

Wolf Pup

Jason's Story - November 1998

I knew I was in trouble the second the car door slammed. Not normal trouble. Mom trouble. The kind where she goes quiet first. The dangerous kind.

The engine ticked as it cooled, the sound loud in the small driveway behind our brownstone. I didn't move. The cold Boston wind cut through my hoodie, carrying the smell of the harbor a few streets away—salt, rust, and old fish.

Mom didn't say anything for a moment. She just sat behind the wheel staring straight ahead, fingers tight around it. That was worse than yelling. Finally she exhaled slowly. "Jason."

The way she said my name meant the argument had already started. I pushed open the door before she could say anything else and stepped out. Gravel crunched under my sneakers. The late afternoon sky hung low and gray over Boston, clouds rolling in from the harbor like they were bringing more bad news with them.

Behind me the car door slammed again. "Do you have any idea," she said, her voice tight, "how humiliating it is to leave a lecture hall at Harvard because your principal is calling about me, saying that my son starting *another* fight?"

I shoved my hands into my pockets. "I didn't start it."

"You never do," she replied immediately.

I turned toward her. "Because I didn't."

Mom looked exhausted. Her long black hair had come loose from the knot she wore when she taught, strands whipping across her face in the

wind. She still wore the same dark coat from campus, one arm clutching her satchel like she hadn't even had time to grab her things properly.

Elizabeth Quannah Red Elk Villalobos. Professor. Historian. Seer. And currently very pissed off mother.

She studied my face the way she always did when I came home with bruises, like she was trying to read something deeper than skin—trying to figure out if this was just another fight or something worse.

The late afternoon sun hung low over the quiet street, washing the neat rows of houses in soft gold. Our neighborhood in Newton looked like something straight out of a postcard—wide tree-lined streets, trimmed hedges, and big colonial homes sitting comfortably behind white fences. A couple down the block walked their golden retriever past manicured lawns, and somewhere nearby a sprinkler clicked rhythmically across fresh grass.

The peacefulness of it all made the dried blood on my knuckles feel even more out of place.

“Three boys in the nurse’s office,” she said quietly. “One with a broken nose.”

I shifted my weight on the front steps, staring down at the perfectly edged lawn instead of meeting her eyes.

A breeze moved through the old maples that lined the street, scattering a few early autumn leaves across the sidewalk.

She shook her head and folded her arms. “Do you have *any* idea how lucky you are to even be in that school?” she demanded.

I didn't answer. Mostly because I hated how guilty she made me feel when she got like this. But also because this wasn't the first time I'd heard this rant. Mom had been giving me the same speech for years after fights at school, broken knuckles, and another call from a teacher asking why her son couldn't stop putting other kids through walls. Only now her voice sounded different. Scared. Like she was realizing the boy sitting in front of her wasn't the same reckless little wolf pup she used to patch up at the kitchen table anymore.

“It's not just some private academy,” she continued, her voice sharpening with frustration. “That place was built for kids like you. Supernatural kids.” She gestured vaguely toward the city beyond the trees, toward Boston somewhere in the distance. “Most schools still won't touch supernatural students. Too dangerous. Too unpredictable. Parents panic, school boards panic, and suddenly the doors close.” Her gaze came back to me. “But *that* school?” she said. “They built an entire program for supernatural children. Teachers trained to handle abilities. Medical staff who actually know what happens when a kid shifts too early or loses control.”

Across the street a garage door rumbled open and a kid rode past on a bike, completely oblivious to the conversation happening on our front steps.

“You’re part of one of the first programs like that in the entire country,” she continued. “Shifter families from all over the East Coast try to get their kids into that place.” Her voice dropped, disappointment creeping in. “And instead of proving they were right to let you in... you send three boys to the nurse’s office.” She studied me again, the same worried look in her eyes. “Jason,” she said quietly, “that school isn’t just an opportunity. It’s a test. A test you failed.”

I shrugged sharply, glaring down at the pavement. “So?” I snapped. “They still shouldn’t have called Luis that.” My hands clenched into fists again. “He didn’t do anything to them!” I shot back. “And they had no right to say that about him, or about me... or about you!”

Mom’s eyes narrowed. “What did they say?” When I hesitated, her expression hardened, the narrow look sharpening into a full glare. “Jason.”

“They called him a spic,” I finally said. The word hung in the cold air between us.

Mom froze beside the car. “What else did they say?” she asked quietly.

I flexed my knuckles. The skin across them was swollen and split. “They said Luis should go back across the border with the rest of the trash.” The alley went quiet except for the wind rattling the fire escape above us. Then I rolled my eyes. “Which is stupid,” I muttered. “Puerto Rico’s a U.S. territory. He’s already American.”

I started to keep going—because technically I could’ve explained the whole thing. Luis and I had just covered it in civics last week. Territorial status, citizenship since 1917, the whole deal. But the look Mom was giving me shut me up real quick.

Her arms crossed. That professor stare.

I shifted my weight.

“What?” I said defensively. “I’m just sayin’. It doesn’t even make sense.”

Mom rubbed her temple. “Jason.”

“What?”

“That is not the point.”

“It kinda is.”

Her glare sharpened. “What *else* did they say?”

I hesitated, turning to look at the skyline, not wanting to meet her eyes. Then I let out a bitter huff. “They called me a bastard.”

Mom went very still.

“And they said you were some kinda ‘reservation witch.’” The words sounded even uglier out loud. I looked away, jaw tightening. “Said you probably put curses on people and that’s why nobody messes with me.”

The wind picked up down the alley. Mom's voice came out very calm. "And then?"

"They kept laughin'," I muttered. "Said Luis and me should both go back where we came from." I then kicked a pebble across the pavement. "So yeah," I said. "That's when I hit Calvin."

Mom stared at me. "You didn't just hit him."

"He started runnin' his mouth."

"Jason."

"And then his friends jumped in," I said quickly. "So I hit them too."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. "All three of them."

I shrugged. "They shouldn't've jumped in."

"One of them has a broken nose."

"He shouldn't've gotten so close."

"Another boy has a split lip."

"He tripped."

"Jason."

I shrugged again. "He tripped into my fist."

Mom closed her eyes for a second. "You are fourteen years old..."

She started.

"Almost fifteen." I snapped back.

"That does *not* make this better."

I looked down the alley toward the street. "They started it," I muttered.

Mom sighed. "You cannot solve everything with your fists."

I snorted quietly. "Worked today."

Her expression hardened. "You think this is funny?"

"No," I said quickly. Then I added, "But I bet Calvin probably won't say it again."

Mom pointed toward the back door. "*Inside.*"

I sighed and shoved my hands into my hoodie pocket. "Yeah, yeah."

As we walked toward the house she said quietly behind me, "You're smarter than this, Jason."

I stopped on the step and looked back at her. "I know."

She frowned. "Then why do you keep doing it?"

I hesitated. Because the real answer didn't make a lot of sense. Finally I shrugged. "Because nobody else was gonna stop them."

Mom stared at me for a long moment. Then she opened the door. "Get inside."

With a huff I marched inside, fighting the urge to slam that door behind me.

The inside of our house always smelled like coffee, old books, and the faint earthy scent of cedar Nanuk sometimes burned when he visited.

It wasn't a cramped city place but an old New England colonial set back from the street, the kind of house with wide front steps, tall windows, and a deep porch that creaked a little in the winter. Mom said it had been built sometime in the early 1900s, back when Newton was still more farmland than suburb. It wasn't flashy compared to some of the huge homes in the neighborhood, but it was big enough for all of us—and Mom had filled every inch of it.

Inside, the place felt like something halfway between a professor's office and a Comanche home.

Bookshelves covered nearly every wall, crammed with history texts, research binders, and stacks of student essays from Harvard that Mom graded late into the night. A bright Comanche blanket hung over the back of the couch, and beadwork and small dreamcatchers decorated the windows, their colors standing out against the pale walls and polished hardwood floors that creaked whenever someone walked too fast down the hall.

The kitchen table was almost never visible. It was usually buried under a mix of legal pads, academic journals, and someone's homework—usually mine, sometimes Kanna's. Meanwhile Tiraq's toys were scattered across the living room floor like tiny land mines waiting to ambush bare feet.

The house was always a little crowded, a little noisy, and a little chaotic. But it was warm.

And no matter how many fights we had or how loud things got, it still felt like home.



When I stepped into the living room, the warmth of the house wrapped around me like a blanket.

Outside, the November air had been sharp and cold, the kind that crept through your jacket and stung your lungs. Inside was different. The old radiator near the window hissed softly, pushing out dry heat that smelled faintly of dust and cedar. Somewhere deeper in the house the coffee maker clicked off with a quiet pop.

Our house in Newton was big by city standards—an old New England colonial with tall windows and creaky hardwood floors—but it never felt

quiet. Mom filled it the same way she filled her lectures: with too many books, too many papers, and too many ideas all competing for space.

The place always looked a little chaotic, but it was our kind of chaos.

Books were stacked on every surface. Hardcover leaned against paperbacks in unstable towers on the coffee table, the side tables, even the window ledge. Piles of Mom's papers and Harvard journals fought for space with laundry baskets and kids' toys scattered across the floor. A bright red-and-blue Comanche blanket hung over the back of the couch, its geometric patterns standing out against the pale walls. Near the window, a small wooden shelf held beadwork, old photographs, and a few weathered objects Nanuk had brought from Oklahoma—things that looked older than the house itself.

The smell of coffee, old paper, and cedar hung faintly in the air.

Kanna sat cross-legged on the floor beside the couch, folding a pile of clothes with the kind of calm patience only she seemed capable of. Each movement was slow and deliberate—shirt folded, smoothed, stacked. No wasted motion.

She glanced up when I walked in.

Most people thought Kanna was just some quiet Asian woman in her late twenties.

They were wrong.

She was only about five-four, but built like someone who could bend steel if she felt like it. Her arms were thick with muscle, her shoulders broad, and there was a heaviness to the way she moved that reminded me of a bear more than a person. The floorboards creaked faintly whenever she shifted her weight. Her dark hair was pulled back in a loose braid that fell over one shoulder, and her sharp eyes took in everything in the room in a single glance—the split in my lip, the blood drying across my knuckles, the stiffness in the way I held my right hand.

Which made sense.

Because Kanna was a bear. A werebear, same as Nanuk. A moon-bear, to be exact. And while she looked young enough to be someone's older sister, I knew the truth. Kanna was pushing eighty.

"Nice face," she said dryly, eyeing my split lip.

I shrugged and tossed my backpack onto the couch. "Other guy looks worse."

Seated on the rug near the coffee table, Tiraq sat surrounded by plastic blocks and toy cars, making engine noises loud enough to wake the dead. Even at six years old, there was something enormous about him. Thick black hair fell messily into his eyes while broad little shoulders hunched over his toys with fierce concentration. He already had the heavy build of his father, Nanuk, dense with the kind of unnatural strength only

werebears carried. One of the last of their kind. Ancient blood wrapped inside the body of a child. Every now and then he'd grin too wide while playing, revealing the faintest hint of sharp little teeth that looked almost too large for his mouth. And despite how young he was, the room always felt warmer with him in it, steadier somehow, like sitting near the heartbeat of something old and powerful hibernating beneath the surface.

"Vrrrrmmm—CRASH!"

One of the cars slammed dramatically into a tower of blocks, sending them tumbling across the rug. The moment he saw me, his whole face lit up.

"JAY-SON!"

He scrambled to his feet and ran toward me, nearly tripping over his own toy truck. His small socks slid a little on the hardwood floor as he bounced forward like gravity was more of a suggestion than a rule.

"Hey, squirt," I said, walking over and ruffling his hair.

He was only five, with big eyes, messy curls, and somehow always sticky. There was a smear of something red on his cheek that I hoped was jam. "Fight?" he asked excitedly.

Kanna snorted. "Of course it was a fight."

Mom walked in behind me, already sighing.

Before she could say anything else, the kitchen door creaked open.

Nanuk stepped into the room.

The old man filled the doorway like a wall.

Nanuk and Elgin Red Elk, my grandfather, went back farther than I could even understand. They'd fought together during World War II, back when Elgin served as one of the legendary Comanche Code Talkers and Nanuk fought beside him in some shadow war most humans would never know existed. Somewhere overseas, Elgin saved Nanuk's life, and creatures like Nanuk took debts seriously. Sacredly. Especially because Nanuk wasn't human. He was a werebear. A polar bear shifter descended from one of the oldest supernatural bloodlines on the planet, old enough that some wolves whispered about his kind like they were myths instead of flesh and blood. Nanuk once told me polar bears remembered everything. Every scar. Every debt. Every promise.

So after the war, he stayed.

Watched over Elgin's family.

Watched over my mother.

Mom used to tell me Nanuk had been there her whole life. Watching over the Red Elk bloodline like some ancient guardian spirit that refused to leave. When my grandfather died, Nanuk stayed. When Mom got pregnant with me and suddenly found herself alone, Nanuk stayed then

too. He helped raise me long before my father Matthew Calder, ever knew I existed.

Growing up, I never really thought about how strange that was. Nanuk was just... Nanuk. The giant old man who smelled like snow and cedar and always showed up when Mom needed help. The one who taught me how to fight. How to hunt. How to survive. He called me “pup” more than he ever called me Jason, and somehow that always felt warmer than hearing my own name. He wasn’t my grandfather by blood, not really. But blood stopped mattering a long time ago. Nanuk treated me like I belonged to him. Like protecting me wasn’t obligation.

It was love.

His gray hair was tied back in a thick braid, and his heavy shoulders stretched the fabric of his worn flannel shirt. Even standing still he looked enormous, like the house had been built a little too small for him. The overhead light caught the deep lines in his face—creases carved there by decades of wind, cold, and time. He stopped the moment he saw my hands. His eyes dropped to my knuckles. The bruising. The dried blood.

The room went quiet.

Nanuk slowly lifted his gaze to Mom. Then he said something in Comanche. “*Háa tsaa?*” His voice was low and calm. But I knew that tone. He was asking what happened.

Mom exhaled slowly. And just like that, I knew I was about to hear the whole lecture all over again. Nanuk’s eyes stayed on my hands. Not angry. Just... measuring.

Mom folded her arms like she’d been waiting for this moment. “He got into another fight at school,” she said.

Nanuk didn’t look at her yet. His gaze moved slowly from my knuckles to the split in my lip, then the bruise forming along my jaw.

Then he spoke again in Comanche.

“*Háa ma?*”

Why?

Mom answered in the same language, her voice tight. “They were insulting Luis. And me.”

Nanuk’s brow creased slightly. He looked back at me. “What did they say?”

I shrugged, trying to act like it wasn’t a big deal. “They called Luis a spic,” I muttered. “Told him to go back across the border.”

Kanna’s hands stopped folding a shirt.

Nanuk said nothing.

“Then they called me a bastard too,” I added. “And said Mom was some kinda reservation witch.”

The room went very still.

Even Tiraq stopped making car noises.

Nanuk's eyes darkened. "And so you fought them." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"Three."

Kanna raised an eyebrow. "All at once?"

I shrugged again. "Two others jumped in."

"And you won."

I smirked slightly. "One of 'em got a broken nose."

Mom shot me a look. "Jason!"

"What? It's true."

Nanuk stepped closer. He took my hand before I could pull it away, turning it slightly to examine the bruising across my knuckles. His grip was gentle. But his fingers felt like iron. "You are stronger than boys your age. Bigger," he said quietly.

"I know."

"That is not always a good thing."

I pulled my hand back. "They started it."

Nanuk studied my face for a long moment. Then he nodded once. "Yes."

Mom looked surprised. "Yes?" she repeated.

Nanuk turned slightly toward her. "They insulted your friend," he said. "They insulted your mother."

"That doesn't justify—"

"It explains."

Mom pressed her lips together. Nanuk looked back at me. "You fight like a wolf pup."

I smirked. "Yeah?"

"That is not a compliment."

Before I could answer, Kanna snorted softly from the floor. She finished folding a shirt and tossed it onto the pile beside her. "Wolves," she said, shaking her head. Nanuk glanced at her. Kanna leaned back on her hands, eyeing me with mild amusement. "Young wolves are always hotheaded," she said. "All teeth and pride. They think every insult is a challenge."

Tiraq suddenly pointed at my hands. "Blood!"

I wiped them on my jeans. "It's nothin', kid."

Nanuk straightened slowly. Then he nodded toward the door. "Jason."

"What?"

"We walk."

I groaned. "Oh come on."

Nanuk raised one eyebrow. That was all he needed to do.

I let out a long breath through my nose and grabbed my hoodie from the couch. "Fine."

Mom watched the two of us like she already knew exactly how this was going to end. "You're not encouraging this behavior."

Nanuk pulled his old coat from the hook by the door and slipped it on, the fabric stretching across his broad shoulders. "I am encouraging thinking."

Kanna glanced up from the laundry pile and gave me a small, sympathetic smile. "Good luck with that."

From the rug, Tiraq waved both hands excitedly. "Bye Jay-son!"

I walked past him and ruffled his curls. "Don't break anything while I'm gone."

"No promises!" Kanna called after me.

Nanuk opened the back door. Cold evening air rushed inside, sharp and clean, carrying the faint smell of wet leaves and wood smoke from somewhere down the street. I stepped outside beside him, shoving my hands into my hoodie pockets as the chill bit into my knuckles. Behind us the door shut with a soft thud, cutting off the warm noise of the house.

For a while we walked without speaking.

The neighborhood was quiet this time of night. Porch lights glowed along the street, and the bare branches of the maple trees rattled faintly in the wind. Somewhere in the distance a car passed along the main road, its tires hissing over pavement.

Nanuk's boots moved steadily beside me. After a few minutes he glanced down. "You enjoyed it."

I frowned. "No I didn't."

Nanuk didn't respond. We kept walking. Our footsteps echoed softly along the sidewalk.

After a few seconds I muttered, "They deserved it."

Nanuk kept his eyes on the street ahead, his breath fogging faintly in the cold air. "Maybe," he said after a moment. His voice was calm, thoughtful. "But that is not the question."

I kicked a loose stone down the sidewalk. It clattered across the pavement and rolled into the gutter. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Nanuk didn't answer right away. He walked with his hands tucked deep inside his coat sleeves, shoulders hunched slightly against the wind. Finally he glanced down at me. "You did not fight only for your friend."

I frowned. "Yeah I did."

Nanuk raised one eyebrow. "And the other words?"

I didn't answer. The wind picked up, tugging at the hood on my back.

"They called you a bastard," Nanuk said.

I stared at the sidewalk. "It's not like they're wrong," I muttered.

Nanuk stopped walking. That made me stop too. The streetlight above us buzzed faintly as it flickered on, throwing pale yellow light across the pavement.

Nanuk looked down at me, his expression steady and patient. “Those words bothered you.”

I shrugged, studying a crack in the pavement like it was the most interesting thing in the world. “I just didn’t like it.”

Nanuk didn’t move. Didn’t speak. He just waited.

I exhaled slowly. “Yeah,” I admitted quietly. “I didn’t like it.”

For a moment neither of us spoke. Then Nanuk started walking again. I fell into step beside him.

“You must learn the difference,” he said quietly, “between fighting for others... and fighting because you are wounded.”

I scowled. “They insulted Mom.”

“Yes.”

“And Luis.”

“Yes.”

“And me.”

Nanuk nodded once. “That is the one you must be careful with.”

The sky above the trees had turned deep blue as night settled over Newton. One by one the streetlights flickered on along the road. The wind moved through the branches overhead. And somewhere in the distance—A dog started howling. The sound cut through the quiet neighborhood.

I stopped.

Nanuk’s head tilted slightly toward the sound. For a moment his expression shifted, subtle but unmistakable, like he was listening for something hidden beneath the noise. Then he nodded once to himself. “Those boys were foolish,” he said. “Cruel and foolish.”

I glanced up. “They were idiots.”

“Yes.”

He resumed walking and I hurried to catch up. “But you,” he continued, “are stronger than they are.”

“I know.”

“And smarter.”

I snorted. “Not a high bar.”

Nanuk’s mouth twitched faintly. “Which is exactly the problem.”

I frowned. “What?”

“When a wolf pup is stronger and smarter than the others,” Nanuk said, “it becomes easy for him to solve everything with his fists.”

“They started it.”

“Yes. But sometimes fists will not fix things.”

I scowled. "But they fixed it."

"For today."

The streetlights hummed quietly above us.

Nanuk's voice stayed calm. "Those boys were weaker than you. And not as clever."

I kicked another pebble. "So?"

"So breaking them proves very little."

I glanced at him. "Then what was I supposed to do?"

Nanuk looked ahead into the dark street. "Sometimes," he said, "the hardest thing for a strong shifter is learning when not to fight. I had to learn this lesson, long ago. But I learned it."

I frowned. "That sounds like something people say when they lose."

Nanuk huffed quietly. "No."

We walked a few more steps before he spoke again. "This happened long before your grandfather and I fought in the war," he said.

I glanced up at him. "You mean before World War Two?"

"Yes."

That didn't surprise me. Nanuk had told stories about the war before—about him and my grandfather, Elgin Red Elk, running patrols in places most people had never heard of. Nanuk was old. Really old. No one ever said exactly how old. But it was the kind of old where eventually you stopped asking.

"I was in Alaska. There was a trading town," Nanuk continued. "Small. Mostly fishermen."

"What'd you do there?"

"Worked the docks."

I snorted. "You?"

Nanuk's mouth twitched. "Yes. Even old bears were young once. And I needed to eat."

"So what happened?"

"There was a man," Nanuk said. "He liked to drink. And when he drank, he liked to insult people."

"Sounds like half the guys at my school."

"One night he insulted my mother."

That made my eyebrows go up. "What'd he say?"

Nanuk's voice stayed calm. "Enough."

I already knew where this was going. "So you hit him."

"No."

I looked up at him. "You didn't?"

Nanuk shook his head slowly. "I wanted to."

"Then why didn't you?"

Nanuk stopped beneath another streetlight and leaned slightly against the pole. “Because I knew what would happen next.”

“What?”

“He would fight back,” Nanuk said. “Then his friends would join him. Then their friends. Soon it would not be one man’s foolish words.” He looked down at me. “It would be a war.”

The wind moved through the empty street.

“So what happened?” I asked.

Nanuk shrugged. “I walked away.”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

“That was enough.”

“That sounds boring.”

Nanuk chuckled softly. “Perhaps.” He then pushed off the lamppost and started walking again. “But the next morning that man woke up with a terrible headache.”

I looked at him sideways. “Did you beat him up later?”

Nanuk smiled faintly. “No.”

“What then?”

“He fell off the dock.”

I stared at him and I gave him a half-smile. “Did you push him?”

Nanuk didn’t answer. After a moment he said calmly, “Sometimes patience solves problems fists cannot.”

I kicked another pebble down the sidewalk. “That still sounds like losing.”

Nanuk glanced down at me. “Did those boys stop insulting your friend?”

“Yeah.”

“And now the school is angry with you.”

I sighed. “Yeah.”

Nanuk nodded once. “Then perhaps the lesson is not finished.”



The wind moved through the trees in long, cold breaths, carrying the damp smell of fallen leaves, wet earth, and the dark water of the pond beyond the trail. Out here, in one of the old parks just outside Newton, the world felt quieter than the city—quieter, but not softer. The paths curved through stretches of bare oaks and maples, their branches rattling overhead, and low stone walls cut through the woods like the

bones of something ancient buried beneath the land. Somewhere farther off, beyond the trees, tires hissed along the road, and every now and then the distant glow of passing headlights flashed between the trunks. But inside the park itself, it was mostly just wind, water, and shadow.

I walked there alone most nights. Nanuk had headed back home already, leaving me to take the long way around before dinner. I didn't mind it. The trails helped me think. The cold kept me awake, and the quiet gave me space to burn off whatever was clawing around inside me. Sometimes I cut through the park so often I felt like I knew every bend in the path, every broken fence rail, every stretch of earth where the roots pushed up through the dirt like knuckles. I knew which benches stayed dry after rain, which trails led back toward the houses, and which ones disappeared deeper into the trees where nobody liked to go after dark.

By the time I started heading back, night had settled fully over the park. The sky above the treetops was a deep, fading blue, and the lamps near the main paths threw weak yellow circles across the gravel while the rest of the trail sank into shadow. The wind slid across the pond and through the trees, cold enough to sting my face, carrying the smell of wet bark, mud, and dead leaves. I kept my hands in my hoodie pockets and took the longer trail home like I usually did, the one that curved away from the lit paths and past the older part of the park where the stone walls and iron fencing looked older than the neighborhood itself.

I turned onto a quieter stretch of path near a clearing, where an old lamppost stood beside a bench half-buried in leaves.

That's when I saw her.

She was leaning against the lamppost halfway down the path.

At first glance she looked almost normal—like some older girl or young woman who'd wandered out here for a smoke or to meet someone she shouldn't have. Short skirt. Thin jacket that wasn't nearly warm enough for the weather. Long dark hair spilling over one shoulder. She shifted her weight slightly when she saw me, like she was deciding if I was worth the trouble.

For a second I just kept walking.

Then the wind changed.

And I smelled her.

The scent hit me instantly—sharp, metallic, and wrong. Not human. Not even close. It smelled like old blood left too long in the open, mixed with something sweet and rotten underneath.

My stomach tightened.

I slowed without meaning to.

Because I knew that smell. Nanuk had made sure of that.

Vampire.

She pushed off the lamppost when I got closer.

Not toward me exactly—just enough to make it look casual, like she was going to fall into step on the same path.

“Evenin’,” she said. Her voice was smooth. Friendly. Too friendly.

I didn’t look at her. “Yeah.”

She walked beside me for a few seconds, hands tucked into the pockets of her jacket like we were just two people heading home after dark.

“You’re out kinda late,” she said.

I shrugged. “So are you.”

She laughed softly. “Fair.”

The wind shifted again and that smell hit me harder this time—cold blood, metal, rot. It crawled up the back of my throat like something dead.

I slowed slightly.

Nanuk’s voice echoed in the back of my head.

If you smell one of them... leave.

I glanced at her.

Up close she looked almost normal. Pale skin. Dark eyes. Pretty in a sharp sort of way.

But her heart wasn’t beating.

At least... not like it should.

My stomach tightened.

“Kid your age shouldn’t be out here alone,” she said lightly.

I finally looked at her. “I ain’t a kid.”

Her smile widened just a little. “No?”

I was already about to tell her to leave me alone when it happened.

She moved.

Not fast.

Impossible fast.

One second she was walking beside me—The next her hand slammed into my chest and the world spun sideways.

I hit the low stone wall beside the trail hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs. “What the—”

Before I could finish, shapes burst out of the dark between the trees.

Three.

Four.

Maybe more.

They grabbed my arms, my shoulders, my hoodie.

“What the hell—**HEY**—”

I tried to shove them off, but they were stronger than they looked. Way stronger. My boots slipped on wet leaves and loose gravel as they dragged me off the path and deeper into the trees.

That's when I saw it.

A van.

Old white cargo van parked crooked beside a service road near the edge of the woods, engine already running.

The back doors were open.

"Get him in!" someone hissed.

I twisted hard, driving an elbow into one of them. He grunted but didn't let go.

"Let me go!" I shouted.

Another pair of hands grabbed my legs. For a second I almost broke free. Then I felt it. A sharp pinch in my shoulder. Like a bee sting.

I turned just enough to see a pale hand pulling a syringe away from my arm. "What—" The word never finished. The trees tilted. The lamplight smeared into long yellow streaks through the dark. My arms suddenly felt heavy. Really heavy.

"Dose worked," someone muttered.

My knees buckled. The last thing I saw before everything went black was the vampire woman standing just beyond the trees near the path, watching.

Smiling.

Then the darkness swallowed everything.



When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was the cold. Not the kind that comes from winter air biting your face. This was deeper. Colder. The kind that seeped through metal and concrete and crawled straight into your bones. For a few seconds I didn't move. My head felt heavy, like someone had packed my skull full of wet sand. Every thought came slow and thick, and my tongue tasted bitter and chemical. My throat burned like I'd swallowed something that wasn't meant to go down.

Drugged. The memory came back in pieces. The park. The woman. The van. My eyes snapped open.

The ceiling above me was low and ugly—bare concrete, rust-stained pipes, a single buzzing light that flickered every few seconds. The sound of it drilled into my skull.

I tried to sit up. Pain exploded through my arm. A sharp, burning spike that shot from my elbow all the way into my shoulder. "—ah!"

The sound came out smaller than I meant it to.

My chest started rising faster as the fog in my head cleared just enough for panic to slip in. I looked down. My stomach dropped. I wasn't wearing my clothes anymore. Just a pair of thin athletic shorts. My hoodie was gone. My shoes. Everything.

My skin prickled in the cold air, goosebumps rising along my arms and chest. And stuck in the inside of my forearm—Was a needle.

For a second my brain didn't understand what I was looking at.

Then I saw the tube. A thin clear line ran from the needle in my arm up to a metal stand beside the cot. Hanging from it was a clear plastic bag.

Dark red liquid slowly gathered at the bottom.



Drip. Drip. Drip.

My blood. My chest tightened so fast it hurt. “Oh—no... no—” I jerked my arm instinctively. Pain tore up my vein like someone had dragged a knife through it.

The metal cot rattled loudly. And something yanked my wrist back down.

I froze. Leather. Thick straps dug into both my wrists. My ankles too. Bolted straight into the sides of the narrow metal bed.

For a moment I just stared at them.

My breathing got faster. “Okay... okay...” My voice sounded shaky. Too shaky.

I tried pulling harder this time. The straps didn't move. They only bit deeper into my skin.

The room around me came into focus slowly. Concrete walls. Bare. Stained. No windows. A heavy steel door sat across the room with a small reinforced glass window in the middle.

The air smelled wrong.

Bleach.

Metal.

Old blood.

And underneath it—That same sick, rotten sweetness from the park.
My stomach twisted.

Vampire.

The word crawled through my head like something alive. My heart started hammering harder now, each beat loud in my ears. Nanuk had warned me about them when I was younger. Not like pack elders did with their cubs—I didn't grow up in a pack.

It was just the two of us most of the time. Him teaching me the important things. Simple rules. If you smell one... leave. If they catch you... You probably won't come back.

My eyes drifted back to the bag beside the cot. The dark red pool at the bottom was getting bigger. Slow. Steady.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My throat tightened. I'd heard stories too. Not from wolves. From people. Dockworkers. Truck drivers. Guys who worked night shifts and talked when they thought kids weren't listening. Rumors about people disappearing along the North Shore. Kids. Supe kids. In Manchester-by-the-Sea. Big houses. Rich people. Quiet police.

One fisherman I had summered with last year had leaned across the table once and said vampires ran shipments through there sometimes. Not just drugs. Blood. Sometimes people.

I'd laughed back then.

Thought he was just drunk and trying to scare me. Now my arm throbbed where the needle sat in my vein. And my blood kept dripping into the bag. A slow, steady leak.

My stomach twisted harder.

Then another thought hit me.

Hard.

Wolves.

Born wolves like me?

Our blood wasn't normal.

Stronger.

Richer.

Worth more.

The realization hit like ice water. They didn't just grab me by accident. They knew what I was. Which meant this wasn't random. This was planned.

My chest started rising faster.

I tried to breathe slower like Nanuk had taught me. But it didn't work. Because suddenly I felt very small in that room. Fourteen. Just fourteen.

My arm hurt.

My head still felt fuzzy from whatever they'd stuck in me.

And the quiet drip of my blood filling the bag beside the bed sounded louder and louder in the silence.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I swallowed hard. “Okay... okay... think...” But the words felt thin. Weak.

And for the first time since the van—Since the park—Since the needle—Real fear slid into my chest. Cold and heavy. Because whatever this place was... It wasn't meant for someone to walk out of. Then I heard it. Voices. Outside the door. Low. Laughing.

And getting closer.

The lock on the door clicked. My head snapped toward it.

For a second nothing happened. Then the steel door opened with a slow metallic groan.

Two figures stepped inside.

The woman came first—the one from the park. Her dark hair fell over one shoulder the same way it had earlier, and she wore the same thin jacket like the cold didn't exist for her. When her eyes met mine, her mouth curved slightly. Like she'd found something she'd been looking for.

But the man behind her—The moment he stepped into the room the air felt different. At first my brain didn't know what to make of him. He looked like someone who had wandered out of a painting. Tall and thin, dressed in black velvet that seemed to drink in the dim light of the room. The coat he wore was embroidered with delicate patterns that caught the flicker of the overhead bulb, the stitching too intricate to belong in a place like this. Under the coat was a high-collared white shirt with lace spilling down the front of it. The kind of thing I'd only ever seen in history books or museum pictures.

Who dressed like that in real life?

His hair was dark and wavy, falling loosely around a pale face that looked almost... perfect. Too smooth. Too clean. Like marble carved by someone who didn't believe in flaws. And in one hand he carried a bundle of pale roses.

Actual roses.

The soft pink petals looked impossibly delicate in that cold concrete room. For a second the sight of them made my brain stutter. It didn't make sense. Nothing about him made sense.

Then he looked at me.

And suddenly the room felt smaller.

His smile was easy. Polite. Almost charming. But his eyes—His eyes were bright in a way that made my skin crawl. Not glowing, not exactly.

Just sharp. Focused. The kind of gaze that didn't just look at you but seemed to peel you apart layer by layer. He stopped beside the metal cot.

For a moment he didn't speak. He just looked at me. His gaze moved slowly over my body—my bare chest, the leather straps cutting into my wrists, the IV line running from my arm to the bag beside the bed.

The blood inside the bag shifted slowly.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My heart pounded harder.

The man tilted his head slightly, studying me with quiet interest, the way someone might examine an unusual animal.

“Well,” he said at last. His voice was soft. Smooth. The kind of voice professors used when they were explaining something complicated. Only there was something underneath it. Something cold. “So this is our little prize.”

The woman against the wall smirked. “Kid put up a fight.”

The man didn't even glance at her. He was still looking at me. Then he stepped closer. The movement was slow. Graceful. Almost theatrical. Like every step had been practiced. I tried to pull away instinctively, but the straps held tight and the needle in my arm tugged painfully against my vein.

He leaned down.

Way too close.

And then he inhaled. Not a normal breath. A slow, deliberate draw of air through his nose. Like he was smelling food.

My stomach twisted.

For a moment his eyes closed. The room was completely silent except for the buzzing light overhead and the faint drip of blood filling the bag beside the bed. When his eyes opened again, something had changed in them. The polite curiosity was gone. Now there was focus. Interest. The way someone looks when they realize the thing in front of them is far more valuable than they expected.

“Oh,” he murmured softly. One pale eyebrow lifted. “Well now.”

His gaze drifted down to the blood bag swaying gently beside the cot. Then back to me. And suddenly I understood the look in his eyes. I'd seen it before. Not on people. On farmers. Nanuk had pointed it out once when we drove past a cattle ranch. The way they looked at the animals. Not cruel. Not angry. Just measuring. Calculating. Deciding what something was worth.

The vampire reached out and lightly tapped the blood bag with one pale finger. The plastic swayed. Dark red liquid sloshed gently inside. My blood.

He smiled.

Slow.

Satisfied.

“Oh yes,” he said quietly. His eyes returned to mine. “You will do very nicely.”

My throat felt tight. “What... what do you want?” I asked. My voice cracked halfway through the sentence.

Behind him the woman laughed softly.

The man didn't react.

He simply straightened his coat with elegant precision, smoothing the velvet fabric like he was preparing for a dinner party instead of standing over a kidnapped kid strapped to a bed.

“My dear boy,” he said gently. “You misunderstand the situation.”

His gaze flicked once more to the IV line running from my arm. To the bag filling slowly with blood. Then back to me.

“We already have what we want.”

My stomach dropped.

He leaned closer again, those bright eyes studying my face with quiet fascination. “You,” he said softly, “are simply the source.”

The woman pushed herself off the wall behind him. “Boss says werewolf blood's worth a fortune.”

The words hit me like a punch to the chest. My heart slammed harder. They knew. They knew what I was. And the worst part wasn't the straps. Or the needle in my arm. Or even the way the bag kept filling with my blood. It was the way he was looking at me. Not like I was a person. Not even like I was prey. But like I was livestock.

Something valuable.

Something useful.

Something that existed only for what it could produce.

His smile widened slightly. Elegant. Flamboyant. Terrifying. “Yes,” he said softly. “This will do beautifully.”

And suddenly I understood something that made my chest feel hollow.

I wasn't just trapped.

I was inventory.



After a while, time stopped meaning anything. The room never changed. Same buzzing light overhead. Same gray concrete walls. Same metal cot digging into my back. The IV never came out. The tube

stayed taped into the inside of my arm, warm blood sliding through it in slow, steady drops that I could almost feel leaving my body.

Sometimes I stared at it for too long.

Watching the bag fill. Watching my blood disappear.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

After a while I started wishing I couldn't hear it anymore.

They kept me there.

Most of the time, I was strapped down, staring at the ceiling while the bag beside the bed slowly filled.

The restraints weren't just regular straps either. They were thick black leather bands buckled around my wrists and ankles, but there was something wrong with them. Every time I tried to pull against them, they tightened. Not all at once—just a little, like something inside them was alive and reacting to the pressure. The harder I fought, the tighter they pulled, squeezing down until the leather bit into my skin.

The first time I really tried to break free, I yanked with everything I had. The straps snapped tight instantly, digging deep into my wrists until white-hot pain shot up my arms. I gasped and jerked again without thinking.

That only made them tighten more.

The leather cut deeper, pressing into the soft skin until it felt like they were trying to slice straight through me. My hands started going numb, and I had to stop before I blacked out from the pain.

After that, I learned fast.

If I moved too much... they punished me.

Even the smallest pull made them cinch tighter, like some cruel trap waiting for me to struggle. Sometimes I could still feel the pressure hours later, dull and throbbing where the straps had crushed down into my wrists.

So most of the time I stayed still.

Staring at the ceiling.

Listening to the slow drip of blood filling the bag beside the bed.

Every so often the door would open and someone would come in—never the fancy vampire again, just the others. They moved quietly around the room like they'd done this a thousand times before. No talking. No eye contact. Just hands checking the IV, swapping the blood bags, feeling my pulse like they were inspecting equipment instead of a person. Quiet. Cold.

Like nurses who hated their job.

They'd unstrap me long enough to let me stand.

My legs shook every time because I'd been lying there so long. The first few times I almost fell. One of them would grab my arm to steady

me, not gently, just enough to keep me upright. Then they'd point to the small metal toilet bolted to the wall.

And watch.

Always watching.

I hated that part the most.

Then they'd strap me back down.

They fed me too. Plain food on metal trays—bread, soup, sometimes meat. I'd be starving by the time it came, my stomach hurting so bad it made me dizzy. I'd eat fast, shoving the food in my mouth before they took the tray away again.

Water too.

Always enough to keep me alive. That part scared me the most. They didn't want me weak. They didn't want me sick. They checked me constantly. Hands pressing against my throat to feel my pulse. Fingers lifting my eyelids. Thermometers in my mouth. Blood bags swapped out when they filled. Sometimes they cleaned the needle in my arm or wiped the dried blood off my skin.

Once they dragged me into a small shower down the hall and sprayed me down like I was something they were washing off before selling. Two of them stood there the whole time.

Watching.

Making sure I didn't try anything. They kept me clean. They kept me fed. They made sure I stayed strong. And they never said a single word to me. Not one.

After a while the silence got worse than the pain in my arm. Days... or maybe hours... blurred together until I couldn't tell the difference anymore. The light in the room never changed. There were no windows. No clocks. No sounds except the hum of the light and the slow drip of my blood filling the bag beside the bed.

Sometimes I tried to count. Count the bags. Count the meals. Count how many times the door opened. But the drugs they kept giving me made my head fuzzy and heavy, like trying to think through thick fog. I'd lose track. Start over. Lose track again. Eventually I stopped trying.

Sometimes I lay there staring at the ceiling and tried to remember what day it was. Tried to remember if my mom would be home yet. If she'd noticed I was gone. If Nanuk had come looking for me. That's when the panic would start creeping in.

Slow at first. Then faster. My chest would tighten until it felt hard to breathe. My hands would pull against the straps without me even realizing it. Sometimes I'd yank so hard the leather burned my wrists. But the straps never moved.

And no one came when I shouted. After a while I stopped shouting too. Because the worst thought kept crawling into my head when the room got quiet. What if nobody knew where I was? What if nobody was looking? What if this was it?

I was only fourteen.

And every day—or hour, or whatever it was—my blood kept dripping into the bag beside the bed.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

And the hollow feeling in my chest kept growing bigger. Because I had no idea how long I'd been there. And worse—I was starting to think they planned to keep me alive for a very long time.



The door burst open so suddenly the metal frame slammed against the wall.

I flinched before I could stop myself.

For a split second I expected the same silent routine—the quiet men who changed the blood bags and checked the needle like mechanics inspecting a machine.

Instead laughter spilled into the room.

Bright. Sharp. Almost delighted.

“Well, well, well!”

The voice rolled through the concrete cell like someone announcing the beginning of a performance.

The aristocratic vampire swept inside as if he were entering a ballroom instead of a basement cell. His long black coat flared behind him as he moved, the velvet catching the flicker of the overhead light in dark ripples. Silver embroidery traced curling patterns across the fabric—old designs, the kind you saw in museum paintings of European nobles who had ruled cities centuries ago.

Tonight he looked almost... jubilant.

There was an energy to him that hadn't been there before. His movements were quick, animated, almost theatrical. A polished silver-topped cane spun easily between his fingers as he walked, the motion effortless, like he'd been doing it for decades.

Or centuries.

“Marvelous,” he murmured to himself, the word dripping with satisfaction. “Simply marvelous.”

Two shapes followed him through the doorway.

At first they looked like men.

Then they stepped fully into the light.

My stomach tightened.

They were enormous.

Each of them had to duck slightly just to clear the doorframe. Their shoulders were so wide they nearly brushed the walls as they entered. Thick cords of muscle stretched beneath grayish skin that looked almost corpse-pale under the fluorescent light.

Their faces were worse.

Heavy brows. Flattened noses. Jaws that seemed too large for their skulls. Their lips hung slightly open, revealing blunt teeth stained dark along the gums.

Their eyes didn't focus the way normal eyes did.

They stared forward with the dull, obedient gaze of animals that had forgotten how to think for themselves.

Ghouls.

Nanuk had once described them to me in a low voice around the kitchen table—humans who drank vampire blood until it twisted them into something else. Stronger than men. Harder to kill. But not really human anymore.

The vampire clapped his hands together once. The sound cracked through the room like a whip. "Gentlemen," he said brightly, "let us not keep our guest waiting."

One of the ghouls stepped forward carrying something large in both hands. A chair. But not the kind of chair you'd expect in a place like this. It was carved from dark polished wood, the arms curling into elaborate shapes worn smooth by age. The high back was etched with intricate patterns—old designs that looked like they belonged in some ancient European manor.

The ghoul placed it beside the cot with surprising care.

The vampire's eyes lit with approval. He lowered himself into it slowly, arranging his coat with delicate precision before crossing one leg over the other. The silver knob of his cane rested beneath his chin as he leaned forward slightly. Watching me. Those bright eyes drifted slowly over my face, studying every twitch, every breath.



Behind him the ghouls moved toward the IV stand. My heart began to race. One of them wrapped his huge hand around the metal pole holding the blood bags.

The vampire lifted one finger lazily. “Careful,” he said, his voice smooth as silk. “Do try not to damage the merchandise.”

The ghoul grunted softly and began working at the tubing taped to my arm. His fingers were huge. Thick as sausages. The smell of old blood clung to his skin. When he pulled the needle free it felt like someone dragging a wire out of my vein. Pain flared up my arm.

I gasped and jerked instinctively.

The straps snapped tight around my wrists, biting into the skin hard enough to make my hands go numb. The ghoul wiped the blood from my arm with a cloth like he was cleaning spilled wine from a table. Behind him the second ghoul began lowering the filled blood bags from the stand. The plastic rustled softly as they stacked them carefully on the floor.

The vampire watched the whole process with quiet fascination. Like a man observing the harvest of a particularly valuable crop. “Oh, do be gentle,” he murmured. “We’ve taken such excellent care of him.”

When the last tube was removed, he leaned back in the antique chair, clearly pleased. Then his attention returned to me. Fully. His smile spread slowly across his pale face. Bright. Excited. Almost joyful.

“My dear boy,” he said softly. His eyes glittered with something sharp and intelligent that made my stomach twist. “Do you have *any idea* how extraordinary you are?”

The vampire watched the ghouls finish disconnecting the last of the tubes before he spoke again.

The room felt different without the slow drip of blood filling the bags. My arm throbbed where the needle had been pulled out, and the skin around the puncture burned like someone had rubbed salt into it.

Adrien sat perfectly still in the chair they'd brought for him.

One leg crossed neatly over the other. His long fingers rested lightly on the silver head of his cane. The roses lay across his lap now, pale petals bright against the black velvet of his coat. He looked completely out of place in that concrete room. Like a prince visiting a slaughterhouse.

For a moment he simply watched me. Not speaking. Just studying my face the way someone studies a puzzle they haven't quite figured out yet.

Then he smiled. "Forgive my manners," he said softly. His voice rolled smoothly through the room, cultured and warm in a way that made my skin crawl. "It seems we have not been properly introduced." He then gave a small, elegant nod of his head. "Adrien de Vaclair."

The name sounded expensive. Old. Like something carved into the front of a castle.

I didn't say anything. My throat felt tight. Too tight to speak. Plus I had the feeling this vampire was not here for the conversation. Adrien didn't seem bothered by the silence. If anything, he looked amused.

His bright eyes drifted slowly over my face again, taking in every little movement. "You, however," he continued, tapping the silver knob of his cane thoughtfully, "remain something of a mystery."

He leaned forward slightly in the chair.

I froze.

The vampire inhaled slowly again, drawing in my scent like he had before. His eyes half closed. Then opened. There was that same strange interest in them again.

"That blood," he murmured. "Extraordinary." His gaze sharpened. "Not the scent of a common wolf." A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "No... there is something older in you."

I didn't understand what he meant. But the way he said it made the back of my neck prickle.

Adrien leaned back again, clearly pleased with himself. "But that," he said lightly, waving one hand through the air, "is a mystery for another time." He tapped the cane once against the concrete floor. The sound echoed through the room. "You must be wondering why you are still alive."

My stomach twisted. Because yeah. I had been wondering that.

Adrien's smile widened slightly, as if he could see the thought written across my face. "At first," he continued calmly, "you were meant to be... harvested." He gestured vaguely toward the now-empty IV stand. "But then I noticed something." His blue eyes gleamed. "You are resilient."

The word rolled slowly off his tongue. "Strong for your age." His gaze dropped briefly to the leather restraints around my wrists. "And more importantly..." His smile sharpened. "You are interesting."

The ghouls stood silently behind him, huge shadows against the wall.

Adrien rested both hands atop the silver head of his cane. "I find myself in need of entertainment," he said pleasantly. He tilted his head slightly, studying my reaction. "And opportunity."

My stomach turned cold.

"There are... gatherings," he continued. "Private affairs." His voice had that theatrical tone again, like he was describing something glamorous. "Where certain members of our society enjoy observing contests of strength."

The meaning of the words started to sink in.

My chest tightened.

Adrien's eyes glittered. "Pit fighting," he said simply.

The room went very quiet.

He watched my face carefully as he spoke the next words. "And you, my dear boy..." The smile that spread across his face this time was slow. Satisfied. "...are going to be the star attraction."

My stomach dropped straight through the floor.

Adrien rose gracefully from the chair, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve. "You should be proud," he said lightly. "It is not often that a wolf cub is given the opportunity to perform for such... distinguished company." He paused beside the bed. Those bright eyes locked onto mine again. "And who knows," he added softly. "If you survive..." The smile returned. "...you may even impress the right audience."

Behind him the ghouls shifted, waiting.

Adrien turned toward the door. "Prepare him," he said casually. Then he glanced back at me one last time. The look in his eyes was bright. Excited. The way someone looks just before a show begins. "You fight tomorrow."



They came for me after what felt like another long stretch of nothing. The door opened and two of the ghouls stepped in. Up close they smelled like old sweat and dried blood, something sour underneath it that made my stomach turn. One of them dropped a tray on the small table beside the cot. Real food this time. Thick slices of bread, meat that was still warm, even a small tin cup that smelled sharp and bitter.

Beer.

I hadn't tasted anything like it before. The ghoul shoved the tray toward me after they unstrapped my arms, watching carefully while I ate. I didn't know why they were suddenly being generous, but I was starving enough that I didn't care. I tore through the food faster than I meant to, the meat greasy and salty in my mouth, the beer burning all the way down my throat.

They let me finish.

That scared me more than if they hadn't.

Afterward they marched me down a short hallway to a small tiled room with a drain in the floor. One of them turned a valve and freezing water blasted out of a rusted pipe. They shoved me under it and scrubbed me down like I was something they were getting ready to sell. The smell of soap stung my nose while rough hands washed the dried blood from my arms and chest.

When they were done, they tossed me a pair of dark shorts. They were thin and stretchy, like the kind runners wore. Nothing else. No shirt. No shoes. The meaning of that settled in my stomach like a stone. They didn't strap me back down this time. Instead they grabbed my arms and started dragging me down the hallway. For a second I thought about fighting.

Really fighting.

The thought barely had time to form before one of the ghouls lifted his hand. In it was a pair of heavy metal manacles. Even from where I stood I could smell it.

Silver.

The scent hit my nose like cold fire. My wolf shrank away from it instinctively, a deep animal panic twisting in my chest. The ghoul didn't even need to say anything. He just rattled the chains once so the metal clinked together. The message was clear. *Try it.*

I swallowed hard and stopped struggling.

They dragged me forward again, their huge hands clamped around my arms as we moved down the dim corridor. The air grew warmer the farther we went, and underneath the smell of damp concrete and rust there was something else now. Blood. Sweat. And the distant roar of voices somewhere ahead. The sound rolled through the tunnels like thunder. And suddenly I understood.

The pit.

They dragged me through a narrow corridor that sloped downward, the concrete floor damp under my bare feet. The farther we went, the warmer the air became. The smell changed too. At first it was just sweat and old stone, but then something thicker crept in—iron, like pennies and rust.

Blood.

Then I heard it. The voices. Yelling. Not one voice. Dozens. Maybe more. Low at first, like distant thunder rolling underground. The sound echoed through the concrete halls, growing louder with every step until my chest felt like it was vibrating with it.

The corridor opened suddenly.

And I saw the pit.

It wasn't some dramatic arena carved out of stone like the movies. It was worse than that—because it looked real. Practical. Like it had been built by people who intended to use it again and again.

The pit sat in what was clearly the basement of a massive old building, the kind of place that might have once been a textile mill, a warehouse, or some old Boston industrial plant. The ceiling stretched high above us, supported by thick square concrete pillars spaced evenly across the room. Heavy steel beams ran between them, crisscrossing overhead like the skeleton of the building. The pipes and electrical conduits were still exposed along the ceiling, and condensation dripped slowly from some of them, splashing onto the concrete floor below.

The fighting area itself was sunken into the middle of the room, maybe fifteen or twenty feet across. Not a hole—more like a reinforced cage sunk below ground level. The walls of the pit were lined with thick steel plates bolted directly into the concrete foundation. The metal was scarred with dents, gouges, and long scratches where something strong had slammed against it over and over again.

Old blood had seeped into the seams where the steel met the concrete. Dark brown stains ran down the walls and pooled in the shallow drain channels cut into the floor.

The pit floor itself was bare concrete, worn smooth in some places and chipped in others. There were darker patches where the surface had been scrubbed so many times it had turned almost black. Near the center of the floor I could see a grated drain set into the concrete—probably for washing the blood away after fights.

Heavy chain-link fencing rose up another eight feet above the steel walls, welded to thick posts. The fencing curved slightly inward toward the top so nothing inside could climb out easily. The whole thing looked less like a sports arena and more like an animal containment cage.

There was only one way in or out.

A thick steel gate on one side, built like the door to a livestock pen. The hinges were massive, and the latch was reinforced with a sliding metal bar that looked like it could lock something much bigger than me inside.

Around the pit, the rest of the basement had been turned into a crude viewing area. Old wooden platforms and steel scaffolding had been bolted together to form tiers where spectators could stand or sit.

Some sections had mismatched chairs dragged in—antique furniture, bar stools, even leather armchairs that looked like they'd been stolen from expensive offices. Industrial floodlights hung from chains above the pit, aimed downward so the fighting floor was blindingly bright while the audience sat in shadow around the edges.

The air was thick with smells. Blood. Sweat. Alcohol. Wet concrete. And underneath all of it, the cold sweet scent of vampires. The place looked like it had been used for years. Maybe decades. Everything about it screamed repetition—repairs layered over repairs, weld marks reinforcing broken sections of fencing, concrete patched where something had cracked it before.

This wasn't a one-time show. This was a business. And judging by the way the vampires leaned forward along the railings, eyes shining as they watched the pit below... It was a popular one. My stomach twisted harder as the ghouls dragged me closer to the edge. Because now that I could see it clearly, the worst part wasn't the cage.

It was the stains on the floor. There were too many of them. And none of them were old enough to have faded completely. Whatever happened in that pit... People didn't walk out very often.

Around the pit, tiered platforms rose in a rough circle, crowded with spectators. Vampires. Dozens of them. Maybe fifty or sixty at least. They leaned over railings and lounged in velvet chairs brought in from somewhere else in the building, their pale faces glowing faintly under hanging industrial lamps. Some wore modern suits, others dressed like they had stepped out of old paintings—dark coats, lace cuffs, antique jewelry catching the light.

Their eyes followed me as the ghouls dragged me forward. Bright. Hungry. Curious.

I could feel them smelling me from across the room. The scent of blood hung heavy in the air. Not just mine. Old blood. Layers of it soaked into the concrete floor beneath the pit, mixed with sweat and something animal. Some of the vampires held glasses filled with dark red liquid. Others leaned forward with sharp smiles, whispering to one another as they watched.

They weren't quiet either. The whole place buzzed with excitement. Laughter. Betting. The murmur of voices that sounded almost... festive. Like this was entertainment. Like *I* was the entertainment.

My stomach twisted hard. The ghouls dragged me along the outer ring of the chamber toward a raised platform overlooking the pit. The closer we got, the quieter that section of the crowd became. Not silent. But respectful. The way people get when someone important is nearby.

That's when I saw him. Adrien. He sat in a carved wooden chair that looked almost like a throne compared to the rest of the seating. One leg crossed over the other, his cane resting lightly across his knee. His dark velvet coat fell perfectly around him, not a wrinkle anywhere despite the chaos of the room. He looked completely at ease. Like he was hosting a dinner party.

When he saw me, his smile widened. But he wasn't alone. Next to him sat another vampire. Even before my brain caught up, my body reacted. Something deep in my chest tightened. This vampire didn't laugh or chatter like the others. He sat perfectly still in a heavy leather chair, one hand resting loosely on the armrest. He looked younger than I expected—maybe mid-thirties—but there was something about him that made the entire space around him feel colder. His presence pressed against the room like a storm cloud.

The other vampires nearby leaned slightly away from him without even realizing it.

Power.

Even I could feel it.

His eyes drifted toward me slowly as the ghouls hauled me closer. They were darker than Adrien's. Older. And when they settled on me, the conversation in the nearby rows died down just a little.

I didn't know his name. But I knew exactly what he was. The Lord of Boston.

The ghouls stopped at the edge of the platform, their hands still gripping my arms. The noise of the crowd swelled again behind me, eager and hungry as they waited for the show to start.

My chest was rising too fast now. My heart pounded so hard it hurt. Every instinct in my body screamed the same thing.

Run.

But there was nowhere to go. Below us, the iron gate to the pit groaned open with a heavy metallic screech. And suddenly the panic hit me full force. Because whatever was about to happen in there...

I was the one they had come to watch.

The ghoul's hand shoved hard against the back of my shoulder. I barely had time to catch myself before the ground vanished under my feet. For a split second there was nothing but air. Then I hit the floor of the pit. The concrete slammed into my hands and knees so hard it knocked the breath out of me. Pain shot up my arms, and the rough surface scraped the skin off my palms. My shoulder rolled awkwardly and I collapsed onto one side, coughing as the impact rattled through my chest.

Behind me the gate clanged shut.

The sound rang through the cage like a gunshot.

I scrambled backward instinctively, my bare feet slipping on the cold concrete as panic rushed up my spine. The floodlights above the pit burned into my eyes, making everything else feel darker than it should have been.

Above me the crowd roared.

Vampires leaned over the railings, their pale faces glowing in the harsh light as they watched. Some were laughing. Others were shouting things I couldn't make out over the noise.

But their voices weren't what froze me.

It was the sound from the other side of the pit.

A deep, heavy breath.

Slow.

Wet.

Followed by the scrape of something massive shifting its weight against the steel wall.

My stomach dropped. I turned slowly. At first I didn't see it. The floodlights left the far side of the pit half in shadow, the cage casting long lines of darkness across the concrete floor. Then something moved. A shape rose from the darkness. Big. Way too big to be a person. My heart started hammering harder as the figure stepped forward into the light. And for a moment my brain refused to understand what I was looking at.

It had the body of a man. Huge. Muscular. The kind of size you'd expect from a heavyweight fighter—but even bigger than that. Thick arms like tree trunks. A chest so broad it looked like it could smash through the steel walls of the cage. But the head—My breath caught in my throat. The head was wrong. Massive horns curved upward from a skull covered in dark coarse fur. The face beneath them was long and animal, a heavy snout flaring as it breathed. Thick black nostrils pulled in the air with slow, rumbling breaths. Eyes burned from deep within the shadow of that skull. Not human.

Not anything I'd ever seen before. A bull's head. Attached to the body of a giant. The creature took another step forward, its hooves striking the concrete with a heavy crack that echoed through the pit. Hooves.

My chest tightened.

I had heard stories about monsters growing up. Old myths Nanuk sometimes mentioned when he thought I wasn't really listening. But those were just stories. Things people made up. Except the thing standing across the pit from me wasn't a story.

A minotaur. It was real. And it was staring straight at me.



A low rumble rolled up from deep in its chest. The sound vibrated through the floor beneath my hands. The crowd above exploded into excited shouting. And suddenly I understood why they'd fed me. Why they'd cleaned me. Why they'd dragged me down here. I wasn't just fighting.

I was the entertainment.

And the monster across the pit—The minotaur—Lowered its head slightly.

Like a bull preparing to charge.

The minotaur moved first. One second it stood there across the pit, massive shoulders rising and falling with slow breaths. The next, its head dropped. A deep snort burst from its nostrils.

Then it charged.

The sound hit me before the creature did. Hooves slammed against the concrete with explosive cracks that echoed off the steel walls. The entire pit seemed to shake as it thundered forward, muscles rolling beneath thick fur, horns lowered like two black spears aimed straight at my chest.

The crowd above erupted.

I didn't even think. I ran. Not toward it—away from it. My bare feet slapped against the concrete as I scrambled sideways, panic flooding every nerve in my body. I was smaller, lighter, faster on my feet than that thing, and some animal instinct deep in my bones screamed that standing still meant dying.

The minotaur's charge was unstoppable.

It covered half the pit in seconds, a wall of muscle and horns tearing straight through the space where I'd been standing.

I dove.

The air exploded behind me as the creature's horns smashed into the steel wall of the pit with a deafening clang. The impact rattled the cage, metal groaning as the horns gouged deep into the scarred plating.

I rolled across the floor, scraping my shoulder hard against the concrete.

Pain flared, but I forced myself back to my feet.

The minotaur wrenched its head free from the steel wall with a grinding screech. Chunks of metal and concrete dust rained down around it as it turned back toward me.

Up close it looked even bigger.

Seven feet tall.

Maybe more.

Its chest heaved like a bellows, thick arms flexing as it pawed the ground with one massive hoof. And its eyes—Those eyes locked onto me again. Not confused. Not cautious. Hungry.

The crowd above howled with excitement. I could hear Adrien's voice somewhere in the noise, laughing softly.

My heart pounded so hard it felt like it might tear out of my chest. I was fourteen. Barefoot. Half-starved. Standing in a cage with a monster twice my size.

The minotaur lowered its head again. And I realized something that made my stomach drop even harder. It wasn't just charging wildly. It was learning. Watching how I moved.

The minotaur came again. This time it didn't charge blindly. It moved slower, circling, its hooves scraping against the concrete while its massive shoulders rolled beneath thick muscle. Its nostrils flared as it watched me, dark eyes locked on every movement I made.

It was learning.

The crowd above the pit roared for blood.

My chest heaved as I backed away, trying to keep distance between us. The floor felt huge when I first fell into the pit, but now it felt tiny. There was nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide.

The minotaur lunged.

I tried to slip sideways like Nanuk had taught me—never meet something bigger head-on. Move. Let the weight pass you. For a split second it almost worked. But the creature was faster than something that big had any right to be.

Its arm came out of nowhere. A massive hand—thick as a shovel and covered in coarse dark fur—swung across the space between us. The backhand caught me full in the face. There was a sound like a branch snapping.

Pain exploded through my skull.

The world flipped sideways.

My feet left the ground and I crashed across the concrete floor, skidding hard enough that the skin tore open along my shoulder and hip. For a second I didn't even realize I was screaming. The taste of blood filled my mouth instantly—hot, thick, metallic. My jaw hung wrong. Loose.

Every attempt to close my mouth sent spikes of agony shooting through my face.

The minotaur's blow had broken it.

The crowd erupted above me.

To them it was just another moment in the show.

I lay there gasping, vision swimming, one hand clutching my face while warm blood spilled between my fingers. I was fourteen. A kid.

And that thing could crush my skull with one stomp.

The minotaur stepped toward me again, hooves cracking against the floor. Slow. Confident. Like it already knew the fight was over. But somewhere through the pain and the ringing in my ears, something else started pushing its way forward.

Not panic. Not fear. Memory.

Nanuk's voice.

"When something bigger wants you dead, you survive—use its size against it and make the bastard bleed."

I forced my eyes open through the haze of pain. The minotaur loomed over me, enormous shadow blocking the floodlights overhead. My jaw throbbed, hanging crooked. Blood dripped down my neck onto the concrete.

But I wasn't done.

Because Nanuk had taught me something else too.

Strength didn't always win fights.

Sometimes... The smaller animal survived because it refused to die. And deep inside my chest—beneath the pain, beneath the terror—something older stirred. Something cold.

Something ancient.

And the minotaur had just made the worst mistake it could have. It had given the wolf cub a reason to fight back.

The minotaur stepped toward me.

Its hooves cracked against the concrete, slow and heavy, like it already knew the fight was over. The lights above the pit burned into my eyes, the crowd roaring somewhere far away like I was underwater.

My jaw hung wrong. Every breath sent a lightning bolt of pain through my face. Blood filled my mouth and spilled down my throat, hot and thick. I tried to crawl backward. My hands slipped on the concrete.

The minotaur's shadow swallowed me.

And something inside me broke.

A scream ripped out of my chest before I could stop it. Not a brave scream. Not something heroic. Just pure panic. The sound a terrified fourteen-year-old makes when he realizes he's about to die. The sound

echoed off the steel walls of the pit. Then something twisted deep in my chest.

It felt like my heart stuttered.

My scream changed. It dragged deeper, rougher, tearing out of my throat until it didn't sound human anymore. My fingers curled into fists—And the bones snapped. I felt it. Heard it. A wet, cracking pop that shot white-hot pain through both hands. My fingers stretched longer, joints swelling, nails splitting open as dark claws pushed through the ends.

Blood dripped from my palms onto the floor.

I gasped.

My back arched violently. Something in my spine shifted with a horrible grinding crunch. My ribs expanded so fast it knocked the breath out of me, my chest stretching wide as muscles rolled beneath the skin like something alive.

I could hear the bones moving. Feel them. Every shift, every crack, every brutal stretch of muscle tearing and rebuilding. I tried to breathe but another scream forced its way out instead. My jaw—The broken jaw—It moved. Bone slid inside my face with a wet grinding sound that made my vision blur. My teeth pushed forward, sharpening, lengthening, until fangs forced my mouth open wider. I tasted even more blood. My skin burned. Then it itched. Then it exploded. Dark fur burst through my arms and chest in thick patches, spreading across my shoulders and down my back like wildfire. My legs jerked. Knees cracking. Feet twisting against the concrete as my toes stretched and split, claws scraping against the floor. I collapsed onto my hands for a second, gasping, body shaking violently as the last of the changes ripped through me. Then it stopped. The pain didn't go away. But it changed. My lungs dragged in a deep breath that smelled like blood and sweat and fear. I pushed myself upright slowly. My arms felt heavier. Stronger. Claws scraped across the concrete as I straightened.

The minotaur stood across from me, staring. I could hear the crowd above the pit, but now their voices sounded strange—too loud, too sharp, like my ears were catching every whisper and every heartbeat at once. My chest rose and fell as I stared back at the monster. My heart still pounded like a scared kid's. Because I **was** a scared kid.

Fourteen. Alone. Trapped in a cage with something that could rip me in half. But when I lifted my head and bared my teeth—The growl that rolled out of my chest wasn't the sound of a boy anymore.



The minotaur roared and charged. The sound hit me like a physical thing, shaking the steel walls of the pit and rolling through my chest. Its hooves smashed into the concrete as it came at me again, faster this time, smarter. Its horns dropped low, the long black points aimed straight at my stomach.

The crowd above exploded into noise, but I barely heard them. All I could hear was my own breathing—ragged, animal, echoing inside my skull.

I moved. Not like a person. Like something wild. The minotaur's horns tore through the space where my chest had been an instant earlier. I twisted sideways, claws scraping sparks off the concrete as I slid across the floor.

One of those horns sliced across my ribs. Pain exploded along my side as the tip tore through fur and skin. Warm blood splashed down my leg. The minotaur skidded past me and spun, snorting violently. I staggered backward, clutching my side, breath tearing through my throat in rough snarls.

I'd never fought anything like this before. Hell, I'd never fought anything at all. Nanuk had taught me how to throw punches. How to keep my balance. How to survive if someone bigger came after me. But this—This wasn't a fight behind a school. This was a monster trying to *kill* me.

The minotaur rushed me again. Its arm swung like a battering ram. I ducked under it and slashed blindly. My claws raked across its side, tearing open thick muscle beneath the fur. Blood sprayed across the pit floor. The creature bellowed in rage. Its other hand caught me across the chest. The impact lifted me off the ground. I hit the concrete hard, the air blasting out of my lungs as I rolled across the floor. The broken jaw still throbbed, every breath sending new waves of agony through my skull.

The minotaur stomped toward me. Slow. Relentless. It was bleeding now, but it didn't care. Its eyes burned with animal fury as it lowered its head again.

This time it didn't charge straight. It fainted. Then lunged. The horns came up suddenly, faster than before. One of them drove into my shoulder. The point punched through fur and skin and buried itself deep in muscle.

Agony exploded down my arm.

The crowd roared.

The minotaur lifted its head, trying to gore me fully, trying to toss me into the air like a rag doll. For one terrifying second I felt my feet leave the ground. Blood poured down my arm.

Panic flooded my chest. I was going to die.

I grabbed the horn. My claws dug into it as I clung there, hanging off the side of its skull. The minotaur shook its head violently, trying to throw me off. My wounded shoulder screamed with pain as I held on. But I was smaller. *Faster.* And Nanuk's voice echoed somewhere in the back of my mind. *If something bigger tries to kill you... get close. Get where its strength doesn't matter.*

The minotaur jerked its head again. That was the moment.

I moved.

I let go of the horn and dropped straight down onto its neck. My claws buried into thick fur and muscle as I wrapped one arm around its throat.

The minotaur roared and staggered backward, trying to reach me.

I opened my jaws. For half a second I hesitated. I was still a kid. Still Jason. And the thought hit me all at once—*I'm about to kill something.* Then the minotaur slammed me against the steel wall of the pit. Pain exploded through my spine. Instinct took over.

I bit.

My fangs punched through hide and muscle. Hot blood burst into my mouth. The minotaur bellowed in a sound so loud it made the steel walls vibrate. It thrashed violently, slamming its back against the cage again and again. But I didn't let go. My jaws clamped harder. Claws dug deeper. I tore. Muscle ripped. Cartilage snapped. Blood poured over my face and chest as my teeth shredded through the thick cords of its throat.

The minotaur stumbled. Its legs buckled. The roar turned into a wet choking gurgle. Then the creature collapsed beneath me with a thunderous crash. Its hooves kicked weakly against the concrete. Once. Twice. Then stopped.

I stayed there, crouched over it, chest heaving. Blood ran down my arms. Dripped from my jaws. The entire arena had gone silent. For a long moment I didn't move. Because the boy inside me—the fourteen-year-old who had never hurt anyone worse than a schoolyard fight—Was staring down at the thing I had just killed. And realizing there was no going back from this. The boy I had been had been killed today. And I had no idea what I was now. Not myself. But also very much the thing I felt I had always been.

Above the pit, someone began to clap. Slowly. Deliberately.

Adrien.



The last thing I remembered was the minotaur's blood. Hot. Thick. Filling my mouth while the creature collapsed under me. Then—Nothing. Just darkness. No dreams. No sounds. No sense of time passing. It felt like I'd been dropped into a deep black hole where even my thoughts stopped moving.

When I woke up, the first thing I felt was pain. Not the sharp tearing pain of the fight. This was different. A slow, burning sting. It crawled across my skin like fire ants. I tried to move. Metal snapped tight. The pain exploded.

I sucked in a ragged breath and forced my eyes open. For a second my brain couldn't understand what I was looking at. Soft light. Golden light.

The ceiling above me wasn't concrete anymore. It was painted plaster with decorative molding around the edges, like something you'd see in a fancy hotel or an old mansion.

Music drifted through the air somewhere nearby. Slow, elegant music. Violins and piano. People were talking. Laughing. The smell of wine and perfume hung thick in the air.

I blinked hard.

Then I realized where I was. I was on my knees. Literally on my knees in the middle of the floor. Cold polished wood pressed against my legs, sticky in places like something had been spilled there earlier.

Chains held me down.

My wrists were locked in thick iron manacles attached to the floor by short lengths of chain. Another set wrapped around my ankles, forcing my legs apart just enough that I couldn't stand. And around my neck—a collar. Heavy. Cold. Connected to the floor by another chain that kept my head pulled slightly downward.

Silver.

I smelled it instantly. The scent hit my nose like poison. The metal burned wherever it touched my skin. Not like fire exactly—more like acid soaking slowly into my bones. The pain crawled along my nerves, making my muscles twitch.

I tried to stand.

The chains snapped tight. The collar yanked me forward and the silver bit deep into my neck. A strangled growl escaped my throat as the burning pain flared again. My arms shook as I tried to push myself

upright, but the chains were too short. I couldn't get my feet under me. Couldn't even straighten my back. The silver dug deeper into my skin every time I struggled.

I froze, breathing hard.

The music continued.

That's when I finally noticed the room around me.

It looked like some kind of massive bedroom. Or maybe a private lounge. Rich dark wood walls. Velvet curtains. A huge four-poster bed draped with deep red fabric dominating one side of the room. Antique furniture scattered around like something out of a palace.

Candles flickered in silver holders. Crystal glasses clinked together. And people—No. Not people. Vampires. Dozens of them.

They filled the room in small groups, lounging on couches, standing near tall windows, sitting in carved chairs with glasses of red wine in their hands. Some of them were dressed like they'd just come from a modern nightclub. Others looked like they'd stepped out of the nineteenth century. They were laughing. Talking. Enjoying themselves.

Like they were at a party. And I was in the middle of it. Chained to the floor.

A few of them glanced down at me when I moved. Their eyes lingered for a second. Amused. Curious. The way someone might look at an exotic animal someone had brought into the room. One of the women in a dark green dress leaned toward her companion and whispered something. They both smiled faintly as they looked at me.

My chest tightened. The silver chains burned against my skin as I shifted slightly. Then I heard a familiar voice somewhere behind me. Smooth. Elegant. Delighted. "Ah," a voice said. "Look." His footsteps approached slowly across the wooden floor. "Our little champion is awake."

I strained against the collar, the chain clinking sharply against the floor as I twisted my shoulders, trying to see where the voice was coming from. The silver bit deeper into my neck the moment I pulled, a hot, stabbing burn that ran down my spine and into my chest. My vision blurred for a second and I had to grit my teeth to keep from crying out.

Then he stepped into view.

Adrien.

The moment I saw him, something ugly and violent surged up in my chest. Rage. Pure, blinding rage that made the wolf inside me rise up like it wanted to tear through the chains.

My hands clenched automatically, claws scraping against the wood floor as the silver manacles cut deeper into my wrists.

Adrien noticed.

Of course he did.

He smiled.

He looked perfectly at home in the room, like this was his private salon and not a cage for monsters. His black velvet coat hung neatly from his shoulders, the embroidery catching the candlelight as he moved. One hand rested lightly on the silver knob of his cane while the other held a crystal glass filled with dark red wine.

Or blood.

Knowing him, probably both. He walked slowly through the gathered vampires, the crowd parting for him without a word. Some of them watched me with quiet amusement. Others leaned closer to see better, whispering to each other as they looked down at the chained werewolf on the floor.

At me.

Adrien stopped a few steps away. His eyes moved over me slowly, taking in the chains, the collar, the way I was forced onto my knees. Then they lingered on my face. On the bruising. On my jaw.

The broken one.

“Well,” he said lightly, tilting his head as if inspecting a painting, “that is quite impressive.”

My growl came out low and rough in my throat. “You—” My voice cracked halfway through the word, my jaw still stiff and swollen. Talking hurt like hell. “You chained me.”

Adrien gave a soft, sympathetic sigh. “My dear boy,” he said gently, “after that performance?” He gestured casually toward the collar around my neck. “It seemed only prudent.”

A few of the vampires nearby chuckled softly.

The sound made my stomach twist.

Adrien took a slow sip from his glass before lowering it again. “You truly did exceed expectations tonight,” he continued pleasantly. “The minotaur was quite expensive, you know. Imported from a rather unpleasant labyrinth in Crete.”

He tapped the rim of his glass with one finger. “And yet...” His smile widened slightly. “You tore its throat out.”

A murmur of approval rippled through the room.

My chest tightened. I remembered the blood again. The hot rush of it. The feeling of muscle tearing in my teeth. My stomach churned. I was going to be sick...

Then Adrien stepped closer. Close enough that I could smell the faint sweetness of his perfume beneath the colder scent of vampire. “You see,” he continued softly, crouching slightly so his eyes were level with mine, “I suspected there was something special about you.” His gaze sharpened.

“That scent of yours.” His eyes flickered briefly, thoughtful. “Ancient. Wild.” He smiled again. “But even I did not expect such... enthusiasm.”

Behind him the room buzzed with quiet conversation. Glasses clinked. Someone laughed softly near the fireplace. Like this was all perfectly normal. Like I wasn't chained to the floor like an animal in the middle of their party.

Adrien straightened slowly and turned toward the room, spreading one arm in a small theatrical gesture. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said smoothly. “I present tonight's most unexpected entertainment.”

Several of the vampires lifted their glasses toward me. Some smiled. Others watched me with that same hungry curiosity I'd seen in the pit. Like I wasn't a person. Just something interesting.

Adrien glanced down at me again. “And now,” he said quietly, almost thoughtfully, “we must decide what to do with you next.”

The vampires rose from their velvet chairs one by one, slow and graceful, like predators finally answering the dinner bell. Silk whispered. Rings gleamed in the candlelight. Their eyes locked onto me with open hunger as they began making their way across the marble floor. Chains rattled violently beneath me when I tried to pull back, iron biting deeper into my wrists hard enough to tear skin. The room smelled like blood and expensive perfume and something rotten underneath it all.

At the far end of the chamber, Adrian lounged across his throne of black velvet and gold, one hand propping up his head while the other held a crystal glass dark with blood-red wine. He watched them approach me with a low, amused laugh, the sound smooth and warm and somehow worse because of it. Like this was entertainment to him. Like I was entertainment.

“Easy now,” Adrian purred, his ancient voice echoing through the underground chamber. “You'll frighten the poor wolf.”

The room erupted into soft, sultry laughter.

My pulse slammed so hard against my ribs it hurt. I could hear the chains shaking beneath me, hear my own breathing turning ragged. They heard it too. I saw it in the way they smiled. In the way their nostrils flared when the scent of my fear reached them.

One of the vampires—a woman in a crimson dress slit to the thigh—knelt in front of me and grabbed my chin hard enough to force my head up. Her skin was ice cold. Her black eyes dragged over my face like she was imagining peeling me apart piece by piece.

“Pretty thing,” she whispered.

Then she smiled, and fangs slid down from her gums.

Something inside me snapped.

I jerked against the chains with everything I had, a scream ripping itself raw from my throat as panic and rage exploded through me at once. The silver shackles groaned. Pain shot through my arms. The vampires burst into delighted laughter at the sound, circling closer now, tighter, their hunger turning the air thick and suffocating.

And Adrian—Adrian laughed hardest of all. Then he slowly rose from his throne, shadows swallowing the massive shape of him as he descended the marble steps toward me. “Oh,” he said softly, his smile widening as his eyes began to glow red in the candlelight. “I think I’ll take the first bite myself.”

Adrian’s smile widened as he stopped in front of me, the candlelight catching the blood smeared across his mouth. His hand wrapped around my throat almost gently, cold fingers tightening just enough to make my pulse hammer harder beneath his grip. Around us, the other vampires watched in breathless silence now, their hungry laughter fading into anticipation.

“You smell terrified,” Adrian murmured, his crimson eyes burning into mine. “Good. Fear makes the blood sweeter.”

Then his fangs slid free.

I thrashed against the chains, screaming as he leaned down toward my throat—and somewhere deep inside me, something answered.

A growl ripped out of my chest. Not human. Not even close.

The entire room went still.

Adrian froze.

Pain exploded through my body. Bones cracked. The chains trembled violently against the floor as something savage and furious surged beneath my skin, clawing its way out. I heard one of the vampires suddenly hiss in alarm. Another took a step back.

Adrian’s eyes widened for the first time.

And then the lights went out when I felt it. The sharp sting of a needle punching into my neck. Cold liquid flooded my veins instantly, burning like ice beneath my skin. My body locked up. The growl in my chest strangled into a gasp as agony ripped through me hard enough to make my vision blur.

Somewhere in the dark, Adrian laughed.

And the last thing I heard before everything went black was his voice whispering against my ear—“Sleep now, little wolf.”



After a while, I stopped knowing how long I'd been there. Time didn't move in that place. It rotted. There were no windows. No sunlight. No clocks. Just concrete walls slick with dampness, flickering lights that buzzed like dying insects, and the endless cycle of pain Adrian called entertainment. I learned fast that the underground world beneath Boston had its own rhythm. Bleeding sessions. Pit fights. Needles shoved into my veins. Hands dragging me half-conscious back to my cell afterward. Then food. Water. Sleep if I got lucky. Then it all started over again.

Again. And again. And again.

I think it was about a year. At least that's what it felt like. Maybe longer. Maybe shorter.

I had no way of knowing.

At first I tried counting the days. I scratched marks into the underside of the cot whenever they left me alone long enough. But eventually the marks blurred together. The drugs made my thoughts thick and slow. Sometimes I woke up unsure if I'd slept for hours or only minutes. Sometimes I'd close my eyes after a fight and wake strapped to the bleeding bed with fresh bruises I didn't remember earning.

Eventually I stopped trying to count.

The pit became my whole world.

I remembered the sounds more than anything else. The roar of vampires screaming for blood. The wet crunch when fists broke bone. The scrape of chains dragging me across concrete. My own breathing turning ragged while the crowd laughed overhead. Sometimes Adrian watched from his velvet throne with a glass of bloodwine in his hand, smiling that cold, beautiful smile while I bled for him below like some prized animal.

And God, the things they threw into that cage with me.

At first it was other kids.

Runaways. Human teenagers with hollow eyes and split lips who fought because they were starving or terrified enough to do it. Some cried before the bell even rang. Some begged. Others came at me shaking and screaming because they knew only one of us was walking out. I still remembered the sound one boy made after I broke his arm trying to stop him from stabbing me with a sharpened piece of metal.

After a while Adrian stopped sending humans.

Then came the ghouls.

Not vampires. Not fully.

Just humans twisted into something awful after drinking vampire blood for too long. Their skin always looked sickly pale beneath the floodlights, veins dark beneath the surface. Some were massive, swollen with unnatural muscle. Others were skinny and twitchy, their mouths

stained red from feeding. They moved wrong. Too fast one second. Animal slow the next. And their eyes... God, their eyes looked empty. Like whatever person they used to be had already rotted away inside them.

They fought dirty too.

Biting. Clawing. Trying to pin me down while the crowd screamed for blood overhead. One nearly tore my ear off with its teeth. Another cracked two of my ribs and laughed while I choked on blood.

Then came the bitten wolves.

Those fights haunted me worse than the monsters.

They weren't born wolves like me. They were humans who'd been bitten and twisted wrong. Something in them never fully changed right. Outside the full moon, they looked almost human, just scarred and wrong-looking in ways that made your stomach knot. Bent spines. Uneven limbs. Jaws too big for their faces. Eyes that never focused quite right.

But in the pit, under those floodlights, something happened to them.

The stress triggered half-shifts.

Their bones would crack loudly while the crowd cheered overhead. Fur spreading in ugly patches across stretched skin while their bodies twisted into shapes that looked painful just to exist in. One arm longer than the other. Snouts half-formed. Teeth jutting crooked from bleeding gums. I saw one whose ribs pushed visibly beneath his skin every time he breathed because his torso had warped wrong during the change.

And the worst part?

Most of them were terrified.

They didn't know how to control it. Born wolves learn young. We're taught. Guided through it. But these things... they shifted like people drowning. Panicked. Confused. Some cried while they transformed. Some begged me for help right before the moon-madness hit their eyes and they came charging at me screaming.

I remember one woman especially.

She couldn't have been older than twenty.

Half her face had shifted while the other half stayed human. One yellow wolf eye stared out beside a normal brown one wet with tears. Her jaw hung unevenly, teeth pushing through split gums while patches of fur spread across her neck. She kept whispering "please" over and over while the crowd laughed above us.

Then the madness took her.

She attacked me crying.

I had to kill her anyway.

After that, Adrian got creative.

He sent in starving hellhounds, creatures tainted with demon blood, with burning yellow eyes and ribs showing through mangy black fur. Sent in a wiry Redcap fae carrying a rusted cleaver that giggled every time it cut me. Once they dropped a swamp troll into the pit with chains still hanging from its wrists, its gray-green skin stinking like rotten water and dead fish while it swung a steel pipe big enough to cave my skull in.

And every time I survived, Adrian looked pleased.

Like I was becoming exactly what he wanted.

Other times the fights weren't even fair enough to call fights. Sometimes they chained silver around my wrists before throwing me in with vampires old enough to move faster than my eyes could follow. They wanted to watch me panic. Wanted to watch me survive anyway.

Nobody spoke to me unless they needed something. Nobody touched me gently. Nobody said my name kindly. I became property so fast it made me sick. The ghouls cleaned me. Fed me. Chained me. Beat me if I resisted. The vampires looked at me the same way rich men looked at racehorses or fighting dogs. Valuable only as long as I kept surviving. Sometimes they ran their hands through my hair while talking about me like I wasn't even there.

Strong shoulders.

Pretty face.

Mean little thing, isn't he?

Adrian liked when I fought back. I realized that eventually. The vampire enjoyed the rage in me. The defiance. Every scream, every snarl, every desperate attempt to survive seemed to amuse him more than obedience ever could.

That scared me worse than the violence.

Because it meant Adrian never planned to let me go.

After a while the outside world stopped feeling real. Boston became something distant and dreamlike in my head. I forgot what cold autumn air smelled like. Forgot sunlight on my skin. Forgot the sound of my mother's voice. Some nights I'd lie awake on the cot trying to remember the warmth of home, and panic would rip through me because the memories kept slipping farther away every time I reached for them.

The underground chambers became the only life I knew.

Concrete.

Blood.

Chains.

And Adrian's laughter echoing endlessly through the dark.



Forever had passed in that place, or at least that's what it felt like. Down underground, time stopped meaning anything. There was no sunlight. No seasons. No mornings or nights. Just concrete walls slick with dampness, rusted pipes, flickering lights, and the endless cycle of violence Adrian called entertainment. Days bled together until they became impossible to separate. Fights. Blood. Needles. Sleep. Then more fighting. Sometimes it felt like weeks had passed. Other times it felt like years trapped beneath the earth while the world above kept moving on without me. The boy who'd been drugged and brought here had slowly disappeared, carved apart piece by piece until even I barely recognized what stared back at me anymore.

I saw it every time I caught my reflection in the rusted metal sink bolted to the wall of my cell. The kid they dragged out of the park was gone. My body had stretched taller over the months underground, shoulders broader now, muscle carved hard onto my frame from endless fights and constant survival. But I looked wrong too. Too thin. My ribs still showed beneath my skin no matter how much they fed me. Scars crossed my body everywhere now. Bite marks. Claw marks. Burn scars from silver. My knuckles had healed crooked so many times they barely looked human anymore.

And my neck...

My stomach twisted every time I saw it.



The vampire bites had scarred badly. Pale crescent-shaped marks sat along the side of my throat where fangs had punctured deep enough to nearly kill me. The skin around them looked ugly and uneven, the flesh permanently damaged no matter how fast my wolf healed the rest of me. Adrian liked biting me. Sometimes to feed. Sometimes just because he

knew I hated it. I still remembered the feeling of his mouth against my throat and the cold laughter afterward while blood ran down my chest.

And my eyes... They weren't green anymore. Not completely.

Something colder stared back at me now. Harder. Older. Like the boy who'd been dragged into this place had been carved out piece by piece and replaced with something meaner trying to survive.

That scared me the most.

I slept curled on the narrow cot in the corner of the cage they kept me in between fights. The mattress was thin enough to feel the springs beneath it, and the blanket smelled like mildew and dried blood. Most nights I slept hard because exhaustion dragged me under whether I wanted it to or not.

That night was no different.

Until the screaming started.

At first it bled into the usual noise underground. Shouting. Metal slamming somewhere in the distance. Vampires laughing. I barely stirred, half-conscious, my body too tired to care anymore.

Then I heard the roar.

My eyes snapped open instantly.

The sound shook the walls. Deep. Primal. Familiar.

A polar bear.

For one disoriented second, I thought I was dreaming. My heart slammed against my ribs as another roar thundered through the underground chambers, louder this time, followed by screams cut brutally short somewhere beyond the corridors.

The vampires were panicking.

I sat upright too fast, chains rattling softly where they hung from the wall beside the cot. My breath caught in my throat as memories crashed into me all at once.

Another deafening roar ripped through the underground, violent enough to shake the pipes overhead. Something massive slammed into concrete hard enough to crack it apart, followed by terrified vampire screams echoing through the corridors.

Then I heard something else.

A blade cutting through flesh.

Fast. Precise. Wet.

Bones snapped one after another, sharp cracks ringing through the tunnels before another scream cut off abruptly. Whoever was out there wasn't fighting.

They were slaughtering them.

My pulse slammed against my ribs as I stumbled off the cot and grabbed the bars of my cage. Red emergency lights flickered across the hallway

while alarms blared deeper in the compound. Ghouls sprinted past in full panic, shouting over each other as distant snarls echoed underground.

Then everything went quiet.

Not normal silence.

The kind that comes after death.

And then I smelled it.

Cold air. Snow. Pine. Blood.

Nanuk.

But beneath his scent was another one too. Steel. Smoke. Wolf. Not just any wolf either. An alpha werewolf. And he smelled like me.

The realization hit so hard my knees nearly buckled. After all this time... He found me. A broken sound tore out of my throat before I could stop it. Panic crashed through me all at once, hot and violent, and suddenly I was moving. I lunged at the cage door hard enough to rattle the entire thing, fingers wrapping around the cold bars while I screamed into the chaos outside.

"NANUK!" My voice cracked badly. God, I hated how weak I sounded. Weak. Desperate. Like some terrified animal.

But I didn't care.

I slammed both fists against the metal again and again, the noise echoing through the corridor while alarms screamed overhead. **"I'M HERE!"** I shouted hoarsely. **"NANUK! I'M HERE!"**

Another deafening roar answered somewhere deep in the compound. Closer this time. Then came the wet sound of something tearing apart. Another vampire screamed. And suddenly hope hit me so hard it hurt.

I threw myself against the cage door hard enough to rattle my teeth. The metal groaned beneath the impact. **"LET ME OUT!"** I screamed, slamming my shoulder into it again. Pain exploded through the old injuries in my arm, but I barely felt it anymore. Panic and adrenaline had swallowed everything else whole.

Another roar thundered through the underground.

Closer.

The walls shook violently this time. Dust rained from the ceiling while alarms screamed overhead in harsh red flashes. Somewhere down the corridor something crashed hard enough to crack concrete apart, followed by the wet sound of tearing flesh.

Then came another scream.

Not mine.

A vampire. *Adrian.*

I hit the door again with everything I had.

"PLEASE!" My voice broke apart halfway through the word. **"NANUK!"**

For one horrible second nothing happened. Then the lock exploded. The entire cage door flew inward with a deafening bang, twisted metal shrieking as something massive ripped it clean off its hinges. I barely had time to stumble backward before the ruined door crashed against the wall beside me.

I froze.

For a second all I could see was smoke and flashing red emergency lights pouring through the ruined entrance. The corridor beyond looked like a warzone. Blood covered the concrete walls in long dark streaks. Bodies lay twisted across the floor, some human, some not. Then I saw him. Nanuk filled the hallway like a force of nature. He stood partially shifted, massive shoulders stretching the remains of torn flannel and leather while thick white fur crawled across his arms and neck. Blood soaked his claws. His chest rose and fell in slow, furious breaths that steamed in the cold air pouring through the tunnels.

And beside him stood someone else. A man. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dark-haired. A werewolf. He stood partially shifted beneath the flashing red emergency lights, looking more monster than man. Glowing green eyes burned from a face twisted by fury, elongated fangs visible behind bloodstained lips while thick claws curled around the hilt of the blade in his hand. Fur crept along his forearms and throat beneath the torn collar of his shirt, the transformation hanging halfway between human and wolf like rage alone was keeping it there.

And somehow that made him even scarier.



He looked middle-aged, somewhere in his forties maybe, but built like he could tear the entire underground apart with his bare hands. Tall enough to tower over everyone around him. Muscular beneath worn

jeans, heavy boots, and what looked like a black Kevlar vest strapped over a dark long-sleeved shirt smeared with blood. Vampire blood. He held a long blade, a machete of some kind, slick with black gore at his side while the body of a vampire twitched next to him on the floor, its head hanging at the wrong angle, spine bent into something impossible. Then the man turned. And his glowing green eyes locked onto mine instantly.

His eyes. They looked just like mine.

For a second nobody moved. Then my knees gave out. The adrenaline vanished all at once, leaving my body weak and shaking beneath me. I stumbled forward out of the ruined cage and hit the concrete hard enough to jar my teeth, catching myself on trembling hands.

The cold floor scraped against my palms.

I barely noticed.

Because Nanuk was here. Nanuk was *actually* here. A broken sound escaped my throat as I looked up at them, breathing hard, my entire body shaking so badly I couldn't stop it. I suddenly felt fourteen again. Not the thing Adrian had turned me into underground.

Just a scared kid.

Nanuk's face changed the second he really saw me. Not the cage. Not the scars. Me. And the look of pure horror in his eyes hurt worse than anything Adrian had ever done to me.

My breathing hitched as I looked between them, my mind struggling to catch up to what I was seeing.

Then I noticed the body at the werewolf's feet wasn't dead. Someone groaned weakly. The dark-haired werewolf had a fist tangled deep in somebody's hair, dragging them upright off the blood-slick floor like they weighed nothing. My eyes widened slowly as the figure came into view.

Adrian.

For one stunned second, I barely recognized him.

The elegant vampire who used to sit above the pit in velvet coats and polished boots looked ruined now. His face was drenched in blood, one eye swollen nearly shut beneath layers of bruising so dark they looked black under the emergency lights. His expensive clothes hung in shredded strips soaked crimson. Deep claw marks ripped across his chest and throat, exposing pale flesh beneath.

And his left arm—My stomach twisted violently.

It was gone.

Not cut clean either. Ripped off. The entire shoulder was a mangled ruin of torn flesh and shattered bone, black vampire blood pouring down the side of his body in thick streams. Adrian choked on a wet gasp as the

werewolf yanked him higher by the hair hard enough to force him onto his knees.

For the first time since I'd met him... Adrian looked afraid. Really afraid.

The werewolf's eyes burned with pure fury as he hauled Adrian close enough that their faces nearly touched. His lips peeled back from elongated canines, the sound that tore out of him more animal than human.

"You dare?!" he snarled. The entire corridor seemed to shake with the force of his voice. "*You DARE cage MY son?!*"

The words hit me harder than a punch.

I froze.

My son.

The world seemed to stop moving around me.

I stared at him from the floor, my chest tightening painfully while blood roared in my ears. The man's face blurred for a second because my brain suddenly wasn't seeing the blood or the claws or the bodies anymore.

It was seeing pieces of myself.

The green eyes.

The dark hair.

The shape of his jaw.

Things I'd never let myself think about before because thinking about my father had always felt pointless. Mom barely spoke about him. Whenever I asked, she'd get quiet and say the memories hurt too much. So eventually I stopped asking. He'd never been there. Never came looking. Never mattered. At least that's what I told myself. But now he was here, covered in blood and tearing apart the underground to find me.

Standing over Adrian like an executioner.

My father.

The realization hollowed me out so fast I couldn't breathe.

For a second nobody moved.

The alarms screamed overhead. Red light pulsed across the corridor. Somewhere deeper underground, something exploded hard enough to shake dust from the ceiling.

But all I could see was him. The werewolf stared at me like the entire world had narrowed down to that moment. His chest rose and fell heavily beneath the kevlar vest, claws flexing once around the blood-covered blade in his hand. There was so much rage pouring off him it felt physical. Thick. Suffocating. Then his expression changed. Not completely. The fury was still there. But something else cracked through it when he looked at me. Horror. Real horror. His glowing eyes dragged over me slowly, taking in every scar, every bruise, the bite marks on my throat, the

way my ribs showed beneath my skin. I saw the exact second he noticed how thin I was.

His jaw clenched so hard I heard his teeth grind.

Behind him Adrian let out a weak laugh through bloodied teeth. “Look at him...” the vampire rasped. His voice sounded wet now. Broken. “Your pup survived beautifully.”

The werewolf moved so fast I barely saw it. One second Adrian was laughing. The next the blade slammed through the concrete beside his head with a deafening crack.

Adrian flinched violently.

The werewolf yanked him higher by the hair, claws digging into the vampire’s scalp while a low growl rumbled from deep in his chest.

“You touched him,” he snarled. Every word sounded barely restrained. “You fed from him.” Another yank. “You put him in a cage.”

Adrian smiled anyway, blood running down his chin. “He fought well.”

The werewolf lost it.

A roar exploded out of him as he slammed Adrian face-first into the concrete hard enough to crater the floor beneath his skull. Bones cracked loudly. Black blood sprayed across the corridor walls.

I flinched instinctively.

Nanuk moved first. The massive werebear stepped between them with a deep warning growl, one huge clawed hand catching the werewolf by the shoulder before he could hit Adrian again. The hallway suddenly felt even smaller with both of them standing there together.

“Enough, Matthew,” Nanuk rumbled, his deep voice cutting through the chaos like thunder. The name hit me harder than the screaming or the blood or the bodies scattered across the corridor floor. Matthew. My stomach twisted violently as realization crashed into me all over again. Matthew Calder. Alpha of New York. Oh God. It really was him.

The werewolf’s chest heaved violently. For a second I honestly thought he might tear Adrian apart anyway. Then his eyes flicked back toward me. And everything changed. The rage was still there. So was the blood and the claws and the violence hanging in the air around him. But when he looked at me now, something in his face broke wide open.

Like seeing me hurt him.

Slowly, the werewolf released Adrian’s hair. The vampire collapsed onto the floor in a mangled heap, barely conscious now.

Then the man turned fully toward me. Toward his son. My throat tightened painfully as he took one hesitant step forward.

I hated how small I suddenly felt.

Fourteen years old. Or was I fifteen? It was hard to know how much time had gone by since I'd been captured. Covered in scars. Shaking on the floor of a cage.

The werewolf opened his mouth like he wanted to say something. But no words came out. Matthew stared at me for another second, breathing hard, green eyes burning beneath the partial shift. Then slowly, carefully, he crouched down in front of me. Up close he smelled like blood, smoke, steel... and wolf. My wolf. His massive clawed hand reached toward me hesitantly, like he thought I might flinch away from him.

Maybe I should have.

Instead, I just stared.

Then he wrapped his hand gently around my forearm and pulled me to my feet.

My legs almost gave out instantly. The world tilted hard enough that I swayed, weak from exhaustion and blood loss, but Matthew caught me before I could fall. His grip tightened on my arm, steady and warm despite the claws.

For a second I just stood there staring up at him.

At my father.

Then I looked past him toward Nanuk.

The old werebear's face crumpled.

He crossed the corridor in two massive strides and suddenly his huge arms were around me, pulling me hard against his chest before I could even react. The embrace hit me like a breaking dam. Warm. Solid. Safe.

I made a broken sound into his shoulder.

Nanuk held me tighter.

"Easy now, boy," he whispered roughly.

His massive body trembled against mine, and for a second I didn't understand why until I felt it. Hot tears against the side of my head as the old werebear buried his face against my hair. He was crying. Nanuk was crying.

"Oh, pup..." he whispered hoarsely, tightening his grip around me like he was afraid to let go. "What did they do to you?"

That destroyed me.

Everything inside me finally cracked apart all at once. The fear. The pain. The loneliness. The endless underground darkness. My hands clenched weakly into the back of his torn shirt as I shook against him, suddenly feeling small again. Not the thing Adrian had turned into a fighter. Not some monster in a cage.

Just a kid.

Just Nanuk's pup.

And in the massive werebear's arms, for the first time in what felt like forever...

I felt safe.



The highway blurred past outside the window in long streaks of gray and gold, rain tapping softly against the glass while New York waited somewhere far ahead of us. I sat silently in the backseat, shoulders tense beneath borrowed clothes, staring out at a world that still didn't feel real anymore. Nanuk sat beside me, massive and quiet, one thick arm resting near enough that I could feel the heat coming off him. Every once in a while his hand would brush my shoulder like he was reassuring himself I was still there. Up front, Matthew drove in silence, both hands tight on the steering wheel, green eyes flicking toward me in the rearview mirror every few minutes like he still couldn't believe I was alive.

Leaving Mom behind hurt worse than I thought it would.

She cried when we said goodbye. I'd never seen her cry like that before. She held my face in her hands like she was terrified I'd disappear again and kept promising she'd visit, call every day, do whatever it took to stay close to me. But even she could see it now.

I wasn't the same boy who'd been taken.

Something in me had changed underground.

The year with Adrian had hollowed parts of me out and replaced them with something harder, meaner, older. Home in Boston didn't feel like home anymore. Kanna and Tiraq needed her there, and deep down I think she knew I needed something else now too. Needed distance. Needed answers. Needed the father I'd spent my entire life not knowing existed.

Matthew Calder.

Alpha of New York.

My father.

Which meant the life waiting for me at the end of that highway wasn't just a new home. It was a throne. A throne I would sit on one day.

The conversation with Matthew after the rescue had been... strange. Not bad. Just strange.

We sat in silence for almost an hour after they got me out of the underground. Me wrapped in a blanket in the back of some SUV while medics stitched cuts closed and checked the vampire bites on my neck.

Nanuk stayed beside me the entire time, but Matthew mostly stood a few feet away like he didn't know what to do with himself.

Like he was afraid to get too close.

Eventually he told me the truth.

He hadn't known I existed.

The words should've hurt more than they did, but honestly, after Adrian, I think I was too numb to feel much of anything at first. Matthew explained that almost a month ago Nanuk had shown up at his territory in New York and told him everything. That he had a son. That his son had been taken by vampires nearly a year earlier. That Adrian de Vauclair had been keeping me underground somewhere in Boston.

Matthew looked sick talking about it. Apparently he'd spent that entire month tearing apart vampire territories across the East Coast searching for me. And somehow things only got stranger from there.

Matthew Calder wasn't just some werewolf. He was the Alpha of New York. One of the strongest pack leaders on the East Coast. He had a mate too. A Luna named Victoria. And two younger children. Ian and Rose. My half-siblings. A family I'd never known existed living in a world I suddenly belonged to whether I wanted to or not. On top of that, he had an entire pack depending on him. Hundreds of wolves. And because I was his oldest son... That meant one day all of it would become mine.

I remember staring at him after he said it, trying to process the words while the highway lights flashed across the windows around us.

Alpha-elect.

Heir.

The titles felt unreal.

A few days earlier I'd been sleeping in a cage underground, fighting monsters for scraps while vampires bet on whether I'd survive the night. Now suddenly people expected me to inherit one of the most powerful werewolf packs in the country.

The thought terrified me.

Because I didn't feel like an heir.

I felt feral.

Broken.

Like some half-starved animal they'd dragged out of a pit and wrapped in borrowed clothes. And I think Matthew saw that every time he looked at me. Saw the way I flinched at sudden movements. The way I watched doors constantly. The way I never fully relaxed. Still, none of that changed the truth that my life wasn't mine anymore.

I rested my head against the cold window and watched Boston disappear behind us mile by mile, the city growing smaller beneath the gray morning rain. Everything felt unreal. A year ago I'd just been some

angry little wolf pup getting into fights at school and trying to survive another day pretending I wasn't different. Then Adrian took me. The underground swallowed me whole and turned my life into blood and cages and monsters. And now here I was, leaving home behind with the Alpha of New York sitting in the driver's seat and Nanuk beside me like some silent guardian spirit. I still felt half-feral inside, like I belonged more in a cage than a car heading toward Manhattan. But none of that changed the truth waiting for me at the end of the highway. I wasn't just some forgotten kid anymore. I was Matthew Calder's eldest son. The heir to one of the most powerful werewolf packs in the country. A prince being taken to his kingdom.

Funny how life works.

One year ago, I'd been fighting kids behind my middle school. Now I was on my way to New York City to inherit a throne soaked in blood and legacy. And somewhere out there beyond the skyline and endless lights waiting ahead of me... was the rest of my life.

I just didn't know yet that it would begin with a girl named Maria.