ever been able to make me feel like this other than Cassius, my King.

Chapter Twelve

Cassius

We lay in the darkness. The soft silence was broken by her rapid breaths. The taste of her lingered on my lips. I ran my tongue along my lower lip to enjoy the taste. The outline of her body was pressing into the mattress and the pillow. She looked as though she was sinking into the bed, and I in turn was sinking into her. The warm skin was flushed with heat, and the air shimmered around her as the crackling pleasure continued to sizzle. I drew her into me, wrapping an arm around her. All I wanted to do was make her feel worthy of being my Queen.

I kissed her on the forehead, wishing I could make her see how special she was, how I had not been intimate like this with anyone for many years, and how she had opened a part of my soul that I thought had died. I grazed my lips across her forehead and twined my fingers amid her lustrous hair, amazed at how soft it could be. She was so perfect she did not seem real, and there were moments when I wondered if my mind had cracked and she was not really here at all, but was just a

creation of my own imagination as a way to help me cope with the loneliness that plagued me. But then I felt her breath upon my neck, and I felt the rhythmic shudder of her heart, and I knew that she was here fully, melting in my arms, sharing her warmth and her love with me.

“You still owe me something,” I said, breaking the silence with words as soft as a whisper.

“I think I gave you plenty,” she replied, a hint of a smile on her face.

“I’m not talking about that. I mean our agreement. I said that I would tell you about my past if you agreed to tell me a secret as well. I want to know something about you, something that you haven’t told anyone else.”

Her finger stopped circling my chest. Her palm rested flat on my skin. “The problem is that I don’t have anything like that to tell you. That’s the problem with being so much younger than you Cassius, I just don’t have as many experiences to draw upon. I haven’t done anything with my life. I’ve been trying to think of something that I could tell you to balance out what you told me, but there’s nothing.”

“There must be something. It’s not as though you’ve been in a void for the past twenty years. Even back when I was your age, I had secrets.”

Willow shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you.” She drew the blankets up to her neck and stared up at the ceiling. “I did as I was told when I was a child. I tried to learn the stories of my clan so that I could follow in my mother’s footsteps, and when I was told that I was to marry Brandon I tried to do my duty there as well. Then I was just treated as an outcast and for the longest time my life didn’t seem to matter.”

“Did you ever think of fighting against them and demanding that they take you seriously?”

Willow let out a dry laugh. “I don’t think that would have done much good. They were all bigger and stronger than me. It wouldn’t have made any difference.”

“How did you feel when you were betrothed to the Alpha’s son?” I asked. She looked pensive for a moment.

“At the time I was confused. I wasn’t really sure how I should feel. I knew it was a great honor, but in truth I think my parents were happier about it than I was. Nothing really changed between Brandon and I. It

never had a chance to. I suppose things would have been different if my wolf had showed herself to me.”

“You might never have come with me.”

“You might never have found me,” she gave me a challenging look. “Would you have thought me suitable to come and live with you if I had the full abilities of my people? You said yourself that you were attracted to me because I was shunned from my kind, just as you were lost from yours.”

I pursed my lips, not wishing to think about how things could be different. “Let’s just be glad that we don’t have to worry about that eventuality.”

“Indeed,” she said, and then her voice took on a different tone. “What’s it like Cassius, to think about all the different paths your life could have taken? I mean, with a life as long as yours there must have been so many times when things could have happened a different way. Doesn’t it drive you crazy to think about how circumstances might have changed, or how you might have made a different decision?”

I nodded slowly. “I’ve found that it’s best not to get caught up in those kinds of things because you tend to

get tangled. But yes, of course I do. I think about what might have happened if Imogen had been kinder to me, or if I had been able to succeed at one of my early auditions. I would never have been in a position for Amara to find me, and all these years I have lived would have been nothing to me. I would have married, probably unhappily given what I now know of Imogen, and died a long time ago, never knowing the rest of my life. But life often hinges on these things, and we can never know how things are going to turn out.”

“If my wolf had shown herself then I would be married to Brandon right now,” Willow said. There was a hollow, absent tone to her voice. I did not get the sense that she was thinking about this in an aspirational way at all. “I would be forced to sit with him as he made his decisions about the direction of the pack. I would have sired his children and been mother to a new generation of wolves. They all would have looked at me with respect and pride, and I would have been cherished by the pack. My parents would have looked on proudly, and I would have been made to feel special.”

“I’m sorry that couldn’t have happened for you,” I said. She looked up at me, likely thinking that I didn’t mean it. In truth I didn’t because I couldn’t bear the thought of her being anywhere else but with me, however I tried to be sincere.

“It was probably for the best. I doubt I would have been happy, not with Brandon.”

“What was he like?”

“Headstrong, arrogant, always convinced that he was right. He was born to lead the pack, so he never thought that he could make a mistake. He wanted people to follow him because it was the right thing to do, and he was never interested in trying to encourage people to follow him because he was a kind and generous man. I think he just saw his authority as the natural order of things. The sad thing is that people went along with it because that’s the way the wolf packs work. We follow the Alpha no matter what, and the only times things change is when someone challenges them.”

“He sounds like every other Alpha I’ve ever met then. They’ve always been too full of themselves to think that there is any other path than the one they can see,” I

said, allowing some element of bitterness to creep into my voice.

“If I had stayed maybe I could have softened those sharp edges of his, but it would probably be a losing fight. I know Naomi isn’t ever going to be able to do that.”

“That’s his new mate?”

Willow nodded. “She used to be my friend. She was jealous of me when I was chosen to be his betrothed. A lot of the girls were. We were all vying for it. For some reason they picked me. Some of the girls congratulated me. I think they were relieved that they could live their lives without being under the focus of the pack. Naomi wanted it badly though. I still remember the look she gave me, this sneering, cruel thing and from then on I knew we weren’t going to be friends any longer. Then, as time went on she turned into a majestic wolf and I was left as myself, and she won Brandon’s affections. She became his new mate. I’m sure they’re out there now, bringing forth a new generation of wolves.”

“Imagine what they would think of you now if they could see you in all your glory.”

“I have thought about it,” Willow confessed, “but I know it would just be a mistake. There’s a part of me that wants to go back and yell at them and show them how wrong they were to shun me, but I know it wouldn’t do any good. They’d probably tell me that I wasn’t a real wolf because I rely on this to access my power,” she played with the amulet that rested against the hollow of her throat.

“They would be wrong. Just because they all think the same doesn’t make it true. I’m surprised that your parents did not do more to protect you from their judgment.”

“What choice did they have? They were ashamed of me, somehow blaming me for not trying hard enough or not being devout enough. Mom was convinced that I had done something to anger the moon. She couldn’t see that it just happened that I was not the wolf they wanted. I wished they had acted as though there was nothing wrong with me, but it was always built as this tragedy. Whenever anyone else grew to embrace their wolf, my parents were always there telling me not to worry because eventually mine would come, and as the years

went by it just became more desperate on their part. I still wish I knew the reason. Maybe the Moon was angry at me, I don't know. There aren't many stories about people who don't find their wolves. I suppose because they never last long in the packs."

"The wolves are a very tribal people. They don't usually keep people around who don't fit in with them, at least that's the way it used to be."

"I suppose my pack was slightly more forgiving in that regard," Willow said with a sardonic smile.

"What about the vampires? Did they ever shun anyone?"

"If any vampire wanted to leave then he was quite welcome to. We have always been more autonomous than wolves. I suppose that is part of the reason why our two people have never gotten along. We just have different ways of looking at the world. For vampires the strength is in the one, not the many."

"Yeah, my condition meant that the pack was weakened. I reflected badly on them, and so they shunned me. I'm glad I'm somewhere I can be appreciated though. It does make me wonder if there are

any other wolves like me out there. I feel bad for them if so. I wish there was a way for me to help them, but if there's only one amulet like this..." she trailed off and I knew how she felt, feeling guilty for having this ability while others suffered. I had felt the same thing when I had seen people dying of the plague. They looked at me as if I could perform a miracle and cure them, but death already had its hands around their throats and was dragging them into the depths of hell. I blinked the memory away and glanced down at Willow. She looked troubled, but she would never know how much I envied her youth. It wasn't so much the way she had so many years yet to live, but it was the lack of years behind her, the lack of all the torment being dragged along the path of her life. She did not have to spend every day waging war with her own mind, knowing that one slip meant she would be plunged into a dark place and be faced with terrible memories once more.

I held her a little more tightly, pulling her in closer to me. She nestled against me and I waited until she was asleep before I moved again. I wished that I could sleep with her, that I could sail along the sea of dreams and know peace just for a few hours.

Instead I slipped away from her and walked through the castle, immune to the chill that swirled around my naked body. I returned to the library and picked up my cloak, wrapping it around me once again. I also picked up the books, smirking at the evidence of the burst of passion that had come over us. I stared at the illustration of myself and glanced at the words written, finding it appalling that I was lauded as a hero for what I had done. It took a lot to come to terms with the things I had done over the years. It was even more difficult than what I had alluded to with Willow.

I used to think about repentance a lot, and how I could make up for my bad actions. The truth was that nothing could make up for them. There was no karmic balance in the world, no deity with their finger on the scales of justice tipping it one way or another. The things we did all added up, but I escaped the consequences through time. Anything good I could do would not erase the bad things. They were all there, etched in the tombstone of history for everyone to see, and all I could do was try to ensure that I did whatever I could to make me happy, and make Willow proud of me.

But I did feel something stirring within me again; a lust for battle. It was an old instinct that I thought had been driven from my mind, but as I stared down at the picture of myself amid a field of slain wolves I thought about the way Willow's pack had treated her, and I wished I had taught them a lesson. I remembered well the smug look of Brandon as I interrupted their conversation. He marched away, indignant, but I wished that I had taken some steps to wipe that smug look off his face. He had never been deserving of Willow as his wife, and to think that he hadn't even realized how fortunate he was to have her betrothed to him was maddening. It was almost enough for me to want to go out there and punish them for the way they had treated her, but the feelings abated because I knew it would only ruin things between myself and Willow. If I did that, she would never forgive me. I wanted her to think that I was a better man than I used to be.

I closed the book and placed it on the table, and then I sat in silence, reading the other books.

Chapter Thirteen

Willow

Time had little meaning for us in our lonely world. The days and nights blended together in this endless dance, and it was surprising how easily I lost sense of time without other people around to remind me of it. There were no parents warning me that I was getting older, no peers to which I could compare myself, no younger wolves growing older and overtaking me. There was just myself and Cassius, and as the days passed we did not need to think about the passage of time. This fundamental essence that held the universe together meant nothing to us, as though we were frozen in this world where a ticking clock had stopped.

That was how it felt, anyway. I knew that above the stars were burning and each moment that passed brought them closer to death. But not caring about time gave me this strange feeling. I was curious about things at home. Was the pack still intact? Had Brandon taken over from his father yet? Did my parents ever lament their treatment of me? I wondered if they even missed me at all, or if I was treated as a stray that had become

lost, the memory of which would fade over the years. I knew neither Naomi nor Brandon would have shed a tear, even if he had tried to get me to become his concubine. I shook my head whenever I thought about it. The man had some gall to think that I would debase myself like that and accept such a lowly position. Now I was a paramour to a King, and I could not have been happier.

Cassius and I spent our days in the library and things were getting back to normal after our brief flickers of tension. Not ever having been in a relationship before, I was worried that these arguments would boil up and mean something worse, but Cassius assured me that it was only natural for people to become irritable with each other, especially when we were spending so much time together. We had our alone time too, of course. I went out hunting and indulged my wolf side, but as time went on I did feel that something was lacking. The wolf inside me was always yearning for a pack. It felt as though there was a hole in my heart, and I just had to accept that it would always be empty. But there were some things we could never get in life, and I just had to be content with all the things I did have.

But while at first, I was happy enough to spend the days idling about with Cassius, losing ourselves in each other's bodies, I did find myself growing increasingly dismayed with certain things. It was on one bleak afternoon when we were sitting in the courtyard, the gargoyles staring down at us with their stony curiosity that I broached the subject with him.

“There's been something on my mind Cassius. I always used to think that life was this march of progression, a series of events where we got bigger and better and stronger, and that was marked with different achievements. I always assumed that when I grew older I would find myself set on a path that was unerring.”

Cassius gave one of his knowing smiles, one of those expressions that always made me feel as though I was so young, too young for him.

“That's what people always tend to think, and I'm not sure why. I suppose it's because when we're young we see other people going about their lives and assume that it's because they have had everything planned. And then there's the fact that our parents always have these hopes for us as well, these grand dreams of success,

when in reality they are just trying to pin all their failed ambitions onto us. The truth is that life does not have a schedule and it does not have an agenda. There is no steady march of progress. Sometimes we move forward, sometimes we fall back. Life is more like a state of being, one that we should try to enjoy as much as possible without thinking of what is to come. It's human nature to try and create a narrative out of random events, but when life ends it rarely ends with a neat bow. It's more like a tangled mess, and even while alive things tend to be chaotic. It's best not to think about what could have been or even what should have been. There is only one reality, and we have to make the best of it."

I considered his words and knew that there was truth and wisdom within them. "What were your parents like?" I asked, the thought suddenly occurring to me that I did not know much about his childhood or his life before he was a vampire. "And I mean your human parents, not Amara."

Cassius leaned back and folded his hands across his chest. "Do you know I can't remember the last time I spoke about them fully. They were good people, although

a little misguided. My mother was a singer of little fame, and my father wanted to write, but he never got the break he was looking for and so ended up being a clerk for some accountancy firm. I remember him telling me that I should never give up like he did because his soul died a little bit each day. I suppose failure runs in the family. They were both filled with ambition and dreams, but those never saw fruition. So when I was born they saw a chance to make up for all they had missed. They wanted me to be some grand creative force in the world, thinking that the blend of the two of them would make me more formidable than they had ever been. So they scraped and saved and managed to pay for my piano lessons. They would sit me at that piano day after day and make me practice until my fingers bled.” He looked down at his hands as he said this, and I could not imagine them twisted and trembling and bleeding. To me they were daring and artful, sensual, gentle, made for bright wondrous things rather than hammering on keys endlessly.

“It was the only thing I knew,” he continued, “and in my youthful innocence I believed that it would all come to me like this. I thought that because I had put the

work in, success would follow, but life is never as simple as that. I became jaded, my parents were despondent, and I began to resent them because if they had tried to set me up with a decent trade then perhaps I would have been better off.”

“Did they live long enough to see you become a success?”

Cassius shook his head. A grave expression came over his face. “No, they died long before that. My mother passed away first, my father shortly after. I was always filled with this sense that they owed me more, but we lost contact after I became a vampire. After mother died, I went to see my father. He was puzzled by the fact that I had not changed a day since he had last saw me.”

“Did you tell him the truth?”

“I did. I thought I owed him that much.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that he was sorry he hadn’t been a better father. He said that he wished he could do things differently, and he said that he was envious of me because if this was true and I had eternal life then I

would have the ability to learn from my mistakes and fix them, eventually living the perfect life. Even to the end he was still filled with ambition for me.” Cassius allowed himself a small smile.

“What do you think he meant by a perfect life?”

“I have pondered the matter a great deal, and I suppose it is different for everyone. Throughout the years philosophers have tried to determine a good and perfect and happy life, but there has been no universal agreement. In my opinion they have all been searching for something that does not exist. The only thing that can make a life perfect is that it is fleeting, because it allows you to savor every moment. With the gift of eternal life, I know that most things are going to come around again if I am just patient enough. But a perfect life for me is a life that is shared with someone I love, is a life spent with an equal, someone whom I can share ideas with, someone I can talk with and learn from and teach and do all these different things with.”

“Is it not going to get boring though? Just us two together?”

Cassius slipped over and took my hand. “It’s never going to be boring with you, Willow. You are an infinity unto yourself and I am never going to find any moment with you dull. I could sit here in silence and gaze into your eyes until the world crumbles away, and I would consider it a good life.”

A smile twitched on my face. He always did manage to say the sweetest things, things to make me feel special.

“And what of your parents? You have already told me about your mother the storyteller, what of your father?”

“He was a hunter, like most other wolves. He was a man of ambition too though. He wanted me to play an important role in the pack. I thought being a storyteller like Mom was going to be enough, but it wasn’t for him. He pushed for me to get betrothed to Brandon from a young age, and I didn’t have a choice in the matter. I think he thought that he would have more respect as the father of the Alpha’s mate. He used to want to be the Alpha, but he was never strong enough to challenge for the title. He was so happy when I was named as Brandon’s mate. I had never seen him so proud of me,

and I didn't understand because I hadn't actually done anything to earn it. It felt like random chance more than anything. And then, of course, I grew older and I missed the wolf. Mom and Dad tried to support me, but I could tell that they were disappointed, especially when it was announced that I wasn't going to be betrothed to Brandon any longer. Dad tried to fight it, kept trying to convince everyone that it was just a matter of time, but their patience was thin.

I remained with them, but it was as though the air had turned colder. I think in part they blamed themselves, but in this way they also resented me because I was now a reminder of their failure. They could not place their faith in me to fulfill these dreams or become a valued member of the pack because I was not a wolf.”

“Parents are shackles we need to shrug off in order to live free lives. They burden us with the hopes and dreams of things that they never achieved, and then blame us when we try and head off into our own direction. If they could see you now I'm quite sure they would not be happy for you. They would probably look at

you with scorn and wonder how on earth you came to be in the company of a vampire.”

“And I would tell them that they should get to know you before making that judgment because you are not like any vampire that has ever lived,” I said, moving my mouth closer to him. My voice became breathy and low, and my eyes closed as I surrendered to a kiss.

At least I hoped I would say this thing. I hoped I would not be a coward and dip my head, falling into the old ways as a child where I took their decision as undisputable and followed it without complaint. Cassius was free of all this. He was a man alone who did not have anything or anyone tugging him back. I still had those strings attached, even though they were a world away. I had no idea if I would ever see them again, but if I did then would I be able to convince them that this path I had taken had led to happiness, or would they be blinded by their own prejudice?

I suppose I wouldn't have to wonder. It wasn't as though they were going to find me here, and I wasn't going to go looking for them.

*

In the evening we returned to the library where we continued our search, spending a few hours before bed poring through these old tomes. Thankfully after that last surprise, nothing in these books leapt out to try and scare me. There were no more secrets about Cassius, and nothing that could drive a wedge between us. Instead I had to peruse many dry tomes that had long monotonous passages and paragraphs using far more words than were needed. My eyes glazed over as they passed over these inky blots and I found myself yawning. A knot of tension throbbed behind my eyes and I kept having to massage my forehead. At points it seemed like an impossible task, but here we had the luxury of time and it was just a matter of perseverance.

And then, just as I was about to give up for the night, just as I was ready to throw these books across the library in frustration as I wished I could go back in time, meet these authors, and slap some sense into them for writing such dense, incomprehensible things, I found it. I couldn't actually believe it. I rubbed my eyes, making sure that I hadn't slipped into a dream but no, it was there plain as day: *The Cure for Vampirism*.

It was a slim book, unassuming and easy to miss. The pages were thin and filled with various diagrams. But the meaning was clear and unmistakable. A gasp burst out of my lips as I read the first paragraph. It detailed how the author had been plagued by guilt and remorse, and how he had seen everything there was to see in this world and wanted it to end. He wanted a way out, and he said that he had found it. He said that vampires should not be proud of what they were and that instead they should be able to relieve themselves of this curse if they wanted to, and he made it clear that he wanted to offer vampires the choice to control their destiny rather than having to wait for death to come to them.

“Cassius, I’ve found it,” I said, my voice trembling as I stared at the book. I found his expression hard to read, but he came over to me anyway and stood beside me, looking down at the flowery words.

Chapter Fourteen

Cassius

I expected to find a way to make her immortal before we found a way to make me mortal. I had been thinking about the prospect ever since she had introduced the possibility, but I had not yet quite come to terms with it. I stared at the pages, amazed that she had been able to find something like this in the library. My throat tightened as I read the words on the page. It certainly seemed reasonable enough, and the author did not sound out of his mind.

“This is it Cassius. This could make you just like me,” Willow said. The excitement in her voice was unnerving. I stepped back, uncertainty rippling across my face. She turned to face me, her smile faltering when she realized that I wasn’t acting as enthusiastically as she was.

“Cassius,” she continued, the words falling out of her mouth, “what’s wrong?”

“It’s just that I am not sure this is for me. I thought we would find a way for you to become immortal.”

“But we agreed Cassius. We said that both options were viable.”

“I know, but still... it is a hard thing to think about when I have been so used to the idea of time being a river that never ends.”

“But haven’t you been complaining about this very thing? Haven’t you been in agony over the fact that you have to sit here and watch the world turn while knowing that you are not going to get any older? Cassius, I know that I am young and inexperienced compared to you, but I know that part of a relationship is planning for the future. We have to think about the life we are going to live together,” she rose from her chair and came to stand in front of me. She slipped her hands into mine. I was always amazed by how soft her skin was, how wide and bright her eyes were, and how her heart had found me.

“Cassius, you’ve told me how painful it was to watch the other women in your life die. I’ve been thinking about that a lot, and I don’t want you to have to go through that with me. But I’ve also been thinking about the alternative and I...” she took a deep breath,

“I’ve come to the decision that I don’t want to be immortal.”

“But it would mean-”

“I know what it means,” she said sharply. “And I don’t think I want that. I don’t want to reach a point where I’m almost wishing that life would end. I don’t want to feel like I’m tricking death. I want to make sure that I can enjoy moments, and if life is only given meaning because it has an end point then I want that because I do want my life to have meaning. I want to love you and grow with you, and while the thought of spending eternity with you is incredible, I also know that it would be equally amazing to grow older with you and to take note of the passage of time, to really feel the weight and the meaning of the years upon our shoulders.”

“I know it’s difficult to understand, but what I’ve been trying to tell you is that eternal life didn’t have any meaning before you came along. I’ve been trying to say that it is worth living now because you are here.”

She gave me a wide smile and squeezed my hands.

“I know exactly what you’ve been trying to say Cassius,

and while I appreciate the sentiment I still would prefer it to be this way, and I think deep down you would too. You've lived more lives than any other man. You've seen all there is to see. The only thing left for you now is death, death after a long, fulfilling life." She turned back to the book and flicked through the pages. "Look, he says that this elixir will restore you to being mortal, but that it will not steal the years from you. It's not as though all the years you have lived will suddenly catch up to you and you'll turn into dust. Your life will continue from this point forward and continue as it would have had you never been turned into a vampire. Think about it... we can grow older together and be on an equal footing. You won't have to ever worry about having to live for a long time after losing me. You won't have to hold my hand for the last time and then know that it is never going to happen again. You can be free of all of this, and what's more is that he says all your other elements will be restored. We could have a child, a family. We could breathe life into the world and give something back instead of taking from time. We could find meaning in our children rather than just ourselves, and the more I think about that the more excited I am. You are such a

great man Cassius, and I know that you would make a great father. It seems like a natural way for things to continue, is there truly no part of you that would even consider this?”

I looked into her eyes and wished that my heart was not shaded with doubt. I tried to think about it properly though, for she deserved the effort. “I’m not disputing the excitement Willow, it just takes a lot for me to consider this because it goes against years and years of being this way. All I have ever known is my life. The one constant of this universe has been me, and for that to end is... it is quite monumental.”

“But you said yourself that you think the only thing that can bring true meaning to life is an ending.”

I nodded sagely. It had always been easier to philosophize about the concept of death when I did not have to worry about it, and always easier to preach about how to live a good life and how to cope with death when I knew that I would never have to face these things.

Except I had faced them, in a way. I had always cheated death, watched death come to claim those I loved, and always I would walk away a little lesser than I

had been before. As I gazed into Willow's eyes, I knew she was right. I knew that if I lost her, it would kill me inside, more than losing anyone else ever had. I felt her hands in mine and thought about it slipping away from me, her head lolling to the side, her eyes empty of what once had made them shine brightly. In that moment I remembered the pain of having so many other hands slip out of my grasp, each of them like a grain of sand falling into the ether, and my heart trembled with sorrow. The pure survival instinct that was in every vampire and every man told me that I should keep a tight grip on life and never let it go because it was the only thing I had, but love should be a selfless thing, and if Willow was truly against being immortal then it seemed as though the path ahead was clear.

“I will need time to come to terms with this, but if you truly do not want to become immortal then yes, I agree it is only fair that we go through life as equals. I have always said that I would do anything for you Willow, and that includes giving up my immortality,” I said. She draped her arms around me and hugged me tightly, for she knew the importance of these words. I had a hundred thoughts careening through my mind, but

amid them all was one truth that burned more brightly than all the others; life without Willow would not be worth living. If I remained immortal and she did not accept that fate then eventually I would lose her, and that was a fate worse than death.

So, thus, began a new chapter of my life; the search for mortality. It was strange being terrified again. For so many years I had been numb to this fear that plagued the heart of every man. I was now plunged into a marriage that was not based on a lie, and one where I would not have to disappoint my wife because I was not capable of giving her what she wanted. But that had always made things easier for me. Now I had to think about the possibility of becoming a father, of bringing new life into the world, of being a man who could accomplish things. For someone who had spent so many years banished from the world, living like a ghost, this was a scary thing indeed.

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Since it was late, Willow went to sleep and I spent the night in silent meditation. I walked a path through my old memories and tried to think back to a time when

I had felt this way. I remembered when I was at my mother's funeral, standing in the background to try and stay out of sight. She looked so peaceful in the coffin, and she was surrounded by family and friends. My father wept as he delivered the eulogy, speaking about how she was always so full of life and happy no matter what happened. I felt guilty, having ostracized myself from them after becoming a vampire. But even though she had not achieved all she wanted from life she seemed happy, and I envied her this.

After that I had gone to find my father. He lived in a small house, and he looked a small man. When I knocked on the door there was a flicker of recognition in his eyes and he shook his head, unable to believe that it was me. He retreated into the house and rubbed his eyes, muttering to himself that he was seeing things. But then I told him that it was me. He stared at me.

“Cassius,” he gasped. “But how?”

I bowed my head and I told him everything that happened. We were supposed to keep our presence secret, but I thought if anyone deserved to know the truth then it was father. I told him about Amara, and

how she had turned me, and how I had disappeared from his life because I wasn't who I used to be. I expected him to be angry with me. I expected him to cower in fear. Instead, he just chuckled and poured me some tea.

“I have just lost the woman I love. Do you think I am going to push away my only son? Oh Cassius... look what they've done to you. You should be an older man by now, a man with a wife and children, a man who can look back at the years with pride. What have they taken from you...”

I tried to argue that they hadn't taken anything from me at all, but that instead they had given something to me. Father wasn't buying it though, and he was the one who first got me thinking that vampirism wasn't necessarily a blessing.

“I wish you had come back before your mother passed,” he said.

“I wasn't sure she would have wanted to see me like this.”

“She would have wanted to see you no matter what you are like. She loved you,” a tear filled my father's eye. I bowed my head.

“It was a lovely speech you gave at her funeral.”

“You should have been up there with me.”

“I’m not her son any longer. At least not completely. I’m something else.”

“You will always be our son Cassius. Nothing can take that from you. I wish you had come to me sooner. I wish there was a way for me to help you.”

“I don’t need help father. I am stronger and better than I have ever been before, and with the gift of time I can finally be the man you always wanted me to be. I have mastered the piano, and I am now performing in great halls that are filled with people.”

Father wore a knowing smile and nodded slowly. “I wish I had not been so adamant in pushing you in that direction Cassius. Your mother and I... we thought we should try and give you the best life you could possibly have, but we were wrong. Life is not about what you do, it’s about who you do it with. Now that your mother is gone, I can feel how empty things are. Please, if you can promise me one thing as my son again then promise me that you will find someone to spend your life with because men are not meant to be alone.”

“I’m not a man father, I am a vampire.”

“You are still you, Cassius. I know my son. I know that you still have this inside you,” he said, reaching over and placing a weak finger in the middle of my chest. I looked down at his withered, wrinkled hand and knew that I would never see my skin change in that manner, and I began to wonder what else I was going to lose because of that. I spent some more time with him. I listened to him tell me the story of his and mother’s life, and then I left him for the last time, only seeing him again after he died.

I had not changed in appearance.

I never forgot that last piece of advice he had given me though, and that had framed my thoughts over the course of the many years of my life. And now I had Willow. His words still echoed in my mind, and I knew that I had to give her everything I possibly could, and perhaps even after all these years I could actually be a father and do something good in this life.

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When morning arrived I greeted Willow with a smile and I told her that I would rid myself of

immortality, that I would allow death to come to me without deceit or trickery, and that I would live a regular lifespan with her, so that neither of us would have to wonder what it was like to live without the other. I had always suspected that love would change me, but I had no idea it would change me to this extent.

The list of ingredients was long. We had most of them in the castle, but there were a few items that we needed to fetch ourselves. One of them was a rare flower growing on top of a mountain. Since the mountain was steep I did not trust the portal to take us to a safe part of the ascent, so we started at the bottom. I thought about shifting into a bat and flying up, but did not think Willow would appreciate this. We supported each other as we climbed and then made it to the summit where the flower awaited us. We took a moment to look around the world and take in the scene before us. It was a vast forest, the trees stretching out to the horizon, and when we spoke our voices echoed out, drifting among the clouds. Willow and I shared a deep kiss, and as I fell into her embrace all the doubt was pushed away from my mind.

The next item we needed was the heart of a stag. This was Willow's area of expertise. I waited by a campfire as she hunted. She moved like a shadow as she disappeared into the woods, and it took a few hours for her to drag back the heart of the beast. There was always a sense of exhilaration on her face after she hunted and I almost felt guilty for bringing her to a barren world that was devoid of interesting hunts. When she was in her wolf form it was clear what she needed to survive, and I wondered if I would be enough, especially because I would soon be an ordinary man instead of a vampire.

We spent the following few days collecting the other items and eventually we returned and had them all laid out in the laboratory. I looked across at Willow. According to the manual, the cure had to be made in the sunlight, so we had to wait until the following day.

We went to bed and slipped under the sheets. We began kissing, but Willow noticed that something was on my mind.

"You're still having second thoughts, aren't you? It's okay. It's natural, I guess. We don't have to go

through with this. I'm not going to make you, if you really don't want to," she said.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. "I do want to go through with it. It's just that it's so final. Once I do this there is no coming back. It's not as though there are any other vampires to change me back. Once I become mortal again there are going to be no more vampires left in the world. It is the end of an era."

"Then I suppose in a way I am the wolf who has finally ended the threat of vampires. It is my claim to fame that nobody will ever know," she said with a teasing smile. I offered a half smile in return, not in the mood for such humor.

"Has that been in your mind all this time?" I asked. The words slipped out without me thinking about what I was saying, and I wish I had put more thought into them. Willow shrank back, clutching the blanket tightly. A wounded look was upon her face.

"Is that what you really think? I thought we were past this Cassius."

I realized how hurt she was and glanced towards her. "I didn't mean anything by it, Willow. I just... I know

that things are never going to be the same after this. It is as though I am standing on a precipice and I'm about to fling myself off without knowing what awaits me at the bottom."

"But that's not true Cassius," she ran her hand across my neck. "You know what is waiting for you; a life with me. A happy life. We're going to make so many great memories together and we're going to be equals. We're going to be able to grow old together and reflect on the past with each other. I won't have to become self-conscious about growing older and losing my beauty, and you won't have to be worried about mourning me."

I furrowed my brow. "But we won't be equals Willow, not truly. I will be a man and you will still be a werewolf. I will no longer be a supernatural creature like you."

Willow shrugged and tilted her head to the side. "It is said that vampires and werewolves should not be together anyway. Besides, if it ever came to be an issue then I could rectify that by taking this off," she fondled the amulet that rested against the hollow of her throat. She had not taken it off ever since we had found it.

“I would never ask you to do that,” I gasped.

She pursed her lips. “To be honest with you Cassius the thought has crossed my mind.”

“Why? Is being a wolf not what you thought it would be?”

“It’s more. It’s so much more, but there’s also a feeling that I am missing something. Wolves are not meant to be alone. I hate myself for feeling this way, but a part of me does want to be a part of a pack again. I can manage the feelings. It’s just because the emotions when I’m a wolf are so intense. Sometimes I’ve thought about taking the amulet off just for a break, but I don’t think that’s going to be good in the long run. I’m going to need to manage them better, but that’s why I think this is a good thing. If you’re mortal then it means we can start our own pack.”

“I want to give that to you Willow,” I said. She filled my heart with love. In a way she represented all the people I had lost over the years, and I somehow thought that if I could give her a good life then I could make up for all the sins and mistakes of the past as well. I had never thought that this was going to be the way my time

as a vampire was going to end, but the fact that I was not going to have to give up my life brought me joy. I tried to think more of what I was going to gain from this than what I was going to lose, and the scales in my mind gradually tipped towards anticipation. It would be difficult indeed to shed this monster inside me, and I wondered what kind of man I would be afterwards. Would I be robbed of something essential? What if Willow had only fallen in love with me because of the facets that the vampire had given me? I did not want to seem weak, so I did not confide these weaknesses with her. I had to pray that our love was strong enough to overcome any adversity.

While she slept I walked down to the tombs where I stood before my own coffin. I had made it with the intention that it would never be used. Amara had always said that these tombs were made to mock the very notion of death and were there to separate us from the regular mortals. She had always looked down on them with disdain. If she were here now... well... if she were here then I would be locked in a battle with the mortals as vampires spread across the world.

I ran my hands along the cold stone and peered into the gaping darkness. There was room enough for Willow and I to share this tomb in the end.

“If you’re listening then you know what’s happening. You know that you’re finally going to get your hands on me Death,” I spoke aloud, my words echoing around the cavernous chamber. “But know this, I am still not going to give up without a fight. I may be turning mortal again, but I am going to enjoy as many years as I possibly can. I am not going to allow you to come for me until I am good and ready, until Willow and I have enjoyed decades of happiness and I am just an old man who is too tired to carry on living any longer. But when I am ready you shall have me, Death, you shall have the soul that has eluded you for so long.”

I left the tomb then and returned to bed. I tried to think about the positive things that would happen after I changed. I could sleep again, finally, enjoying the peaceful slumber that came to Willow every night. I would be able to sire a child and teach them all about the world. And I would be able to appreciate the passage of time again, for each moment would become precious in

and of itself. I would know that I only had a finite amount of them to enjoy, and I would make sure I savored them all. However, despite trying my hardest to be positive about this I still could not escape all of the things that I was going to be losing, most of all my magic. The powers and abilities of a vampire were no longer going to be mine, and that meant that I would have to rely on the basic spells that anyone could muster with the right resources. It did go to show, though, that the link between me and my bat form was nowhere near as spiritual as the link between Willow and her wolf. There was most decidedly something deeper in a wolf soul. It was something that might have been worth investigating, if I had been a younger man. It wasn't as though it would help anything in the world now though, as there were no other vampires to benefit from the knowledge.

But I had to stop thinking about melancholy matters such as this. The world was in a constant state of change and the fact that I had been the same for so many years was an aberration. It was time to correct the mistake that was me, time to make myself normal again and free myself from this prison that had become so gilded.

Chapter Fifteen

Willow

The pale sunlight filtered through the window. Cassius was awake, as he always was. He was dressed in his cloak, ready to go through with this grand reset of his soul. I knew it was not easy for him, but I appreciated his willingness to go through with this for me. I hoped that it would end up well for us, and I wanted to make sure that he knew I would forever be grateful. In moments like these his love for me was truly proven as he showed how much I meant to him. The fact that he was willing to give up his immortality, well, he may as well have chopped off an arm or a leg. I knew we couldn't have everything in life, but at least we could have each other, and I was certain that this was going to be enough.

It didn't stop me from feeling a little guilty though. I knew that it would have been easier for him if I had found a way to become immortal as well, but it wasn't something that sat right with me. I had learned from a young age that the only stories worth telling were the ones that had an ending. I could see the man Cassius had become before I arrived. I would not want to risk him

becoming the same again, and I certainly would not want that fate to befall me. I had not shared this with him, but I feared that the longer we stayed alive the more chance there was of us growing tired of each other. Was it truly possible for two people to stay in love for eternity, or was there always a point at which these things decayed?

Either way, I would not have to worry about that now. I was about to help turn this vampire into a man again, and then we could embrace the new destiny that awaited us. The more I thought about it the more excited I was to have a child, to feel life swelling inside my womb. If I couldn't be a part of a larger pack then I would create my own.

“Are you ready?” I asked, still willing to give him the opportunity to change his mind if he so wished. He nodded his head though, and took my hand. We walked through the silent castle towards the laboratory where the items waited for us. Light shone in through a window and reached a cauldron.

“Do you think this is going to be bright enough?” I asked. Cassius nodded as he began arranging the ingredients, pinching a herb here, sprinkling some white

sand there, stirring the concoction around and around in a hypnotizing manner. The potion took on different colors as the different ingredients were added. The stag's heart turned it scarlet, the purple petals added another layer of color to the potion, and the scent that filled the air was heavy and bitter. The more Cassius stirred, the thicker it became. He had two hands on the long spoon and dragged it around and around until the potion became created. He then picked up a test tube with tongs and ran it through the potion, filling it to the brim and placing a cork in it. The recipe said that it needed to sit for some time.

“What are you going to do with the rest of it?” I asked, looking towards the cauldron.

“I'll keep it here for now, in case this first one doesn't work. At least then I'll be able to add something else in if required without having to gather all the ingredients again.”

He stared at the potion in the test tube, which now had a dark orange hue. He tapped his fingers against his thigh and pursed his lips. I wanted to tell him that everything was going to be alright and that he did not

need to worry, but the words were pointless because he already knew these things. This was a momentous occasion for him and he just needed to be alone with this thoughts.

He was about to reach out and pluck the test tube in his fingers when we heard a loud crash that reverberated through the castle. He and I glanced at each other. Since we were the only two people in the castle the noise was highly unexpected. The castle did utter noises of its own accord, quiet groans in the night and whispers of a chill breeze that passed through the hallways, but never anything as loud as this. It sounded as though something had fallen over.

I sniffed the air, and thought I caught a familiar scent. But it couldn't be... it was impossible.

"What was that?" Cassius asked, his brow furrowing into a deep frown. He angled his body towards the door, his entire form poised to attack, all hard angles, with a sharp glare emanating from his eyes.

"I don't know. It was probably nothing," I said hurriedly, still thinking in my mind that what I sensed must be wrong. There must have been something with

the potion that was playing havoc with my senses. “Look, I’ll go and investigate. You stay here and wait for the potion to be ready. I’m sure that it was just something falling over,” I was already halfway out of the room before he could join me. I closed the door behind me, making sure that he wasn’t going to follow. If this was what I thought it was then it was better for him to stay there. But if this was indeed what I believed it was then I had no idea what this meant for us going forward, or what it meant for me.

I curled my hands into tight balls and breathed heavily. My heart rate increased to a rapid thud as I sprinted through the castle and leapt up the stairs. Sweat dripped down from my temples and the closer I got the more intense the scent became, and I knew that I was not mistaken at all. I reached the top of the tower where the portal room was. It was the first room I had ever seen when Cassius brought me here, and it was the one we used whenever we traveled. I flung the door open and my mouth dropped when I looked inside and saw that it wasn’t empty as usual. Instead it was filled with people, people I knew.

My pack had come to find me.

Wolves had invaded the castle.

Brandon was standing there, tall and strong. He had grown a beard since the last time I had seen him. Beside him was Naomi, strong and sinuous, her eyes glaring at me. My father was there as well, standing beside Brandon. His eyes were creased with wrinkles, but filled with relief when he saw me. There were other wolves as well, some of whom I recognized, others I did not. They came through the portal one by one. Brandon smiled as he saw me.

“Willow! It’s you,” he cried.

“Brandon? Dad? What are you all doing here?”

“What do you think Willow?” Dad said. “We’re here to rescue you.”

His smile was earnest. Even Brandon looked like he meant what he was saying. Only Naomi rolled her eyes. I thought I was dreaming. But how was I supposed to tell them that I didn’t need rescuing? There were so many thoughts careening through my mind, so many words that I wanted to say, yet they all got locked in my throat,

jumbled together and lost, so only a choking breath came out. And then I thought of Cassius and what he would do if he discovered there were wolves here.

“You have to leave,” I said.

“We are going to leave, with you,” Dad said. “I don’t know what you’ve been through here, but we’re here to rescue you Willow. We’ll take you away from this monster.”

I thought about Cassius. If he had taken the potion then he might not be able to defend himself from these wolves. Had I been wrong about them all this time? Had they truly cared about me all along?

I didn’t get a chance to ask them the questions I wanted to though because I heard Cassius’ footsteps behind me, and I prepared myself for a storm.

Chapter Sixteen

Cassius

Willow had hurried out of the room. I paced around with my hands clasped behind my back, staring at the potion. It was ready now. I could drink it and become a mortal, and by the time Willow returned I would have been stripped of my supernatural abilities and rendered as helpless as any normal man, but something was holding me back. This survival instinct that was as vibrant as all my other keen senses had been triggered and I knew that something did not feel right. That loud crash in the castle should not have happened. This was my domain. I was the King here, and nothing happened in the castle without my knowledge, so what could have fallen over?

If we were being invaded then I could not relinquish all of the advantages my vampiric form gave me. Willow had told me to guard the potion, but instead my cloak billowed out as I strode out of the room and followed the path up to the top of the tower. There was an unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach that something was deathly wrong, and if Willow should be

harmd by anything then I would never forgive myself. My thoughts turned to the worst possibility of all; that Amara and her brethren returned. I told myself that it was impossible. I was sure I had planned for every eventuality, had prepared for every way she might escape and had made sure they were locked into their eternal prison without hope of being freed, but though I had lived a long time I did not know everything. Perhaps there was a way, and if so then Amara would not take kindly to Willow's presence.

And if she was back then I might be meeting death far sooner than I had planned for.

It may not have been Amara though. It could have been some monster that had tracked us from one of the worlds we had visited, or perhaps kin of a monster that Willow had sought. The portals I created were not without risk, for sometimes people could track them and be led right back here. It's why I tried to never abuse them, or only use them in places that were devoid of other magical creatures. Perhaps something had slipped my attention though. The more I thought about Willow being in danger the faster my pace increased until I

reached the top of the tower and saw the open door with Willow standing inside, and her kin were around her. I could smell them as I grew closer, the stench of these wolves staining the pure air of my castle.

What was this? No... no it couldn't be... she hadn't betrayed me, had she?

"Willow, what is this?" I hissed as I entered the room. As soon as they saw me all the wolves took up a defensive stance. Their Alpha was there, gritting his teeth with his fists clenched, only cowed by all the stories that he had been told over the years.

"Get away from her! Let my daughter go, you monster!" one of the other wolves snarled. I saw the open portal and realized what had happened. They had been coming through here. But how had they found us? Unless Willow... no... I didn't want to think of it. I dared not think of it, but it all lined up perfectly. She had suggested I become mortal, leaving me defenseless. The potion had been made. I would be mortal and as soon as that happened the wolves arrived. It seemed too fateful to be a mere coincidence and I stared at her, unable to ask the question that burned in my mind.

The wolves lunged forward as one. Their bodies shifted, flesh giving way to fur, sharp teeth snapping in the air, and beady eyes glaring at me with all the hatred they could muster. Willow was the only one who did not change. She remained as a statuesque beauty as this small army of wolves came pouring towards me.

The fools.

It was clear that they had not fought a vampire before so they had no idea of my strength. And I was not mortal. I still had access to my arcane power and it was this I used to banish them from the castle. I clapped my hands together and focused all of my strength, creating a wave of blistering magic that sent them all flying back. It extended, pushing them away from the castle entirely, phasing them through the stone walls and outside, sending them to the very periphery of the castle where the bridge extended to the portcullis. At the same time the wave stabilized into a dome that completely surrounded the castle. My home had now become a fortress, my own magical abilities enhanced by the castle itself, the wolves safely pushed beyond the barrier. They

could slash at it and batter it all they wanted, but they would never make it through.

I turned to Willow, my eyes blazing.

“What is this?” I yelled, my words reverberating around the room. I had snipped the portal shut as well, ensuring that no other intruders would come my way. I paced around the room, my paranoia and anger getting the better of me. “Is this your final betrayal Willow? Did you always plan this from the beginning? Is this another fatal kiss again?” I asked, remembering how I felt after she had kissed me properly for the first time. Her lips had been dusted with poison and I had fallen unconscious. Now my fate might be far worse.

But Willow was close to tears.

“I have no idea what this is! I had no idea they were going to come and rescue me. I don’t even know how they got here Cassius. You know that I never want to leave here. You know that I haven’t been lying to you. I promised you.”

“You also told me that you have been yearning for a pack. Perhaps the desire became more than you could handle and you needed to do something about it no

matter what. These creatures are here in my castle because of you.”

“I had nothing to do with this Cassius! I promise.”

“And yet you insisted that you come up here alone. I know how keen your senses are. Are you telling me that you did not even suspect?”

“I...” she paused, and I knew that I had her, even though it pained me to think like this. “I suspected, but I didn’t believe it. I mean, how could I? To think that they would be here after all this time... it didn’t make any sense to me. I wanted to investigate it for myself before I decided anything. I wanted the truth to be revealed to me, and I thought it would be safer for everyone. I didn’t want anyone to be hurt.”

“Or perhaps you wanted me to be a mortal and vulnerable to these wolves, so they could come here and take this castle for their own end,” I said, sneering at her.

“No, please, Cassius, that’s not it at all,” Willow flung herself to her knees and took my hand. “I promise this is all some huge misunderstanding. All they said was that they had come here to rescue me. They must have found a way to summon a portal somehow.”

“And this from a pack that does not care about you,” I looked down at her, my heart still raging, the vicious suspicion stabbing like needles behind my eyes.

“Cassius I... I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t know why they’re here. You know I haven’t spoke to anyone apart from you. I would never lie to you. I promised to always be truthful with you. I haven’t broken that promise. I want a life here with you. You’re my pack. I love you. Please don’t act this way. Please just think about this.” She held my hand tightly, not allowing me to walk away even though I wanted to.

I wanted to believe her, but could I? I thought about everything she was saying. If she had betrayed me then why not wait until I had drunk the potion to be sure that I was vulnerable? Perhaps there had been a miscommunication, but when would she have spoken to them? I prided myself on knowing everything that happened in this castle. Surely if she had accessed the portal then I would have known about it? And was I really ready to throw away everything we had spoke about and shared? Could I just cast aside the love we had built because of this?

These thoughts raged around my mind and then I watched as her head hung down. Silver tears streaked down her cheeks.

“Cassius,” she whispered. “If this is how you feel about things then maybe... maybe it’s best that you remain a vampire. I didn’t realize that our love was so fragile that it would fall apart so easily. I thought I meant more to you than that. I thought what we had was stronger. I must have been wrong to believe this.”

Her words were like a dagger that slipped through my ribs and found its way to my heart, the tip reaching the most vulnerable part of me. Her shoulders shuddered and I found myself calming down, the innate rage abating. I sank to my knees and faced her, placing my finger under her chin to tilt her head towards me. Her eyes glistened. The tracks of her tears were like rivers. I hated seeing her weep like this. I hated to be the one that brought her so much sorrow. She was right. I should not have allowed myself to doubt her so easily.

“Willow, it is only because I am so afraid of losing you that my mind rushes to these things.”

“It can’t Cassius. You can’t keep thinking these awful things of me. There has to be another explanation because the love I have for you is an absolute truth. There is nothing that comes before you, and I would never betray the trust you have placed in me. I thought you felt the same way, but clearly...”

“Clearly I was shaken by what I saw and I leapt to conclusions. I am sorry Willow. I just... this place has always been a fortress and to see the enemy standing in my midst with you before them... it was my worst fears realized. I acted without thinking. I only want to know why they are here.”

“Well, you pushed them away,” Willow gulped and wiped her eyes. She glanced to the empty space where the wolves had been standing. “Where did they go? Are they...” she trailed away, leaving the question implied in the air, unable to bring herself to ask if they had been killed.

“The Butcher has not struck again today,” I reassured her. “It was a simple shield spell, one that pushes out anything that is not wanted here. They will not be able to get into the castle again.”

“So they’re forced out there?” she asked, gesturing with a limp hand to the outer world.

I nodded. “They will not trouble us again, and I have closed the portal so no more will be able to join us.”

“We should go and speak to them.”

“What could you possibly have to say to them?” I asked, my voice growing terse again. She shot a look at me and I made an effort to calm myself down.

“If we’re to find out why they’re here and how they got here then we need to ask them, and we can’t very well leave them out there.”

“Why not? They came to this world. They should learn what it is about. I’m sure it will make short work of them.”

“You would let them starve?”

“I would let nature take its course,” I replied icily. “Let’s not forget Willow, that these wolves came here without an invitation and trespassed on my castle. As soon as they saw me they tried to attack me, in my own home. That’s not even mentioning that they shunned you for no good reason. Are they really worthy of mercy?”

Willow looked down at her feet. “They’re my pack. My father is among them. I just... I just want to know why they came here after all this time. I never thought I would see them again. I wasn’t even sure if they thought about me, but they’re here. I need to speak with them.”

“It’s too risky. We don’t know what they’re planning. The easiest thing to do is let the world take them. They came here knowing the risks, so now they need to face the consequences of their actions.”

Willow faced me. “Cassius, I need to speak to them. I know I have every right to hate them, and I know that they have disrespected you by coming here without asking. I am your Queen. I will stand by you in whatever you decide, but I cannot escape the fact that these are my people. I share their blood, and that’s true whether you or I like it or not. I don’t think I can just stand there and know that they’re dying out there. I can’t just leave them to the mercy of the world.”

“Even though that’s exactly what they did to you?”

Willow had a pensive look on her face. When she spoke again it was in a quiet tone, but this somehow made her words more impactful. “I want to be better

than them. I've tried being angry with them before and it only made me uneasy. I would rather try to show them a better way. Please, I only want to speak to them.”

I considered her proposal, knowing full well that I did not have any right to stop her. However, I did not like the idea of these wolves being here without a proper defense. The castle had been prepared with various spells and other methods of defense, but it still needed someone to use them. I was the last Vampire King and this was my kingdom. I was not about to let wolves linger here without them knowing that I could end their lives with a snap of my fingers.

“Do as you please Willow, but know that as long as they are here I will not drink that potion because it will leave me vulnerable. I shall stay as a vampire until I can be sure that the wolves mean us no harm.”

I turned my back. My cloak flicked out as I knew that Willow would have been disappointed by this, but it was the bargain I needed to strike. I was not about to leave myself at the mercy of wolves, for I knew they had none to give.

Chapter Seventeen

Willow

I knew why Cassius had been so stricken with worry as soon as he saw the wolves in the tower. I knew why he had panicked and given way to fear. He might have liked to think of himself as this brooding, fearless vampire, but he was actually fragile. Having lived for so long he had become used to the way his life had been forged, and anything that threatened the delicate balance was terrifying to him. It's why he had been so reluctant to take the potion, despite spending so much of our time together lamenting his fate as an immortal. I knew him well, but even so it still hurt that he reacted so abruptly to the sight of the wolves. How dare he think that I had brought them here. How dare he believe that I would betray him like this after giving my word. But his words calmed me, and I had to remember that relationships were never easy.

I suppose I could understand as well why he decided not to drink the potion at the moment, fearing that the wolves would breach the defenses of the castle and kill him. I would protect him as best I could, but

could I fight against this many wolves if they decided that they wanted to turn on us?

I needed to speak with them and figure out what exactly they wanted, so as Cassius turned away I followed. It was easy to forget how simple it was to be happy when we were the only people in the world.

Despite the way I had been treated by the clan I had meant what I said to Cassius. I wanted to be better than them, more sympathetic and more merciful. I did not want to become a creature consumed by rage and revenge, so the thought of them wilting in this barren world was anathema to me. I did not want to see them choke to death and starve, turning on each other for food before the last wolf eventually died. I didn't think Cassius wanted that either, not truly, he was just shocked that the wolves had managed to breach his defenses and surprise him. He was a man who prided himself on being a few steps ahead of everyone else, but this had been something unpredictable. It had certainly taken me by surprise.

We marched through the castle and emerged from the huge gateway. The stone bridge extended towards the

land, and all around us the air swirled. The magical barrier had a light purplish hue, but it did not prevent the air from shifting back and forth. My breath turned to vapor. Cassius was hunched forward, his body rigid with tension, poised to attack like some bird of prey. I quickened my pace to be ahead of him, wanting to defuse the tension. Aside from Cassius and I, it must have been years since wolves and a vampire had faced each other like this. Their enmity stretched back through the mists of time and it wasn't something that would be pushed away or overcome easily. I was caught in between both parties, a wolf who loved a vampire, and to be honest I still had a lot of hostile feelings towards the members of my old pack as well.

The wolves had shifted back into their human form. They paced back and forth, still occasionally testing the strength of the barrier. They would hammer their fists against it or toss stones. Each time the effect was the same; the barrier held firm. Nothing would pass through unless Cassius allowed it. Behind him the bleak ground extended towards the black forest, with the brittle trees pointing at us, their skeletal branches like fingers. As I approached them I was better able to see them, as now I

wasn't so taken by surprise. Brandon looked a good few years older than I remembered. His face wore the responsibility of a leader, and since his father was nowhere to be seen I assumed that he had been named Alpha. My own father looked older too, and the expression on his face was pained. I wondered how he would react when he realized the truth of the situation.

It was my father who stepped forward first, but Brandon held out a hand to stop him. We were separated by this mystical veil. Cassius was by my side. Brandon's gaze shifted between us as he tried to understand the relationship we shared.

"What is this?" Brandon asked.

"This is what happens to people who trespass in someone else's home without any warning whatsoever. You should just be grateful you were pushed out here and not to the side of the mountain, because as far as I know wolves don't have the ability to fly," Cassius said acidly.

Brandon narrowed his eyes. "We don't need an invitation to come and rescue one of our own," his attention turned back to me. "Willow, I don't know

what's going on here, but it's okay. We're here to rescue you."

Cassius laughed. "Oh, you child. You have no idea what you are talking about, do you?"

"Don't call him a child," my father said sternly. "He is the Alpha and he is worthy of your respect."

Cassius's laughter faded. "Respect is earned, not given, and I respect none of you. You come here thinking that you can intimidate me because you are oh so strong and mighty, but what have you really done to earn that respect? I have seen many different wolves over the years and you are nothing compared to them. Do you call yourself warriors? Hunters? No... you are playing at what wolves used to be. You come here and claim that you are bringing Willow back with you? Do you truly think she needs rescuing? I was the one who rescued her from you. That is the truth that you don't seem to grasp. I am not her enemy, you are."

"We are her pack, her family!" my father cried.

"You turned your backs on her," Cassius jabbed a finger in the air. "You were not there when she needed you, but I was."

My father seethed. His face reddened as the anger simmered inside him. He muttered something under his breath and then he charged, unable to hold himself still. He crashed right into the magical barrier and bounced off, falling to the ground. Cassius smirked and shook his head.

“Typical wolf,” he whispered.

I glared at him. This kind of sniping at each other wasn't going to get us anywhere. I needed to understand what the wolves were doing here, and how to get out of this situation. But it didn't seem as though we were going to make any progress while Cassius was here. So it was with regret that I turned to face him and placed my hand on his shoulder. I spoke low, trying to hide my words from the wolves, even though I assumed they would be able to hear me.

“Cassius, I think it's better that you go back into the castle and let me handle this.”

“I'm not going to leave you alone with them,” he replied tersely. I wasn't sure if he meant this because he wanted to protect me or because he worried that I was

going to turn on him. Perhaps there was an element of both.

“We’re not going to get anywhere if all you’re going to do is insult each other. Let me have some time alone with them so I can explain the situation. Do you really want to get in a fight right now? I thought we were beyond that.”

Cassius curled his lip and grumbled as he stalked away, shaking his head. I exhaled deeply, knowing that I was going to have to do something drastic to mollify him later. For the time being though I had to focus on the wolves. I turned back to face them.

“Willow, darling, what’s happened here?” father asked. His tone was gentler now that Cassius had gone, and the pain was apparent in his eyes.

“I need to ask you the same question. Why are you here?” I asked.

“We came to rescue you,” Brandon said. Once again I saw Naomi roll her eyes. Seeing Brandon again brought back so many feelings. I remembered being a girl, standing beside him as the promise was made, and then I was older, seeing him ignore me and treat me as though I

was invisible. Even after this he goaded me, and the old hostile feelings rose within me.

“Brandon, the last time we met you came to me and asked me to be your concubine, telling me that it would be a great honor to share your bed even if I could not be your wife,” I spoke in a matter of fact tone. He might have thought I had forgotten that as his eyebrows raised and his lips parted. Naomi crossed her arms and gave him a pointed look, while my father glared at him.

“I don’t know what game you’re trying to play here, but I’m not going to fall for it. I haven’t been away for so long that I’ve forgotten how you treated me. I remember how you all shunned me just because my wolf never showed herself. Brandon, we were supposed to be mated together. We were betrothed, but you didn’t even care. All you wanted to do was Lord over everyone that you were better than the rest of us. Naomi, you were my friend, but you turned your back on me as well. Instead of trying to make me feel accepted you went off with Brandon and took my place, acting as though I had died when I was still there. And father... you always wanted

me to be something I wasn't. When the truth came out you were so disappointed.”

“Willow...”

“No, I heard the conversations that you shared with Mom when you thought I was sleeping. I remember all the different remedies we tried. You were so damn desperate to find the wolf inside me that you never thought to ask yourself if I was just good enough with the wolf. You never wondered if I could contribute just as myself. You always wanted to see that other side of me before I was accepted. I was an outsider with you. Well, now I want to show you something.”

I stretched out my arms and embraced the wolf inside, feeling an extreme sense of satisfaction as I watched their expressions change in awe as they watched me shift. I felt the exquisite delight of the transformation course through my body and my soul, until I stood before them as I had never done before, as a wolf. I stared at them through my golden eyes, still separated from them, this time by the magical barrier rather than their dislike of me.

“Willow you’re... you’re beautiful,” my father said in a hushed tone. There was a disbelieving look upon his face, but beyond that he looked proud of me. It should have been a cherished moment. It was something that I had always wanted for myself, and yet it felt hollow. I drew the wolf back inside me, swallowing up the precious part of myself, feeling the amulet becoming warm against my skin.

“Willow, how did you do this?” Brandon asked.

“Cassius helped me find a way. I have to tell you the truth now. He did not kidnap me, and I do not need rescuing. I came here of my own volition.”

“But why? Why would you leave your own home... your own family?” Dad asked.

“Because you didn’t act that way. When it was clear that my wolf was not going to appear none of you tried to accept me for who I was. You all just stood there and insulted me. You only act like a pack when it’s easy for you. Who knows, if you had put in the effort then maybe you could have found something like this amulet to bring out the wolf in me and I would have stayed. Instead you bullied me, you pushed me away, you made me feel as

though I was less than I truly was, and all because I couldn't turn into a wolf."

There was silence as they bowed their heads in shame, all but one. Naomi raised her hand to her mouth and laughed. "So even after all this time you're not a true wolf Willow. You rely on something else to bring it out of you. How sad it must be that you can't be a natural wolf."

Her words were goading. Her eyes filled with ice. I felt the same sense of shame that I had felt years ago, when they would embark on a hunt and Naomi would skip away, or when they would return and she and Brandon would be linked arm in arm, and she would always give me a sly glance, tormenting me with the knowledge that she had something that should have belonged to me.

I pressed my lips firmly together. "It doesn't matter whether it comes from the amulet or not. The wolf is still my wolf. It's still the same as all of you, and this just goes to prove that you've never really been my pack. I've always been different to you, so I can't believe that you're here to rescue me. Why are you really here? You've never cared about me before, and I've been here for some time

now. It's not as though you ran after me. Why here? Why now? What are you truly doing here?"

"We are here to rescue you Willow, at least I am," my father said.

"It took some time because we had to figure out a way to access the portals. Luckily vampires aren't the only ones who can use magic. And it wouldn't have been possible unless I took control of the pack. I had to challenge my father," Brandon said.

"And why is that Brandon?" I asked, because I still couldn't believe that he had suddenly changed his mind and now wanted to take me home with him. He hadn't made me feel welcome for so long, and now I was supposed to believe that he was just going to be my knight in shining armor?

It wasn't he who answered my question though, it was Naomi, Naomi, with her flaxen hair and smooth skin, her twitching smile that always gave her an air of superiority.

"He did it because of the vampire. I believe his words were that it wasn't right that a vampire should come into our territory, the heart of our pack, and take

one of our own. Frankly I think it was generous of Brandon to think of you as one of us, but many of the wolves agreed that we needed to defend ourselves. We weren't sure if the vampire would come again, or who else he might take. Instead of living in fear we wanted to take the fight to him and prove once again that wolves are the superior beings. It was time for war, and sadly the last Alpha did not agree. Brandon had to take the position by force, and as he showed his strength so too are we showing our strength. There are none who can defy us, none who can insult us, and this vampire will soon learn that truth as well."

As she spoke Naomi sidled towards Brandon and slipped her arm in with his. Her eyes blazed with a self righteous fury and I knew she had not changed over the years. I did notice that Brandon's eyes flickered with shame though. I gasped inwardly as I realized that he must have killed his own father to get to this position. I knew he had been a bully, but I never thought he was capable of something like this. And father... he had allied himself with this man.

“You come here wanting war? You come here wanting violence? Cassius has done nothing to encourage this,” I said.

“You call that monster by his name? He took you from us Willow. You don’t know what it was like in the days after that. We had no idea what to do, no way to know where he had taken you and we all... your mother and I... we realized how poorly we had treated you. I never wanted to lose you. We could have found a way for you to be happy in the pack. We just... we want you to come home, and if we can get rid of this vampire then all the better. You know what they’re like. You’ve heard all the stories.”

“I do, and I know the stories from every perspective as well. I am not going to leave Cassius father. I love him.”

There were gasps all around from the wolves. My father flinched and staggered back, as though he had been punched in the gut. Naomi looked nauseous. Brandon glowered and breathed in deeply, his chest puffing out.

“Wolves, give me and Willow a moment to talk in private,” he said. Naomi looked as though she was about to protest, but before she had a chance Brandon was already pointing into the distance. Slowly the wolves dissipated, filtering away into the distance. Brandon moved as close to the barrier as he could without being forced back. I stared into his hazel eyes, thinking back to that first time I had been standing beside him, our hands coming together, an oath being taken to unite us for the rest of our lives.

“Brandon, I think I can convince Cassius to allow you to leave, but you’re going to have to play by his rules. If you say anything that puts him on alert or if you try anything to hurt him then he’s not going to let you leave. He’s going to make you stay here in this place and let me tell you that this world is not kind to people Cassius does not want to be here. There is no food in the wild. You will all starve, but before that you will turn on each other and the last wolf left will be feral because you will have eaten each other. And I will be forced to watch from this castle as you all dwindle and die. And I will not be able to dissuade Cassius of this, because you will have proven to him that you are the enemy.”

“I’m not an enemy to you Willow. I’m here to rescue you.”

“So you say, yet Naomi has a different tale to tell.”

I folded my arms across my chest. Brandon glanced to the side and shifted his weight between his feet.

“That’s how it started. I was so angry that he could come into our pack and act as though he owned the place. It wasn’t right, and you know what things are like between us and vampires. I was afraid that his appearance was the prelude to another war.”

“So is that why you killed your father?”

Brandon blanched at this, showing emotions that I hadn’t previously attributed to him; things like shame, regret, remorse. “I thought I knew better. I just wanted to protect the pack. Dad thought it was just an aberration and shrugged his shoulders, stating that there was nothing we could do about it. That didn’t sit right with me. I wanted to do more, so yes, I killed him to become Alpha so that I could lead the pack into the unknown, because I thought that more was going to be needed.”

“And how have you found it?”

“It’s... not all that I thought it would be. We spent a long time searching for a way to access the portal Willow, and over time I... the mission changed.”

“In what way?”

“Do you remember when we were young? How we were taken to the chamber and we promised our vows to each other.”

“I do. And do you remember how those vows meant nothing to you because as soon as you realized that I wasn’t going to be what you wanted you turned your back on me? You ran with the other wolves and didn’t even bother to say hello to me. You made me feel so small Brandon, so unwanted.”

“I know I... I’m sorry Willow. I didn’t realize how mean I was being. I had always been taught that the only reason we were special and strong was because of our wolves. When you never showed yours I thought it meant that there was something wrong with you, and I believed that I wouldn’t be able to make the pack stronger if I still had you as a mate. I needed to have someone who could shift into a wolf.”

“And Naomi was all too happy to pick up the slack,” I replied dryly. “And how is that working out for you?”

“It’s... not everything that I dreamed it would be. The more that time passes the more I wonder if I made a mistake. I keep wishing I had acted differently, that maybe I could have stayed true to my oath.”

“And maybe you wouldn’t have bullied me or tried to get me to agree to be your concubine. I mean, do you realize how heartless you were?”

To my surprise he nodded. “I do now. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking Willow. I’m not the same man I was and now I really do wish that you could come back. I wish that you could give me the opportunity to make things right again and prove to you that you have a place in the pack. Naomi and I... we haven’t officially formed anything yet. There’s still a chance for things to remain as they should be. The oath we made...”

“The oath we made was broken a long time ago, and whatever it meant then has been rendered meaningless. Brandon, you never showed that you cared for me and right now it’s too late. This foolhardy mission

is all too late and it's really not necessary. Like I told you, I came here of my own free will."

"And you would stay here with him?"

I smiled. "I love him Brandon. He is the one who has helped me discover my true nature. He's the one who has brought out the wolf in me, and the woman as well. He's never made me feel less than I am. He's never made me feel small."

"But he's a vampire."

"I know, and vampires and wolves aren't supposed to mix. But the rules never seem to stay true, do they? After all, it's said that the pack is supposed to stick together, but as soon as I was deemed different I was cast aside. We don't have to follow the rules that were set out for us Brandon, we can make our own. This is where I belong, and it's important you understand that because you're not going to be able to make me leave, and you won't defeat him either, not here. If you challenge him then Cassius will kill you, and I won't be able to do anything to stop him, but if you allow me to talk with him and if you promise that you will return and never

come back here then maybe he'll let you leave. You can go back to your pack and live."

"I can go back as a failure," Brandon muttered.

"Better to be alive as a failure than die as one," I replied, but Brandon didn't seem appeased by this. He ran a hand along his jaw.

"Before you go and talk to him you should speak to your father." Brandon moved away and I stood firm as my father approached me. I tried to keep my emotions in check. Despite having told myself that I had pushed aside the feelings about the past, he was still my father and I would always be bonded with him. After spending so much time away from the pack I was filled with delight that I could see him again. There was so much I wanted to share with him, so much I wanted to show him and tell him before it was too late.

"I'm sorry Willow," he said, the craggy features of his face turned down in sorrow. "I'm so sorry for ever making you feel like you weren't good enough. It wasn't true. I've always loved you, I just wanted the best for you. That's all. Your mother and I both did. I didn't realize at

the time how narrow my definition of that was. I wish I had done things differently.”

“So instead you allied yourself with a man who killed his own father?”

“The old Alpha wasn’t going to do anything about you. I needed something to be done. Brandon promised action, and he brought me to you.”

“Dad, I know that you want me to come home with you, but it’s not going to happen. I know that you’re going to find this hard to understand, but I love Cassius. He’s my soul mate.”

I could see the disgust on my father’s face, but to his credit he did not try to diminish or dispute my feelings. Instead he wrung his hands together.

“There is something that might make you want to come back Willow. It’s about your mother,” he said. I listened, and inside I felt my heart shatter.

Chapter Eighteen

Cassius

I paced around the inside of the castle, my cloak flowing behind me like a black river. I tried to tell myself to trust in Willow and that she would resolve this situation, but I couldn't move past my dislike of wolves, especially after the way she had told me they had treated her. I had observed the same thing myself. It was one of the reasons why I had chosen her in the first place, and it was just a reminder that she was so much better than me. I ended up staring out of the window, watching her as she remained protected behind the magical barrier. The wolves meandered away, investigating the area around them, perhaps trying to see if there were any signs of life. Willow spoke with the man who had been promised to her, the man who would have been her husband had she shown her wolf when she was supposed to. Instead I was the one who had helped her discover it, and I was the one who had won her heart.

Except what if she wanted to find her way back into the pack? What if she had only chosen me because she knew it was the only path left to her.

I spun away from the window, wishing that I was not plagued by these insecure thoughts. I hated myself for falling back into the same old patterns of negative thinking. I thought I would have been able to move past these things by now, but when I cared about someone so much I was always afraid of losing them. These were her people after all, her blood, and it was the toughest test our relationship was ever going to have to endure. What if she was caught between me and them? Would I be able to waver even a little? Would they?

I looked back out the window, but Willow was gone. The wolves were still there, mingling amongst themselves. I heard footsteps approaching. Willow had been crying. She stepped into the room.

“What did they say?” I asked, my heart as fragile as glass. I did not dare move, was she crying because she had decided to leave?

“They said a lot,” she moved to another window and looked down towards them. “They cleared things up a little. Apparently at first Brandon wanted to attack you because you had invaded their territory, but over time he

wanted to come and rescue me. They found a way to access the portal, which is how they arrived here.”

“And what are their intentions now? Do they still want to attack me?”

Willow sighed. “I’m sure a part of them does. Don’t worry, I’ve already told them that it’s going to be futile and they’ll be digging their own graves. I’ve warned them that if they try anything then you will defend yourself, and you won’t show any mercy.”

I bowed my head. “I hope you understand that this place is sacred and I can’t-”

“I know that Cassius,” she held up a hand to interrupt me, but I noticed how the words caught in her throat. I wanted her to know that I was better than I had been before, that I could be merciful. “If you can convince them to leave peacefully then I’ll lift the barrier. I won’t condemn them to a life in this world,” I said, hoping this would show her that I was not a monster. It didn’t seem to bring any relief to her soul, however.

“That’s not going to be enough.”

“Do they want to stay?” I asked with incredulity, my face twisting at the horror of the suggestion. But then I realized it was something much, much worse.

“No Cassius, they don’t. But I need to leave.”

My stomach turned and all the strength was drained from my body. I felt as I had done all those years ago, both when Imogen had rejected me, and when all the maestros had turned me away and sneered at me for ever daring to darken their music halls with my insipid melodies. I placed my hand against the wall. The castle supported me as it always did.

“It’s not what you think,” the words rushed out of her mouth as she rushed towards me, pressing a hand to my chest. “It’s my mother. She’s dying.”

I had turned my gaze away from her, but now I looked at her again and saw the sorrow locked within her eyes.

“She’s fallen ill. Father says the healers have done all they can, and now it’s just a matter of time. He says that she misses me and he thinks she’s holding on to the slim chance that she will see me again before she goes, but that he doesn’t know how long she’s going to be able

to hold on for. I don't want her to wait in vain. I want to see her for the last time, to say goodbye."

I gritted my teeth, still finding it difficult to understand how this was happening. Our life was perfect. We had everything we needed, and then these wolves had to come crashing in like some meteor falling from the sky and ruin everything.

"They pushed you away Willow. They treated you like an outsider. They shunned you and made you feel horrible just because you couldn't summon the wolf inside you. Why do you owe them anything?"

Willow shrugged helplessly and the sorrow she had been holding within her burst out in a choking sob and cascading tears. "Because despite all that she's still my mom. She still gave me life, and after this I know I'm never going to see her again. I need to say goodbye to Cassius. Maybe you could live without saying goodbye to your mother, but I can't."

The words shook me. I was there again, hundreds of years ago, standing in the shadows at my mother's funeral, filled with a kind of emptiness about the fact that I would never see her again. I knew in that moment

that I had to let Willow leave, even though it pained me to do so.

I took a deep breath and took on a measure of self control.

“I understand Willow. I just... I don’t want to lose you.”

“You’re not going to lose me Cassius.”

“But if you’re among your people again...”

She placed a hand on my cheek and then hugged me. The warm glow of her love washed over me and I basked within it. “You are my people,” she said with a small laugh. “Cassius, come with me.” I recoiled, thinking at first that she had misspoke.

“Willow... I’m a vampire.”

“I know that, but you’re also my soul mate. I want you with me. I need you with me,” her hand slipped down to clasp mine and she punctuated her words by squeezing my hand. “I want you to meet my mother as well. I want her to see how happy I am because that might give her some semblance of peace.”

“But no vampire has ever been invited into a wolf pack.”

“Then there’s a first time for everything. I want this Cassius. I’ll make it right with the others. I’ll make sure that nothing bad happens. They’re not going to be stupid enough to attack, and then we’ll come right back here. I just... I don’t want to do this alone.”

I bowed my head and pressed my lips against her forehead. I knew how she felt, how lost and alone she was. I had felt the same after I had lived through my parents dying. It was as though I had been a tree and my roots had been cut out from underneath me. What’s more is that if I did love her as much as I proclaimed then I needed to heed her request, for love was never worthwhile when things were easy. The only time its true majesty was shown was when it was put to the test, so although it went against my nature I agreed to the matter at hand.

“Thank you,” Willow whispered the sorrow filled words as she pulled me into a tight embrace. She kissed my cheek and I felt the full, gorgeous weight of her body against me, filling my arms, and I knew that this was a

part of the pact we had made. I could not get all of the joy of being with her without being there for her in times of distress either.

“I will need some time to make preparations, however,” I said.

“Just don’t be too long. I don’t know how much time Mom has left,” Willow pressed her lips against mine and then said she was going to get changed and tell the wolves the plan moving forward. I nodded slowly, hoping that I wasn’t making a big mistake. I had been taught never to trust wolves, for they could be savage and scheming, but if this was a plan to lure me into a trap then it was an elaborate one and they should be given credit for it. I still wasn’t ready to trust them, and I would remain on my guard for Willow’s sake if nothing else.

Chapter Nineteen

Willow

I felt better after speaking to Cassius. He helped alleviate some of the sorrow in my soul. I wiped my eyes free of tears as I returned to my chamber and got changed into a fresh dress. I quickly brushed my hair and then tied it into a ponytail. It swung like a pendulum against my back. I then turned away and waited to greet Cassius in the entrance hall near the gates of the castle. This was the large room where the throne sat, although it was largely unoccupied now as there were no grand audiences to receive the king. It was still an impressive throne though, sitting on a dais that raised it like a mountain in the middle of the room, meaning that anyone else would have to look up to whoever was sitting in it.

I was trying to work through the various emotions I was feeling. I was grateful to Cassius for agreeing to come with me even though I knew he wouldn't have chosen to do this. I was still puzzled about what Brandon had told me though. Life had not worked out for him, but did he really mean what he said? It didn't matter either

way. He might have been able to forget how he treated me, but I did not, and nobody could ever treat me better than Cassius. Seeing father again though and learning about mother... it made me realized how innate this familial bond truly ran. It was in my blood. I could feel it aching now, and it was clear I had been missing a fundamental part of a wolf's life.

I knew things were never going to be the same again after this, after I lost my Mom. I had no idea what it was going to be like being back in the pack though.

I paced around, waiting for Cassius to arrive. When he did I saw that he was dressed in his finest tunic, his dark hair slicked back. His cape billowed out around him in voluminous black, and I had to smile at the dramatics of it all. He knew the wolves would be expecting him to look a certain way, and it seemed he was going to play up to the stereotype. But then I saw what else he was holding.

It was Amara's sword.

"What are you doing with that?" I gasped.

The long, sharp sword had an ornate hilt with a ruby set into it that was as dark as blood. Cassius stared

at me as though he knew that I was going to ask this question. He sighed before he spoke.

“I’m going into a pack that is filled with people who have spent their lives hating the very idea of me. This disgust is in their blood and they’re not going to find it easy to put it aside. This is just a way for me to defend myself. While I have this sword anyone is going to think twice before they strike.”

“Or they’re going to think that you’re about to attack so they’ll make sure to defend themselves.”

“I would hope that they would not be so stupid,” Cassius said.

I put my hand against my forehead and rubbed my temples. “Cassius, you can’t bring this.”

“This is the most powerful relic in the castle! It is only right that a King should go into battle wielding it.”

“This isn’t a battle Cassius! Nobody is going to attack you. This is just going to incite people’s anger and it’s going to make things more awkward than they already are. You need to leave it here.”

He stared reluctantly at the blade, but placed it back on the throne, resting it on the arms of the throne. The ruby was turned up and the blade gleamed as the sunlight poured through the window and shone upon the throne. When night came the moonlight would do the same.

“I thought it was worth a try. I’m really not comfortable with this,” Cassius said.

“I know you’re not, but I appreciate it more than you can ever imagine. I don’t think I could do this by myself. I feel a lot better knowing that you’re with me,” I curled my fingers around his neck and kissed him again, wanting to make sure he knew how much I thought of him.

“You can’t always get away with things with a kiss like that.”

“Then I’ll make sure to try something else when we get back,” I said with a playful look in my eyes. I could feel the tension rising in his body, and knew that he would already be anticipating coming home again. I took his hand in mine and kept hold of it as we walked out of the castle towards the wolves. I could smell the disdain

in the air as we approached, and the looks on their faces displayed their disgust at the thought that I could be in love with a vampire. It seemed completely unnatural to them.

“I shall return with you, but I want Cassius to come with me,” I began.

“Absolutely not,” Brandon said, slashing his hand through the air.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” Cassius muttered under his breath.

I pursed my lips, determined to not let anyone else tell me what was going to happen. “Brandon, the only way you’re going to get through this barrier is if Cassius lets you, and the only way that’s going to happen is if he knows I’m safe, and the only way he’s going to know that is if he’s with me. You’re all going to have to get used to the fact that he is the man I’ve chosen. I want him to come with me. I need him for emotional support. I’ve already spoken to Cassius and he’s promised to not do anything to harm you, and I expect the same promise from you. Whatever wars the vampires and werewolves have been through all happened in the past. Take a look

around you. There isn't anyone else around. If you won't trust him then at least trust me. There is going to be no fighting. I want to go home to see my mother, and I want the man I love beside me. It's as simple as that."

"It might not seem that way to the other wolves," Brandon said uneasily. He glanced towards my father, who gave a slight nod of the head. Brandon turned his gaze to Cassius. "And I have your word, vampire, that you will not do anything to harm me or my kind?"

"I shall restrain myself," Cassius said. "As long as you promise to not do anything to me. I don't want any wolf letting their emotions get the better of themselves." I nudged him, for he had a way of speaking that made every phrase sound as if it were an insult.

"You have my word. All the wolves shall follow the Alpha's lead," he said. Naomi did not look happy about this, but she really had no choice. Cassius then looked at me and I gave him a nod. He raised his hands and then murmured a few arcane words. The magical barrier fell away, and this was the moment of truth. If the wolves were lying then they would surely charge at Cassius, but they did not. They walked steadily behind us, following

us into the foreboding castle. They shuddered and looked around warily, almost expecting ghouls to leap out at them.

“It’s so quiet in here,” Brandon said. “Where are the other vampires?”

“They are elsewhere,” Cassius said. It wasn’t quite the truth, but it wasn’t quite a lie either. I could understand why he didn’t want Brandon to know the entire truth, and it wasn’t my place to correct him either. We ascended the stairs and made it to the portal room. Cassius formed a portal. He asked the wolves to go through first, not wanting to give any of them the opportunity to sneak around the castle. They dutifully obeyed, until it was just myself and Cassius left.

“Whatever happens, I love you,” he said.

“I love you too, and you’ll be right behind me, yes?” I asked. He nodded. I stepped through the portal, feeling the arcane energy crackle and shimmer around me. I took a few steps and then I was no longer in the castle, but in a clearing near the village. The sweet air drifted around my nose and I was greeted by the lush grass and the tall, slender trees. I squinted as my eyes adjusted to

the brighter sun. I looked back, and Cassius was behind me. I took his hand, and he scanned the area with his sharp eyes. The wolves looked more comfortable now that they were in their natural habitat again, and it was Cassius who was vulnerable. I would not let anything happen to him though, and if the wolves tried anything against him I would never trust them again.

But a lump formed in my throat as I thought of Mom.

We were led back to the village. Everyone whispered as we approached. I wasn't sure if it was because the outcast had returned, or because there was a vampire in our midst. I suppose it might well have been for both reasons. I was overwhelmed by emotion; flooded with memories of this place that I had known so well. Part of me was relieved to be back, but another part just remembered all the ways in which I had been shunned. The eyes that stared at me were not the eyes of friends, but those of people who had treated me as lesser purely because I could not summon a wolf.

I had to put all of that out of my mind, however, for my mother needed me.

The wolves gradually peeled away until only my father was left. Brandon had warned Cassius again that he should stay quiet and not do anything that might be deemed as a threat. We came to my home, which looked humble compared to the castle in which I now lived. I passed through the entrance and my heart caught in my throat as I saw her in the bed, so frail and weak, robbed of all the energy that had once imbued her soul. I fell to my knees and clasped her hand.

“Willow, is that you, or am I dreaming again?” she asked, her eyes glazed over.

“It’s me Mom. Dad found me and brought me home. I’m really here.” I squeezed her hand more tightly and life came into her eyes. They brightened and she looked at me, smiling widely.

“Willow, my girl, I’ve waited so long to see you again,” she said, forcing herself up into a sitting position. But then her expression changed. Her brow furrowed. “Something is wrong. Something is not meant to be here.”

“That would be me,” Cassius said, striding forward, “I apologize for taking you by surprise, but it is a

pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Cassius.”

“Vampire,” Mom hissed.

I had to calm her down quickly. “It’s okay Mom. He’s with me.”

“With you?”

“I love him,” I said. “It’s a long story, but he loves me too, and I’m happy.”

“She’s been living in the castle with him,” Dad said in a neutral tone.

“He’s really sweet Mom, and he cares about me in a way that few people have ever done. He even helped me find the wolf inside me,” as soon as I said this her expression changed.

“He what?” she gasped.

“It’s true. Look,” I pulled my hair away and showed her the amulet. “He had a relic in the castle that helps bring out the wolf in me. I’ve been shifting regularly. I know it’s not exactly the way it was supposed to happen...”

“All that matters is that it happened at all,” Mom said, clearly pleased and relieved that this had happened. “And it was because of him?” she glanced towards Cassius.

“I couldn’t have done it without him Mom.”

“Then I have thanks to give you, vampire,” Mom said.

“His name is Cassius,” I corrected. She bowed her head, but then turned to look back at me. “Well, let me see you dear. After all this time I’ve waited I think I should see this just the once before I die.”

I nodded, blinking furiously to try and deter the tears from falling. I felt the amulet growing warm and then summoned the wolf. She sprinted forward and burst out of me. It was like a wave of thunder passing through my body. My flesh ripped and my bones cracked. Within an instant I had shifted my form in front of her, and I saw the look of pride on my mother’s face. She put her hands on her heart and seemed overwhelmed.

“You are... you are magnificent,” she said, the words rushing out in one breath. “Look at our little girl.

She's amazing. I always knew there was a fine wolf within you."

I bowed my head as she reached out a hand and ran her palm across my head. She then began to move out of the bed.

"Jessie, what are you doing?" Dad cried out.

"Don't try and stop me. If there's one thing I want to do before I die it's to go for a run with my daughter."

"But you can't. You're too weak."

"I'm too weak to do anything. Do you think I really want to spend the rest of my life in this state? My daughter is here and I finally get a chance to run with her. It's a privilege that every mother should have, and I'm not going to have that taken from me. This life has already taken too many things from me and I'm not going to let this be another one. There's nothing you can do to stop me," Mom said. She teetered as she rose, and summoned her own wolf. There was a rippling, shimmering effect as her body shifted. I heard the agonized cry for the metamorphosis took a great toll on her body, and the fever clearly wasn't allowing her any respite. I winced, knowing that Dad was probably right

to be sensible, but also knowing that Mom was always going to do what she wanted. Besides, a part of me had always wanted this as well. She nuzzled into me as we walked outside, and then we broke into a sprint. I matched her pace and we streaked through the village, and I found it utterly exhilarating to be running alongside another wolf. I felt the rush of excitement coursing through me, and in this way I understood myself and my kind better than ever before. I could understand why they had been so obsessed with running together, and while I did not like that they had ostracized me I knew that I would never have been able to understand fully what they were going through.

But now I did know. Now I knew what it was like to run with another wolf, to see the world turning into a blur around us, to feel the grass under my feet and to know that our hearts beat as one.

My uneasy heart was at rest.

Chapter Twenty

Cassius

I watched them leave, rushing away in a streak of fur, gaining speed until they were just two dots in the distance, before they disappeared completely.

“That woman never listens to sense. Once she has an idea in her mind there’s nothing that can keep her from it,” Willow’s father muttered. I had overheard Brandon call him Peter.

“Her daughter is just the same,” I remarked, and offered him a half smile. He looked at me for a long time with a gaze I found difficult to scrutinize, but eventually he nodded and smiled. He turned his back to me, which I thought was a sign of trust, and offered me a drink. I accepted, knowing it was respectful to accept hospitality when it was offered. He handed me some dark liquid and gestured to a chair. We both sat down. He took a sip of his drink. I did as well. The taste was bitter, and I decided that I wasn’t going to have any more.

“You know Cassius,” he said, catching himself before he said my name. I knew he had been tempted to

call me 'vampire' again, as though such a thing was an insult. Werewolves, by and large, had never had much of an imagination. "After Willow was taken my heart broke. I was filled with all kinds of regret. All I wanted was to see her again. I thought I never would. I thought you would have killed her. I was so filled with hatred. I used to prowl the village at night, certain that you would appear again to take another one of our children."

"I only wanted her," I said softly.

He cocked his head towards me. "Why her specifically?"

If I had learned one thing from Willow then it was that honesty was always appreciated. "Because I felt a kinship with her. I had been searching for a companion for a long time. I wanted to make sure that they would be able and would want to stay with me. I watched as Willow was treated as an outcast by her people, bullied by the wolf who would be Alpha, always told that she was nothing unless she could become a wolf. The truth is that she was driven away and made to feel unwelcome in her own home."

Sometimes the truth could be brutal though. I held myself tensely, well aware that he might not take too kindly to my words. Instead though he sighed and leaned forward, his head being weighed down by all his mistakes.

“I can see that. I never realized how bad we were with her until she left. All we wanted was for her to be happy.”

“Did it never occur to you that she could have been happy without being a wolf?”

By the look on his face it seemed that it hadn't. Peter took another sip of his drink before he spoke again, smacking his lips together. “It might be different with your kind Cassius, but for us we take pride in being a wolf. It is something that we are told brings us a connection with the moon and with the world. I just wanted Willow to feel that same sense of pride.”

“But in doing so you made her feel as though she wasn't good enough.”

“I know, and I hate myself for it. After she left there were so many things that I wanted to tell her, and I realized that she would never be able to hear them. I

tried to be a good father, but nobody ever tells you how to go about it. You always make mistakes, even when you think you're doing something right or with the best of intentions. I'm just glad I've been able to find her again though, and I'm glad that she's safe." He paused again. As I looked at him I was reminded of my own father and how he had lamented the mistakes he had made. Was this always our lot in life, to keep trying and failing in different ways over and over again? Would I be the same if I ever had a child?

At first I had felt true enmity towards Peter, but now that I was sitting with him he reminded me a lot of my own father, and I could never make things right with him now. He and Peter only had the luxury of one lifetime. Of course, they were going to make mistakes. I still made mistakes and I had the benefit of having lived hundreds of years. Was it really fair to hold them to some impossible standard of parenthood when their mistakes had come from a place of love? It gave me a lot to think about.

"So, she says she loves you. Do you love her as well?" he asked, an edge coming to his voice.

“I do. More than I have loved anything.”

He grunted. “I wasn’t sure vampires were capable of love.”

“We’re capable of many things, we just haven’t let the world know about it.”

“Always with your secrets.”

“It is our way.”

“You know, I’m not exactly happy about this arrangement. I don’t like the idea of you stealing my daughter away and making her fall in love with you.”

“I didn’t make her fall in love with me. In fact I was the one who fell in love with her first, but I just wanted a companion. I wanted someone beside me who knew something of being an outsider, of being lonely. She actually was on her guard and used my feelings against me because she thought I was lying to her.”

Peter laughed at this. “That sounds like her.”

“She is a spirited, fierce woman. I have not known anyone like her for a long time, and I cannot bear to think of life without her. She has shown me many

different sides to myself, and she has given me a chance to free myself from this loneliness that has plagued me.”

“And you helped her find the wolf inside her.”

“I did.”

“Weren’t you afraid that she would attack you? Wolves and vampires are natural enemies.”

“I was, but it meant a lot to her. She wanted to understand what it was like. She wanted to know how all of you felt, and what she was missing by not having a wolf. And even though we found that amulet there is something that I cannot give her.”

“What’s that?”

“A pack. I’ve taken her to worlds where she can hunt, and she is free to shift whenever she likes, but wolves are not meant to be alone.”

“No, they’re not. You could leave her here,” Peter said.

The words stabbed at my heart.

“I know that you love each other, but this is where she belongs. And sometimes loving something means that you have to set it free. It might be good for you to

live in that castle, but is it good for her? Besides, I hate the idea of other vampires coming there and thinking she is an intruder.”

I offered him a sly smile. “You don’t have to worry about that Peter. There are no other vampires.”

“What happened?”

“I banished them all.”

He stayed silent for a long time.

“Why would you do such a thing?”

“Because they wanted to wage war on the world and I did not want that to happen. So I banished them to a place from which they could never escape, and now I live in that castle, that world, alone.”

“And this is the life you want to condemn my daughter to? Please Cassius, just look around at this place. This is where she belongs. I know we made mistakes in the past, but we can be better. All I want is a chance to make it up to her. I want my family back.

I bowed my head. There was an undeniable truth to his words, but I wasn’t sure if I was the one who had to let Willow go. It might have been him. However, there

was a kernel of doubt in my mind about her wishing to remain here. If she did express a desire to stay then would I be able to grant her that wish? Would I be able to be selfless enough to leave her here and return to the castle?

I dreaded the possibility, and so I hoped that she would never ask the question. But now I longed for her return, and I longed to be away from this place. It was hard to be settled with so many wolves around me. If they ever learned how much blood of theirs I had spilled in the past I am sure that even Willow's pleas would not be enough to save me.

Chapter Twenty One

Willow

The world streaked by us in a blur and my heart was soaring with happiness and elation. We left the village behind, sprinting into the wilderness of the thick trees and wending rivers. Birds fluttered away from their branches at our presence, and the small animals scurried away too, diving into their hiding holes and burrows for fear that we were going to display our strength.

They did not have anything to worry about on this day, for we had no interest in hunting. I felt a new kind of energy in my limbs. Running alongside my mother made me feel stronger and faster, and I could only imagine how I would have felt among an entire pack. When I had become a wolf I became aware of the world I had been missing, and I was now filled with the same kind of feeling. It made me wonder what else there was for me to discover, what else was hidden from me. It almost felt like falling in love really, and I wished that Cassius could know this as well.

We ran towards a lake, and then Mom faltered. I could feel her straining to keep up with me. I slowed my

pace to make it easier on her, but eventually she had to come to a complete stop. We settled on the mossy bank. At the edge of the lake, reeds swayed in the gentle breeze. The water was still and perfect, with the beautiful sky reflected in a watercolor haze. Mom leaned back and shook her hair, for we had regained our human forms. There were more lines on her face than I remembered, as well as grey streaks in her hair. It was a glimpse of my own future, and I hoped to meet it with as much grace as Mom did.

“I am so glad that you have come back to us,” she said, turning towards me. “So this is what makes it all possible.” She reached out and touched the amulet, frowning in surprise at how warm it was. “Do you know how it works?”

“I’m not sure of the particulars. All I know is that it does work.”

“I hope it continues working for as long as possible. It’s only right that you should feel a communion with your wolf. We are only whole when all the aspects of our soul are balanced.”

I bowed my head. There was so much I wanted to say to her, and yet some things did not feel right. Should I dredge up the past even though she had little time left? There were so many things that seemed unimportant now.

“Is it really true that the healers have tried everything they can?” I asked, my voice trembling a little as I was afraid of the answer. Mom nodded and sighed. She picked out a long blade of grass and tore it between her fingers.

“I have tried all kinds of remedies and nothing has worked. At first the only thing that could give me any sort of respite was to be in my wolf form, but soon enough I found that too tiring and it sapped me of my strength. Even now I think the only thing keeping me awake is the excitement of being with you.”

“There must be something that can be done though, surely?” I said, and then a sudden thought occurred to me. “You should come back to the castle with me. There’s so much wisdom in there. I’m sure that there’s a cure we can find.”

Mom shook her head and ran her hand through her hair. “Don’t trouble yourself with that. I think it’s too late for all that, and I’ve long since made my peace with what is going to happen. I’ll be with the moon soon enough and I’ll get to see all of our ancestors. Besides, it’s like I’ve always said, the only story worth telling is one that has an ending.”

“But this ending is coming too soon Mom. We haven’t even had a chance to reconnect properly,” I said, feeling the sorrow bubbling within my throat. She patted my leg.

“I know Willow, but I also know that’s my fault. I was too hard on you. I never should have made you feel like we made you felt. Your father and I we... we thought we were doing right by you. We thought that if we just pushed you a little harder then your wolf would present herself. I should have known that it wouldn’t work like that. Maybe this was for the best though. You seem happier now than you ever did here. You might have needed some time away from the pack to grow.”

I nodded mutely.

“So, this Cassius, is he worthy of your love?”

I brightened at the mention of him. “He is. He’s really... he’s incredible. He’s seen and done so much, and yet when I’m with him he makes me feel like I’m the only person who has ever mattered to him. And I know he’s a vampire Mom, but he’s not like what we thought. He was just lonely. He needed someone to keep him company. But he’s a good man and he wants the best for me.”

“That’s all that matters then.”

“Things haven’t always been perfect though. I guess that’s true of any relationship.”

Mom chuckled. “It’s certainly true of me and your father. There was a time long before you were born when we almost broke up.”

“There was?” I wore a look of shock as I had never heard this story before.

“It’s all ancient history now. None of that matters. What matters is that these feelings endure, and if he treats you as well as you say, then who am I to argue with it?”

It felt as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, a weight that I hadn’t realized was there

before. Somehow knowing that Cassius had my mother's approval meant the world to me.

“He does Mom, he really does.”

“The good thing about stories is that there are always new ones to be written. I've never heard of a vampire and a werewolf falling in love,” she said with a chuckle. “I'm sure you will get your happy ending when all is said and done.”

“I just wish you could be there to see it.”

“Don't worry about me love, I've seen and done enough. I've made my peace with it. Like I said, I'm just glad that I've been able to see you again. I'm never going to be able to say enough words to make up for what happened between us. I know I played my part in driving you away, and I just want to say I'm sorry. I should have reassured you that I loved you no matter what. Sometimes it's easy to get caught up in the way you think things should be, and I just... I wish that we could have had more time together. But I like to think that we made the most of the time we did have together, and the time we have together now.”

She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tightly. I felt her shoulders shudder as sorrow passed through them, and the same thing happened to me. We wept together by the lake. That body of water was still and undisturbed, but our tears rolled down our cheeks as wildly as any storm. I realized then that nothing I said mattered; it was all shared by our feelings. We could recognize the truth that lay in each other's hearts and in that moment I forgave her for all she had done. All that was left in my heart was love.

She pulled back, her eyes glistening, and caressed the side of my face. "Now you just listen to me Willow. The only thing that makes this life worth living is family. You make sure that you have one of your own, okay? That's what I really want for you. If you could know the pride I feel as a mother then... oh Willow... I hope you know how much I love you, and how this life would not have been worth living without you. Just one day give your child a big kiss from me, tell them about me, and try and learn from the mistakes I made."

The words came out thick and fast, rolling through the sorrow. I promised that I would and we hugged

again, even more tightly. It was only a while later when I realized that she had stopped crying, that she had stopped breathing at all. I pulled away and looked at her lifeless eyes, hating that this had happened, yet finding solace in the fact that she had not died alone. She had passed away in my arms, knowing that I loved her, and I thought there was something beautiful about that.

I lay her gently on the moss, folding her arms across her chest and passing my hand over her eyes, closing them for the final time. My trembling lips left a kiss on her forehead, while my own tears fell upon her cheeks, making them shine as though they were made of crystal. I then got on my hands and knees and embraced the wolf inside me. I arched my neck up and I let out a soulful howl, one that bellowed from the depths of my soul and contained all the raw emotion that whirled within me. It was a howl to warn the Moon that a new soul was coming to join the stars, and a howl to my pack to let them know that a wolf had fallen.

My mother was dead, but at least I had had a chance to say goodbye.

Chapter Twenty Two

Cassius

We all heard the howl drifting around the village. Peter stood up immediately and darted away. I watched as a number of wolves shifted and joined him, flowing like a furry river that streaked through the land. I waited patiently. I saw them return, carrying Jessie's body. Willow staggered with them, her face pale, her eyes raw. I rushed to her and gathered her in my arms. She was weak from all the weeping. I whispered to her to see if she was going to be alright, and she murmured that she was. I wasn't sure I believed her.

While Peter and the others had gone to fetch the body, others had begun to build a pyre to perform the funeral rites. The wolves believed that by burning a body they released the soul from the flesh, allowing it to ascend to be with the Moon. Jessie's body was wrapped up and placed on the pyre. One by one the wolves stoked the flames, and we watched as the fire took hold of her. As the Alpha it was Brandon's duty to speak.

"Today we bid farewell to one of the most beloved wolves in the village. Jessie touched all of our hearts with

her stories. She held within her heart the wisdom and myths that have been passed down through different generations of wolves. Some of them she added her own spin too, while others she spoke just as they had been spoken in the past. She used these stories to entertain and to educate, as well as sometimes to remind us that we are not alone in the way we feel. I remember sitting around her when I was younger, a circle of us pups all enthralled as she told us the stories of heroes in the past. Some of those stories I still get inspired by now, and it's all thanks to Jessie's skill. The role of a storyteller is an important one for us wolves, and Jessie was one of the best. She has left us with a new story to tell, her story, and it's one that I want us all to share as often as we can. She will be missed, but at least we know that she is delighting our ancestors with our stories as well, and they will be glad of her company."

Brandon then tilted his head to the sky and howled. The other wolves, including Willow, joined in. As I watched her it was as though she was changing in front of me, becoming more comfortable in this place that had once been her home, and perhaps could be again. Was it

selfish of me to expect her to come back with me? Should I suggest that she stay?

I noticed Peter giving me meaningful glances. His position was clear. My heart was heavy, but perhaps this was the final test of my love.

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After the funeral, Willow and I walked away from the crowd. We stared at the fire, which was still burning.

“I suppose we should leave now. There’s nothing more for me to do here,” she said.

I found it hard to form the words, but form them I did. “Are you sure that’s true?” I asked. She gave me a questioning look. “Willow, I know that you have been missing certain things. These are your people. I spoke with your father earlier and he thought that perhaps you might prefer to stay here, that now you are a wolf you could find your place in this pack. After all, they are in need of a storyteller, and that is what you always wanted to be.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Do you want me to stay here Cassius?” she asked. I stared back at her,

unsure of what to say. “I assume that you would not wish to stay with me.”

“This is hardly the place for a vampire to make his home, and you know that I have already taken an oath to watch over the castle,” I replied.

“So this would be it then. We would be back where we started, both alone.”

“But you would be accepted by your pack.”

Willow shook her head in disbelief and let out a small chuckle. “Cassius, you are my pack. Don’t get me wrong, it’s cathartic to be back here and to see everyone again. I’m glad I’ve been able to bring some closure to things with Brandon and my parents, but that doesn’t mean I want to stay here. I can’t forget the way they treated me, and I’m not going to forget what you’ve done for me either. I am who I am today because of you. I want to know the woman I’m going to become with you. I don’t want to throw that away. But if you would rather have things return to the way they were then I will accept your judgment. If you want me to stay here then I will. So do you want me to stay? Or do you want me to go back with you?”

“I...” I wondered if I should do what was best for her in the long term. Over her shoulder I could see Peter staring at us, and I knew what he would want me to say. But I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t.

“I want you to be with me forever,” I continued.

She smiled and took my hand. “How about for the rest of our lives? I want you to take that potion Cassius. I want you to be mortal again so that we can have a family together. I want our pack to grow. I want the chance to bring new life into the world and even make new mistakes that our children are going to hate us for.” She laughed as she said this.

I nodded and found that there were tears in my eyes. I squeezed her hand. “You might have to explain this to your father though. I don’t think he’s going to be very happy.”

She followed my gaze over her shoulder and her smile fell. Still holding my hand, she led me to him. I could see the crestfallen look on his face. I think he already knew what she had decided.

“Willow, I’m so glad that you were here for this. I’m glad that you were able to say goodbye to her,” he said,

almost choking on his emotion.

“I am too father. And I’m glad I got to see you as well. But I want you to know that Cassius and I are going to leave now. We have matters to attend to at home.”

Confusion rippled across Peter’s face, as though he couldn’t quite comprehend her words. “But Willow, your home is here.”

“It was Dad, but it’s not any longer. I’ve found a new home, with Cassius.”

Peter scowled and he glared at me. He spoke through gritted teeth. “You promised me that you would let her leave.”

“Cassius has nothing to do with this Dad,” Willow said. “This is my decision to make. It’s always been my decision. I chose to go with him. I chose to stay with him. I chose to love him. I’m going to leave with him again now. I’m going to make a life with him.”

“But... but things could be better now. I’m a better father and your mother... you could take over from her.”

“I don’t want that Dad. I don’t want to live the life you laid out for me. I have my own ambitions now. But I

promise I'll come back and visit. This isn't going to be a final goodbye. I just... this place isn't where I can be my best self. I belong with Cassius. I'm sorry if that's hard for you to understand, and I wish that things could be easier and we could all live together, but unfortunately that's not possible. You just have to trust that I know what's right for myself."

For a moment I thought that Peter was going to be enraged and attack us to try and prevent Willow from leaving. I pitied the man. He had just lost his wife, and now he was about to lose his daughter again. I knew a great deal about loneliness, and even though he was still a valued member of his pack there was something he lost that he would never be able to regain. But often in life our paths took us away from our family members, and it was the same for Willow. She had found her happiness elsewhere and now she was going to explore it with me, and I was not going to stop her from doing that.

Peter closed his eyes. "I suppose it's time for me to learn that I don't always know best," he said. I was glad that he wasn't going to make this difficult for us. Willow thanked him and hugged him. He shook my hand and

told me to take care of her. I promised that I would. Then he asked if Willow was going to say farewell to anyone else in the pack. She looked around, but ultimately decided against it. Now that they understood she had made her own choice in life they were not going to look for her again, and we would be free to live out the years undisturbed. Nothing would threaten the sanctuary of our castle again.

We walked to a dark part of the forest where I summoned a portal, but just as we were about to step through I felt another presence skulking towards us. I turned to see a wolf shift into Brandon.

“Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?” he asked.

“It’s starting to become a habit,” she smirked.

“You know you could stay,” Brandon said. He seemed a lot more level headed than Willow had described.

“I could, but it wouldn’t be what’s best for me.”

Brandon nodded with an understanding look upon his face. “You know, being the Alpha forced me to grow

up quickly. I realize how immature I used to be and I'm sorry. I think things would have played out a lot differently if I hadn't made you feel like an outcast. I know the pack takes it lead from me, and I should have set a better example."

"Yes, you should have," Willow said. I was proud of her for not making any concessions. Brandon nodded his head and then since there was nothing else to say he bid us farewell. I could see he was tormented by the path he had not taken, as was the lot for many men. I did not have to worry about that though because I had won Willow's heart and did not have to fear losing her.

We passed through the portal, hand in hand, and within moments we were standing back in the castle again. The air was peaceful, the atmosphere darker, and the ambience was quiet. Silence hung around us like a soft blanket and she was still holding my hand tightly. Before I dispelled the portal there was something I thought I ought to tell her.

"Willow, if I do take this potion and become normal it is going to strip me of everything that makes me a vampire, including my ability to conjure magic. These

portals... there may be some relics that can open them, but it might be the case that we are only going to be able to open a narrow line of communication, as you did with Clea. We may not be able to pass through to other worlds, at least not with the regularity you have been used to. I know you promised your father that you would see him again, but if I turn mortal then that might not be the case.”

Willow turned to me. “There is always more than one way to face a problem Cassius. But thank you for telling me. I still would like you to go through with this, if you’re happy too.”

“You understand that I am not going to be the same as I am now. What if you are attracted to the vampiric part of me?”

“You loved me after I embraced my wolf. I will love you after you lose the vampire. This way we can have children Cassius. This castle will be brimming with life again and we can bring happiness into the world. Seeing my mother again reminded me of the happy times we shared. My only regret is we could not have had more of them. But I learned to age gracefully from her. I learned

to appreciate the fact that we only have finite moments to live. She had made her peace with death, as we all must eventually. What can be better than living our lives out together?”

She closed the distance between us and plucked a kiss from my lips, as gently as if she was plucking a fragile string on a lute. I nodded and quelled the anxiety in my heart. Whatever instincts were left over should not overpower me. I knew I wanted to be with her, and I knew that I wanted to sire children with her. After all these years it was time for me to live rather than exist, it was time for me to shed the skin of a vampire.

We walked to the laboratory. I never let go of her hand. We were both filled with trepidation. Although the manual detailed that there had been successful experiments, I had never heard of any. I worried that we might have gotten the recipe wrong, or that it simply was not going to work.

The test tube was still there, waiting for us. The dark orange liquid was thick and viscous. I took it in my hands and held it aloft.

“This is it. Are you sure you want to do this?” Willow asked.

She knew she was asking a lot of me, but then hadn't I done the same for her when I had asked her to stay here? She had turned away from everything she had known in order to make a life with me in this castle. Now it was my turn to return to the favor. The years behind me were filled with all kinds of different experiences and emotions. I had been many different things during my life. I had been a pianist, a lover, a husband, a butcher, a failure, a traitor, a loner, but never had I felt more alive than when I had been with Willow. There was nobody else I would have done this for. It was almost as though I had been waiting for her all my life. I would have given up my life for her, and so in the end it was only natural that I should give up my immortality too.

I slowly uncorked the test tube and let it fall to the floor. Willow nodded to me. She told me she loved me. I then shot the test tube back and felt the potion slide down my gullet. It was thick and heavy, and I had to swallow multiple times to imbibe it. Willow stared at me expectantly.

“Do you feel any different?” she asked.

I held up a finger, not wanting to open my mouth because the taste upon my tongue was sickly sweet and it made the back of my throat tingle, so I was afraid if I moved I might hurl everything up. I blinked as I felt it trickle down, as thick as tar, and then I coughed and bent over the table.

“Are you alright?” Willow asked.

“I don’t feel anything yet,” I said. And as the minutes ticked by that did not change. I waited for something to hit, for something to twist inside me and change me, but it didn’t seem as though anything was going to change.

Willow had grabbed the manual and looked at it with a brow knotted with frustration. “Annoyingly it doesn’t say how long it’s supposed to take to work.” She flicked back and forth between pages. “You don’t think this could be a joke, do you?”

“It’s not beyond the realm of possibility.”

“Or maybe we just got the ingredients mixed up. Let’s go through them again,” she said, listing them off

one by one. I nodded and confirmed each of them in turn, getting about halfway through the recipe when suddenly I felt a stabbing sensation in the pit of my stomach. It was so intense that it caused me to collapse to my knees. I clutched my fists in the air and gasped, my body angled to the side as I braced myself against the pain.

Willow rushed to my side and held me. “Cassius! Cassius! What’s going on?”

“I think...” I gasped, but I could not finish the sentence as another jolt of pain burst through me. It was as though lightning had seized me. I fell to my hands and knees. I was shaking. Sweat poured through my clothes and a tingling sensation passed all the way through me. I blinked as the world became a blur and I was determined to not let this consume me. I was stronger than this. I struggled to my feet with Willow’s help, but as soon as I regained my upright position the world became a blur and this delirious sensation filled my mind. I groaned and everything felt as though it was spinning, but in reality it was me who was spinning as I fell to the ground and cracked my head. Pain throbbed everywhere. It was

more than I had ever felt in a long, long time. It was as though some savage beast had sunk its claws into me and was now proceeding to peel away my flesh from the bones. It was pain that went beyond pain, horror that went beyond horror. Silence filled my gaping mouth and my eyes were wide. My fingers scraped against the stone floor, and I knew there was no going back.

This was always what I imagined death would feel like, and if this was the case then I wanted Willow to be the last thing I saw. I tilted my head towards her and looked at her, but I could only see the vague, hazy form. I could not see the soft, sensual lips or the luscious eyes, I only had the memory to console me, but that would have to do. Oh Willow... oh Willow I love you... yet I was too weak to even speak the words. Would she know? Would she understand?

I spasmed and felt something hard reaching into my soul. I wanted to fight, but I could take no more. The pain was blistering and all consuming, and in the end it prevailed. I was left sinking into the black abyss of infinity, filled with a dread that I would never return and

all that was left for me to do was slip away, slip away into
the silence.

Chapter Twenty Three

Willow

I watched with horror as Cassius collapsed. It was as though he was a puppet whose strings had been cut. I tried to help him up, tried to offer him support, but he had been drained of all strength. Whatever was inside him had rendered him helpless. I felt sick with guilt. He had only taken this damned potion because of me and now it was killing him. I grabbed at his clothes. I tried to shake this out of him, but nothing worked. He trembled and writhed and he coughed and choked in pain. It looked like he was in hell. Was this how the potion was supposed to work, or had something gone horribly wrong? I had no idea, all I thought was that nobody deserved to go through this. Nobody deserved to have this happen to them.

I called out to him, but he didn't seem to hear me. His eyes rolled all over the place, never fixating on one thing even though I tried to hold his head steady and get him to focus on me. I had just lost my mother, was I going to lose Cassius as well? It didn't seem fair. Why

was life punishing me like this? Was I not allowed to have anything? Did I have to lose everything?

Cassius' entire body shook as though he was having an electric shock. I put my hands on his shoulders to try and steady him, worried that he was going to end up hurting himself.

Then he was still.

It wasn't like what had happened with Mom. That was gentle and tender. This was like a war, and Cassius had just lost. All the strength in his body had been drained, leaving nothing behind. Tears poured down my cheeks and in my choking breaths I lamented the fates for taking Cassius from me, and I hated myself for allowing him to drink this potion. I had been so selfish in wanting him to be mortal. I should have known not to mess with things I did not understand. He was a vampire, why did I seek to change that?

I collapsed over his body and wept horribly. I clutched his clothes and his skin, trying to keep a hold of him because I thought that somehow if I did then he wouldn't have to go.

Except he was already gone.

I even tried kissing him like in the old fairytales Mom had told me, wishing that true love's kiss would be able to save him.

It didn't.

Either our love wasn't true enough, or the whole thing had been a lie.

I leaned back on my haunches, my hands on my thighs, looking down at the man I loved who had so suddenly and so horribly been taken away from me. My chest heaved as I took in deep breaths and then I looked around at this cold, empty room and thought of this cold, empty castle. I was all alone now, a lone wolf living in the heart of the vampire's kingdom. I had just lost everything, and might never be able to leave this place. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Cassius and I were supposed to have a life together, not just mere moments, not just a glimpse of bliss. Anger bubbled inside me, aching to get out. I wanted something to rage against, but there was nothing. There were no enemies to fight, only life and death, and these things were too abstract to grasp.

Instead I turned and grabbed the manual again, hoping against hope that there would be something inside that told me what to do in case the potion failed.

There was nothing.

Perhaps there was something in the library! Even if it took me a lifetime to find then I would scour every single volume in that library to see if there was a way to bring him back from death. There was an answer to everything else in there, why not this?

I kept clinging to these vague bursts of hope because I did not want to face the truth that I had lost the man I loved. I knew I would never be the same without him.

And then, from behind me, I heard movement.

I turned around slowly, unable to believe my eyes as Cassius drew his arms up and then he coughed and groaned. Tension and fear gripped my heart as I worried that some necrotic spell had taken hold of him and would bring him back to be a monstrous creature, a soldier of the damned.

But when I looked into his eyes I saw that he was still Cassius.

“Willow?” he asked in a choking breath.

He reached out to me, and I gave him my arms. I helped him stagger to his feet and I looked at him in his new splendor. He was still the same man as before, only slightly changed. His skin was richer in color, his features less sharp and angled, and he was warm to the touch. He looked down at his hands and then touched the rest of him, checking that he was still there.

I gazed at him in wonder. “I thought you had died,” I said.

“I thought I had too,” he said, and then his mystified look turned into a wide smile. He was mortal. My vampire king was now a man, filled with the ability to create life, to age, to grow with me, to die with me, to bring an end to our story. I took him into my arms and in our joy we kissed passionately, madly. I ran my hands under his clothes and became quickly aroused by the heat burning under his skin. I wanted to taste him, to drown in him, and I growled with hungry passion as we made our way stumbling into the bed chamber, kissing

as we did so, all our feelings unbidden and our inhibitions abandoned, our clothes being left bit by bit in a trail behind us. By the time we reached the bed chamber we were naked. I gazed down at the glory of his body and I couldn't stop touching him, unable to draw my hands and lips away from his warm skin.

“How do you feel?” I asked in a wretched moan, my words punctuated by heavy breaths and lingering kisses as I moved my lips across his shoulders and chest, my hands running along his stomach and his thighs, my breasts pressed against his swollen arousal.

“I feel great right now. I just feel... I feel different. I feel lighter. My senses are not as attuned as before, but I feel alive.”

“That's good,” I said, suffocating his words in a passionate kiss. I ran my fingers through his hair and felt his body stiffening underneath me. The air crackled and sizzled with heat as we created an inferno with our bodies. They struck together like a match to a matchbox and a flame burst into life, consuming us both. I was all over him, indulging my primal instincts as I was overwhelmed by this need to have him and be close with

him. There was something about him being mortal now that made the desire within my heart burn with the kind of passion that could not be denied or pushed away. The molten core of my body ached and pulses of pleasure swept through me, creating shudders.

I drifted down his body, wanting to celebrate his return. My open mouth trailed saliva down the core of his body and my gaping lips caught on his warm skin. My hands found his sex and fingers curled around his hard flesh. My lips soon joined them, my breath drifting around the hot musk. I tasted him as my tongue darted out and ran along the smooth tip of his erection, so big and thick. His body arched as I sucked him. I watched the delight flicker over his face. I moved my head back and forth with wild abandon, wanting to make him feel good, wanting to give him a show, wanting to devour him myself. I was in a frenzy and chaotic thoughts careened through my mind as I was lost to this world of feeling and desire and sensation, where the stony castle melted away into a haze and the only thing that mattered was this bed and our bodies and the soaring, inexplicable wonder that floated in the air above us, simmering off our bodies.

He groaned loudly and I knew that he was close, but he could not come yet. I wasn't ready for him. Now that he was a human we had to work on making a child, and that could not happen if I swallowed his desire. I pulled myself up in my haze and swam up his body. His skin was flecked with sweat, glistening as though he was coated in the sea. As my hands ran across his chest I noticed something new, and I realized it was his heartbeat, powerful as a drum. I kissed it, knowing that it beat only for me, that he was only like this because of his love for me.

I drew myself up and felt the burning, yearning ache of arousal throbbing in between my legs. His hand reached down and tickled me there, but I needed more. I gripped the head of the bed and brought myself up, resting myself against his face. His hands wrapped around my thighs as I sat there and felt his eager tongue flicking and lapping at me, his frantic breath hot against my most sensitive area. I groaned and whimpered as the pleasure was a whiplash through me. Goosebumps broke out upon my skin as I sat upon my king, soaking his mouth with the flow of my pleasure, feeling how much he wanted to please me. Through fluttering eyelashes I

looked back and gaped in awe at his impossibly long body, with his erection still throbbing, still craving my touch.

I gasped as I welcomed the flowing waves of pleasure crashing through me. Guttural moans rippled into the air as I let it all fly out, embracing the ferocity inside me. My skin was slick with sweat too. It trickled in between my curves. I sank down, kissing him as he wiped the juice off his lips. I could taste the lingering sweetness. He rolled me onto my back and started to worship my breasts, pressing them together and moving his mouth across them, his tongue darting between each nipple. My legs and arms moved like tentacles as I sank into the softness of the bed and the warmth of this pleasure he was generating within me. My hair splayed over the pillow and there was a dreamy, delirious feeling in my mind that I was in heaven.

Cassius wrapped his arms around me and continued to kiss my body. One of his hands then delved down and played with me again, his fingers slipping inside me to reach a hidden sweet spot that only he had ever touched. He grazed it with his fingertips and then

moved his finger back and forth, stimulating me with such gentle movements. The tremors soon turned to quakes though, and I felt myself sinking into this erotic abyss where all the rules of the world were abandoned and nothing mattered except pure, hedonistic pleasure. I clung to him tightly, not ever wanting to let him go, wanting to feel all these things forever, wanting to feel him.

I grabbed his head and wrapped my legs around his waist, driving him forward.

“I need you. I need your cock. I need you in me Cassius,” I breathed, each word coming thick and fast, riding a frenzied wave of passion. He was all too happy to oblige. I could feel the tension rippling around his body. His heart was a manic crash of thunder. His eyes were ablaze with fervent ardor. His entire body shook with such mania that it felt as though he was going to explode completely, bursting apart at the seams.

The bed creaked and our lustful moans echoed around us. I felt him shift position and then he plunged into me, far bigger than his fingers this time, far larger and harder and all the things that a man should be. This

was my love, this was my vampire, this was my King. I rolled my hips and drew him deeply into me as our bodies fell into a familiar rhythm. His essence may have been changed, but he was still the same Cassius. He still knew exactly how to please me. He took hold of one of my legs and hooked it up, allowing him to get even deeper inside me. The other hand grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled my head to the side. Pain blurred with pleasure, giving another edge to everything that was happening. His hips crashed against mine, our bodies melting into each other with every thrust. My face contorted as I reached around and dug my nails into his back, using everything I had to pull him as deep into me as he could get. The rolling movements made it feel as though we had lost ourselves to something far greater than ourselves, to something that we could never escape.

His lips found mine. His kisses scorched me. The flames of his passion consumed me utterly. Our breaths became one and I held him as close as possible, feeling so close to him in that moment that my entire sense of being an individual was subsumed into him. I lost myself and we became something new, something more than we had ever been before. We were not just a man and

woman, werewolf and vampire, we were lovers united, our flesh and souls bound together in this intangible, ethereal, and inextricable way. Every aspect of ourselves were bound together, twisting and flowing in this beautiful, dazzling array of emotion and sensation that reached into every pore of our skin, and touched every facet of our souls. We transcended each other and the natural world, becoming something greater than the sum of our parts, and yet what was inside us was raw and feral too, the most immediate and pulsing sensations that quaked within.

All the pleasure blurred within me. It cascaded in one endless ribbon, spooling out of me and around me, accompanied by him slamming inside me, his thrusts shaking me to my core. All the time he grew tenser, he grew hotter, until he could not contain himself. I wanted him to feel alive. I wanted to welcome his new mortal form to the world with the orgasm to end all orgasms, so I held him close and I moaned deeply and I pulled it all out of him, feeling him shudder and tremble as he collapsed in my arms, a slick, sweaty mess that exploded in rapture.

Bliss filled me. I blinked because stars appeared before my eyes and my skin was flushed, my chest heaving. He rolled off me and I lay there, knowing that he had left a part of himself inside me, a part of himself that would grow and blend with me, creating something wholly new.

Chapter Twenty Four

Cassius

I lay there, panting to try and catch my breath. I rested my hand on my chest, feeling the echo of my heart. It was strange to feel it beating once again. I had not imagined I would ever feel this way.

Willow had a dazed look upon her face. I imagined that I expressed something similar. We were burning with heat, but I pulled her into my arms nonetheless. The sheets underneath us were soaked. The air was filled with the musky haze of our lovemaking, and the lingering taste in my mouth was of her. The sweet nectar lay upon my tongue like morning dew. How I loved losing myself in her body. How I loved being with her like this.

She stroked glistening drops of sweat off my chest. “I thought you were gone,” she said softly and seriously. The elation of my return had dissipated now.

“I suppose that was just the way the potion worked.”

“It would have been nice if we had been warned.”

“Nobody can predict how magic is really going to work,” I shrugged. “The important thing is that I’m still here.”

“Yes, you are. How do you feel though?”

“I feel... different. I’m not exactly sure how to describe it. I’m still getting used to it. I don’t have the same keen senses as I did before, and I have lost the arcane link to this fortress. It is strange to not have access to magic again,” as I said this I flexed my fingers to see if I could still conjure anything, but nothing happened. “I also feel...” I paused as I shifted my body slightly. “Pain.”

“Like, aching?” Willow asked, laughing gently.

I nodded. “I had almost forgotten how fragile a mortal body can be. I suppose I need to be careful now. I can’t take any risks with this.” I stretched out my arms and looked at my flesh, which was deeper in color than it had been before. One wrong move or wrong slip could end my life now. I could not count on immortality to save me any longer, and this meant that I had to be more cautious.

“I am also tired. And I’m hungry.”

“You’ll now know the pain of taking those stupid potions instead of having real food,” Willow teased. Then her tone grew serious. “I’m just glad you’re okay, and that you’re not suffering any truly ill effects.”

“No, I don’t think so. This is me now. I was the last vampire, and now I’m a man. It’s strange to think how things have come full circle.”

“You don’t regret it, do you?”

I thought about it for a moment. “No, I don’t. This is right,” I slipped my hand in with hers and twined our fingers together. “We can have a life together now Willow, a life free of any trouble, and one day we’re going to bring an end to our story.”

“But not today. Not right now. We’re only just beginning Cassius. We’re going to have a pack together.”

Her eyes gleamed with excitement, a fact that I found touching. And the more I thought about having a family the more excited I became about it.

“Do you think it will have worked already?”

“I have no idea. But if not, then we’re just going to have to keep trying.”

“I don’t have any complaints about that... although I fear that this body may not be as durable as the last.” I tried to hide the throbbing pain on my back from where she had dug her nails into me, but it was hard not to wince. I gained a few things by being mortal, but I also lost a few things as well.

“I’ll try and be gentle with you,” she joked, and then the smile fell from her face again as she placed a hand against my cheek. “Cassius, I’m so glad that you took this step for me. I know that things haven’t always been perfect between us, but I do love you more than life itself and the only thing that will really make me happy is having a family with you. I want our children to love you as much as I love you. I want to raise them and show them the world.”

“I want that too, and I’m glad that you have been able to show me a way forward in life, a way to be happy again. Having a family with you is something that I could never do as a vampire. It’s just strange to think that there are no vampires left any longer.”

Willow nodded. “It is the end of an era, but I suppose in the future there will come a time when there

are no wolves either. I'll make sure that they survive in stories though. Our children will know the story of the last vampire."

"And the werewolf who saved him," I added with a knowing smile. I kissed her on the forehead, breathing in her scent. It was not as vivid as it had been before. I had to put a little more effort into searching for it, but in the end I found it. It was just as rewarding and intoxicating as it had been before.

"How many children do you want?" Willow asked, changing the subject to something lighter.

"I hadn't really thought about that. I always assumed we would start with one and see where it goes."

"I'd like to have more than one. I never want my children to know what it is to be alone. I want them to be able to grow with each other and run with each other. Being able to run alongside Mom was a great privilege and I want to be able to enjoy that with my children."

"You think they will all be wolves?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“I don’t see why they wouldn’t be. The genes are strong, although I suppose they might suffer from the same affliction that I did. There’s only one amulet as well... we might have to share it.”

I heard the tension in her voice. “Don’t think about that right now. There’s a long time until that happens, and we’re not going to put so much importance on them being wolves anyway, are we? Them living here is not going to be the same as living in a pack with other wolves. They have value no matter who they become. And if there is a way for them to become a wolf then we’ll just have to find it because there are still plenty of items and wisdom in this castle to help us deal with any problem we might encounter. But first and foremost they are going to be our children, and they are going to be loved because of that.”

“That’s sweet of you to say. I know you’re going to be a great father Cassius.”

“And you’re going to be a great mother. You know, I think the best parents are the ones who have suffered a little bit because they know what it’s like to feel lonely. But we have to promise to keep an eye on each other to

make sure that we're not going to make the same mistakes as our parents made."

"We're going to let them figure out where their ambition is going to lead them. They're not being brought into this world to live the life that we couldn't," Willow agreed. We both nodded. She ran her hand down my arm and twined her fingers in with mine. "I just hope that we can give them a good life."

"We will Willow, because all we need to do is love them. I hope that they don't end up running away like we did from our parents. I know it hurt my mother and father."

"It hurt mine too. But we didn't really run away. We were pushed. We're not going to do that to our children."

"No, we're not."

"And the only reason you ran away from them was because you were turned into a vampire. That's not going to happen to them."

"No, it isn't."

I yawned and felt my head growing heavier as it sank into the pillow. Willow kissed me goodnight and

said that I should get some rest. After all, I had hundreds of years of sleepless nights to catch up on. It did take me a while before I went to sleep though. I thought about the fact that I was no longer a vampire. The last time I had been mortal I had been a wretch, drinking myself silly after another failed audition, with hope coming to me in the form of Amara, who promised me the world. Now I was with Willow, happier than I had been in a lifetime, planning for the future. Things were going to change and I was looking forward to it because now I was going to add a new, exciting chapter to my story. I was going to become something that I had never been before; a father.

Yet, in order to do this I had to give up something that had been precious to me. I knew I would be able to cope with it as time passed, but the fact that now all the vampires of the world were gone because of me was hard to cope with. I never thought that I would take them entirely out of the world. It was ironic really, given how much of my reputation was made from protecting vampires against werewolves. But we could not be born, only turned, and now there were no vampires left to turn any new ones. The myths had come to an end. This grand castle housed the memories of the vampires, and as

Willow said, they would just be stories now. It would be interesting to see what my children would think of them when we ended up telling them the truth about how we met.

I yawned again. My breathing deepened as I allowed myself to fall into sleep. It was something that my body had not experienced for a long time, as I did not count the time when Willow had drugged me. However, my body had not forgotten the instincts. I felt my mind slipping away into this nether world of dreams, and before I knew it my soul was sailing away on a wondrous sea, and I was at rest, gathering my strength for another day. In time I would rest for the final time, but before then I hoped to have many nights shared with Willow and to be able to look back at a life well lived and well loved.

Epilogue

Cassius and Willow slept. No longer did the Vampire King wander the silent castle in the depths of night, but that did not mean the world slept. The sun had turned, and now the moon was in full view, bathing the barren world in its soft caress of silver light. The windows of the castle were open to this, and thus the moonlight poured in while the mortal couple slept. The last vampire had indeed surrendered his supernatural soul, but there were always ways for magic to alter the truths of the world, for Cassius had not been the only vampire to live in this castle, nor had he been the only one to know its secrets.

In fact, there were secrets that even he did not know.

So it was that in the throne room, unbeknownst to Cassius, he had placed Amara's sword in a dangerous position. He perhaps should have given more thought to his actions, given how she had been the Queen of Vampires and took great pride in the throne she used to sit. It had been little more than an honorary title to Cassius since he had had no subjects to rule over, but for

Amara it meant a great deal. Amara had lived a full, long life, and she knew what it was to be in danger, and she knew how to trick death.

She also knew that there were some fates worse than death.

So she had made a plan. And this plan would result in her soul being pulled back from wherever it was being held, brought back to this place she called home, this throne of which she was so proud.

The ruby set into the hilt of her sword glinted as the moonlight poured upon it. There were some myths over the years that the vampires had made up entirely, but one truth was that the moon had some special energy about it that was worshiped by vampires and wolves, albeit in different ways. Amara knew that the moon's energy could be harnessed by the right jewel. Until now the sword had been kept in the repository with all the other relics, the ruby cast in shadow where the moonlight could not touch it. Now it rested on the throne, bathing in the celestial light.

And the magic took hold.

The ruby glowed and the sword rattled as eldritch energy took hold of it. There was a crackling sensation, and then a bright red light burst out of the ruby, as though it had just exploded with a crimson glow. The impact was such that the sword fell to the floor, the echo dancing around the room. If Cassius had still been a vampire then he would have heard this and come to investigate, and perhaps he could have stopped what was happening before it was too late.

But then there was an almighty screech and a howl as someone crashed down behind the throne. A pale, skeletal, trembling hand clawed the top of the throne, pulling herself up. Her hair was straggling, her eyes were punctuated with dark shadows, her pupils small dots. Her body was gaunt, her clothes tattered, and every breath was a hiss. She blinked as her gaze darted around, at first not believing that she was in these surroundings again.

But then as she moved around her throne a smile spread upon her face. Being in the castle once again seemed to fill her with strength. A murmur of a laugh emerged from her throat and it became a full cackle as

she realized that she had returned. She looked down at her sword and bent low to pick it up. The ruby had cracked, but that was fine because it had done its job. Amara raised the sword and pressed her lips against the cool, cruel blade, the sensations of the world flooding back to her yet again.

She was still weak for the moment though. She fell back into the throne, taking her rightful place. The sword lay across her lap. The smile faded and a mask of hatred descended upon her face. There was only one thought on her mind; revenge against Cassius. He had betrayed her and he had cast her and the other vampires away. Now it was time to teach him a lesson. As she settled into her throne she breathed deeply, getting used to being in this world again compared to the empty void in which she had been imprisoned, the world between worlds were there was nothing except existential agony. All the senses swirled around her as she tried to make sense of them. It took a lot of focus for her to remember what it was like to be in this world. All she really remembered was Cassius, and that last moment where he had banished her from this castle, her castle, when he had taken her kingdom for his own.

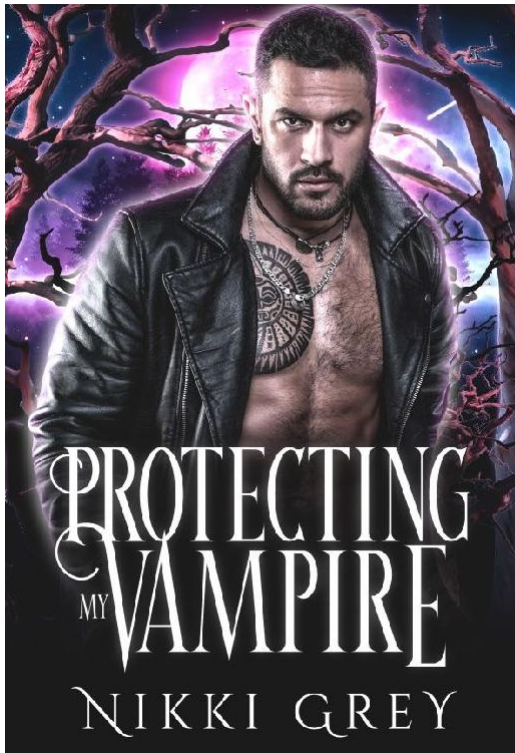
Hatred was the only thing she could feel. It burned in her blood.

But there was something else. She twitched her head. Her nose caught a faint scent on the air. A wolf? Oh, how things had changed. What had Cassius done?

But they would soon be as they should be, for Amara was back to make things right. Cassius did not have to lament the death of the vampires because the Queen had returned, and she was eager for blood.

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series *Protecting My Vampire*

Here's a FREE Preview to book 3 of this series.



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.

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Protecting My Vampire

Paranormal Protector

Romance

By: Nikki Grey

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

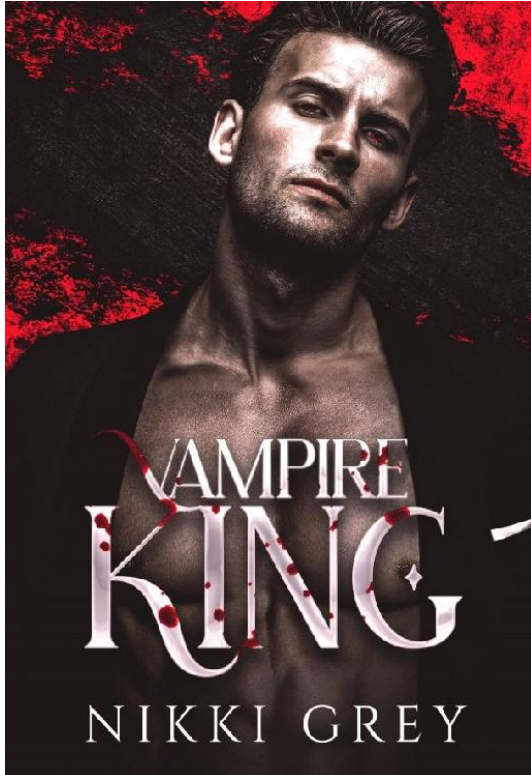
to react in time, my senses dulled, otherwise I would have felt her coming. She drew back and I saw the fire in her violet eyes. They screamed death and vengeance and all the dark things of the world, and all I could think was that my mortal life had been too short lived. There wasn't even time for it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

Click [Here](#) to read more of Book 3 of this series (Click the link or enter <https://mybook.to/ProtectingMyVampire> into your browser.)

Click [Here](#) to check out this Nikki Grey best seller
“Vampire King: Enemies To Lovers Protector Romance”
(Click the link or enter <https://mybook.to/VampireKing>
into your browser.)



Your worst enemy is your best protector.

In a supernatural town that has always protected you,
you don't expect to stumble upon danger.

Yet, there are threats around every corner.

Lurking.

Waiting.

In a town where everyone is different, where everyone is
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.

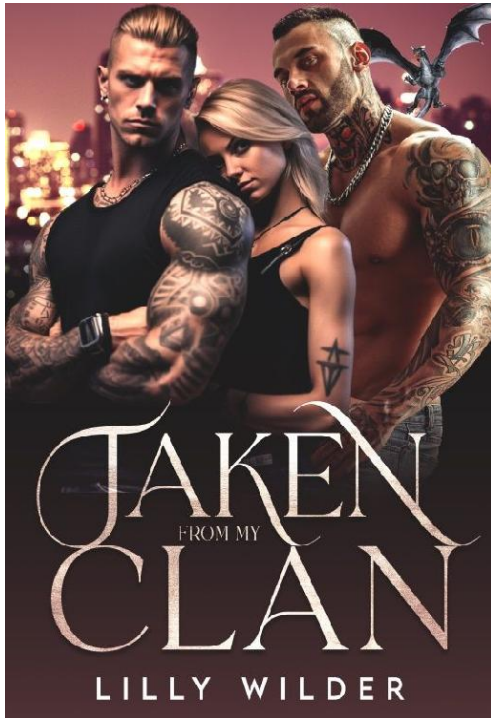
But that means I have to be close to him.

Closeness means affection.

Affection turns to forbidden love, and eventually,
enemies become lovers.

Even then... are they to be trusted?

Click [Here](#) to check out this Lilly Wilder new release
“Taken From My Clan: Menage Dragon Romance” (Click
the link or enter <https://mybook.to/TakenClan> into your
browser.)



Two rival dragons kidnap me.

Being the clan leader's mate is an honor.

Yet I feel dread at being forced to mate with him.

As a good girl, I'd never disgrace our dragon clan.

So I resign myself to my fate.

That's when Ayrvan and Tarsi kidnap me.

Stoic, stubborn, and tight-lipped.

They're the opposite of me.

I should hate them.

Instead, I feel pulled towards Tarsi's pitch-black dragon.
In his human form, his thick, black hair falls to the middle
of his muscular back.
I want to caress his sunkissed skin.

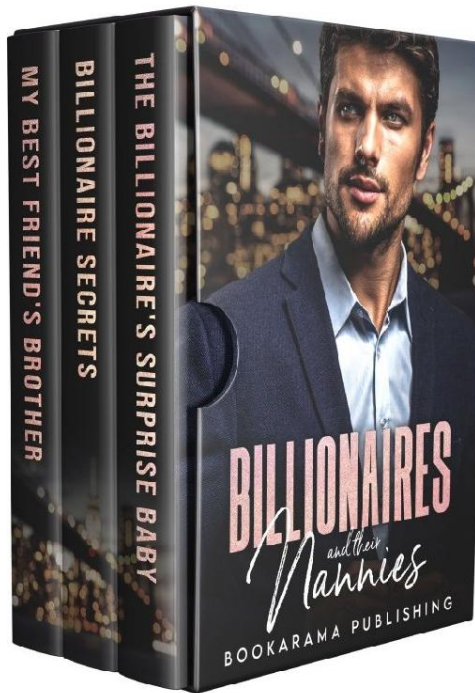
As if that wasn't bad enough, Ayrvan stirs dangerous
desire within me too.

His dark eyes make me want to confess all my secrets.
He's the enemy, but my body feels safe in his strong
arms.

Being with them is a sin.
Yet that's all I want.

I must escape before my treacherous, forbidden feelings
bubble over.

Click [Here](https://mybook.to/BillionairesNannies) to check out this Erica Frost best seller
“Billionaires And Their Nannies: New Adult Romance
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If you love steamy billionaire romances, grab this complete 3-book Billionaires And Their Nannies Collection.

In this collection you will find:

Billionaire Secrets

Dominic Hart is nothing more than my boss.

Who cares how suave he is.

I'm not going to warm the bed of a man much older than me.

But the more time I spend with Dominic, the harder it is to resist.

Until I don't.

His kisses make me feel alive.

His touch awakens my passion.

Just as I start to fall for Dominic, he's accused of kidnapping.

My Best Friend's Brother

I'm working for the grumpy, single dad Will Ashton.

He happens to be a billionaire and my best friend's brother.

Will is hot, but so not my type.

At least that's what I kept telling myself.

But the more time I spend with Will, the more I want to kiss him.

The Billionaire's Surprise Baby

Nannying for the billionaire single dad.

A divorced, big-city trader, he doesn't fit into our small college town.

Dark, handsome, and muscular, he makes it impossible to think straight.

I most shouldn't daydream about him.

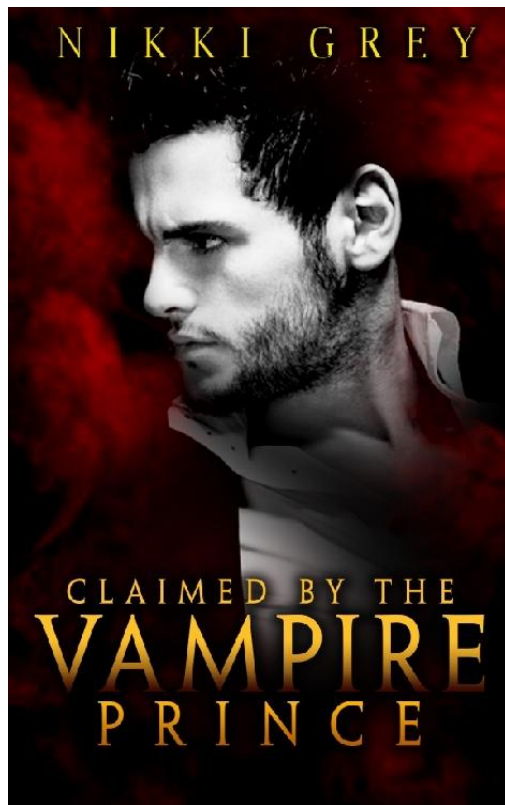
Oh, well. A little romance has hurt nobody.

That's my motto until I realize I'm pregnant.

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(Click the link or enter <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/1fhuqpwkk> into your browser.)



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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