

## Phase 3.

# THE WOLF INSIDE

*There are three things all wise men fear;  
The sea in storm,  
A night with no moon,  
And the anger of a gentle man.  
~ Patrick Rothfuss*

The war was finally over. Maxima Viteri-Lazaar was well into her sixteenth year of life, and it was the first time she had ever experienced life without fear. She saw signs of peace everywhere she went, and it wasn't uncommon these days to see werewolves and vampires hanging out together or sharing a home.

She looked around now, as she sat in the center of Lobo Common, to see one hell of a party bustling around her. The music was loud and the sun was hot, beating down on the giant square of pavement that served as a monument to the fallen. All around the perimeter were stone benches, each carved with the name of a family who'd fought in the Mystic War. The names of those who died were carved into the floor, where people currently danced and talked and laughed and drank fizzy drinks. Max cast her gaze across the square to see Finn coming toward her, two foaming, sweating cups in his hands.

Finn had grown exponentially in the past few years, but he seemed to only grow up and not outward. In other words, the kid was scrawny as hell. His blonde hair fell around his face in messy, wavy strands. He wore black jeans and a pale blue t-shirt that brought out the color of his eyes, the same blue-green hue as his mother's. He plopped down next to Max and pushed one of the cups into her hand.

"Shouldn't be too much longer," he said. He pushed his hair out of his face and took a mouthful of his drink. "Mom says she wants to stay and eat, since she doesn't feel like cooking dinner."

Max chuckled. "Understandable." She looked around at the pack, or what was left of it. The Lazzar's had worked hard to rebuild and recover from what they'd lost in the war, but the once legendary pack was still less than half of what it used to be. They were gathered here today to celebrate, and to mourn, and they'd all brought their extended families with them.

Max could see Finn's mother, Grace Lazaar, standing across the square, her intense eyes sweeping the party, back and forth. Her shiny blonde hair fell past her shoulders and blew gently in the breeze. Max had always thought that Grace was so beautiful; like a movie star or a super model. Dorian often called her Werewolf Barbie.

Grace stood with her hand resting on her husband Sonny's shoulder. The Alpha of the Lazaar pack sat in his wheel chair, laughing heartily with a frothy beer mug in his hand. If Grace was Barbie, then Sonny was Ken; tan and blonde and perfect, the way perfect is depicted in magazines. When he would smile, he would glance up at Grace first, as if nothing ever truly made him happy except her face.

The only thing that took away from the perfection of them was Sonny's condition, which left him paralyzed from the waist down. A sliver of poisonous dart was still lodged in his spinal cord. Trying to get it out could just make things worse, and the shard worked its way further into his spine every day. Sonny was getting worse and worse by the minute, but he never let it show. He never let the pack see him weak.

Max had always envied Sonny's strength, and Grace's unwavering dedication, and the connection they shared with each other as they led their pack together. A team; an Alpha pair, more powerful together than apart. Although Max had been invited into their family, they'd given her their name and treated her as one of their own, she still felt like an outsider sometimes. This was, in large part, due to the fact that she didn't look at all like any of them.

While the Lazaar's were fair haired and golden skinned and borderline angelic with their bright eyes and bone structure, Max was... different. Her hair was dark and it stuck out all over in tight curls. Her eyes were plain brown, her skin dark and freckled, her teeth crooked. She was tall and athletic, but broad shouldered and a little curvier than other girls her age.

"Are you listening to me?" Finn asked.

Max blinked and looked over at him. He'd finished his drink; hers was still spilling over the brim of her cup.

"What?"

Finn rolled his eyes. "I've been talking to you for, like, five minutes. Where did you go?" He took the cup from her hand and chugged half of its contents.

Max sighed. "I was just thinking. About your family, and how lucky I am to have them. To have you." She smiled at him.

"Cheesy." Finn laughed and bumped her shoulder with his. "They're not *my* family, okay? They're yours, too. Might as well get used to it, Viteri."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Hey," said Finn, "speaking of family. Have you seen Dorian around?"

Max glanced around the crowd. "Now that you mention it, no, I haven't seen him since breakfast."

"Wonder where he is."

"Maybe we should go look for him." Max stood up, her eyes still thoroughly searching the crowd. She locked eyes with Grace for a moment, and they nodded at each other with quick, lazy grins.

Finn, still sitting on the picnic table, kicked his legs up onto the seat next to him and laid down on his back. Both cups were empty and sitting on the table. "Nope. I think if he's not here, he probably wants to be alone."

"He never wants to be alone," said Max. She tousled Finn's hair. "I'll find him. And if he's mad, I'll let him know that you're the one who sent me." She started toward the archway that led out of the square and followed the lightly-trodden path down the hill and into the woods.

Dorian Lazaar sat at the edge of the water and felt as though his veins were on fire. He stared down into the clear, rippling pool below him as it churned with the torrents of water rushing down from the falls. He could see his own distorted reflection but could not recognize it.

This pain was no foreign feeling; he'd been experiencing bouts of it for years, ever since his older brother was injured. Dorian always thought that he'd been lucky enough to make it through the Mystic War with no real damage done. He'd survived, he hadn't lost any of his immediate family, and everything was just fine in his world. But that was not entirely true.

Though he didn't die in the war, Dorian's sense of self was buried with the fallen warriors who had. Everything he was, everything he wanted to be, had been burned away with the poison that pierced his brother's spine. Since that very moment, Dorian's veins had run cold as though they were filled with gasoline. His mind unstitched itself more and more with each day, and his heart seemed to wither into a lump of dry, black coal. Something had broken inside Sonny Lazaar, and Dorian was being called to fix it. But he couldn't. What kind of brother would he be to usurp Sonny and take his place as Alpha? Dorian wasn't cut out for that. He wouldn't betray his brother; he wouldn't take on the responsibility of leading the pack. He couldn't.

The wolf within him disagreed, however, and it fought him daily. As time passed, he began to spend more and more time alone. He kept his mouth shut and his eyes down, and he simply obeyed.

Dorian's ears twitched as he looked into the garbled reflection of himself on the water, and he could hear footsteps. He closed his eyes and breathed in steadily through his nose. He heard soft, sure footfall paired with near-silent breathing, and smelled the scent of lavender mingling with vanilla and salt and caramel. The heartbeat was unmistakable. His mouth quirked up at one corner.

That was it; the one thing that had made him smile in these past months, when the pain had worsened and the nagging voice in his head was louder than ever. The one thing that made him drift away from the unwavering pounding in his ears and the feeling of razorblades in his lungs. The only thing that had made him feel even the slightest bit normal since the war began.

"Maxima," he said.

"How do you always know?" Max stomped forward in a huff. "I was so quiet this time."

He turned to look at her, beaming. "I am better than you, Max, you just have to let yourself accept that."

She rolled her eyes. Dorian looked back out at the water, clear blue-green and sparkling in the sunlight. Max could see all the way to the

bottom where rocks had been pounded into sand by the falls and shimmered like diamonds.

There were many times when she had found Dorian here, all alone, sunbathing or swimming or just staring into the water. Sometimes, he'd hear her coming and climb into the treetops to jump out and scare her. Other times, he would stay under the surface of the water, just near the edge, and wait for her to walk close to the edge when he could grab her by the ankles and pull her in.

Max tilted her face toward the sky, her eyes closed, and let the sun warm her skin. After a moment, she could feel Dorian's eyes on her.

"What?" she said. "Why are you staring at me?" She blinked, seeing bright spots behind her eyelids, and looked at him.

"Sometimes," said Dorian, "it's hard for me to remember that you are not a child. To see you not for the smart-mouthed, wild-haired little girl you used to be, but for the beautiful young woman you've become."

Max could feel her face flush. "Shut up."

"I mean it." He laughed, a rare sound that warmed Max's bones. "You're still smart-mouthed and wild-haired, but it suits you better now. As if you were a forest in winter and now you've bloomed with the spring, vibrant and alive."

She frowned at him, shook her head.

"You don't think so?" Dorian said.

"Please." She couldn't bear to look into his eyes. They were bright and knowing and beautiful. His face, the hard features of a God's timeless sculpture, was impossible to look at for too long. Max thought of the story of Narcissus, and how he was so beautiful and loved himself so much, that he got lost in his own reflection, growing into the soil of the riverbank. "I'm more like a barren desert," she said, "and you're like... a bright, colorful jungle or something."

Dorian laughed again and Max felt her heart sputter. She saw him move out of the corner of her eye and looked. He lifted his shirt over his head and dropped it onto the ground.

"I think there's something incredibly beautiful about the desert," he said.

Max eyed him, unable to look away. His shoulders were enormous, his arms corded with more muscles than she'd ever seen on one person. There was a tension in his back that made her uncomfortable, the way he stood as if he were in constant pain.

"There's endless heat," Dorian continued. "All that warm sand and clear, untainted sunlight. Nothing around for miles and miles. You could

scream, and no one would hear you, or you could cry. There's a strange, ethereal sort of beauty in that which is... incomparable."

Max blinked, reminded herself to breathe. She felt hot and cold in waves all over her body. Was she about to faint? There was something in the way he was looking at her, something in the depth of his voice that both terrified and excited her. She could feel her heart slamming against her chest, like a caged animal desperate to escape.

"Besides," he said, looking away again, "if I were any type of habitat in the world, do you really think I would be a jungle?"

Max laughed. The odd sensation that had taken over her was fading now, slowly, and she felt herself relax. "Nah, maybe more like a tundra, or a snowy mountain peak."

"I believe that was a dig." Dorian kicked dirt at her before lying on his back in the grass. He closed his eyes against the sun as it hung directly above them in the cloudless sky. Max moved to sit next to him, leaning forward on her knees.

"What?" She shrugged. "Mountains are pretty."

"Don't feel like you need to compliment me simply because I complimented you, Max."

"I'm not. I mean, that's not why. I'm being serious. Snow is mysterious and quiet, like you." She took a deep breath, glad to have her back to him as she continued. "It's cold and lonely, and you can't keep it. You can't hold a snowflake in your hands. You can't reach out and touch it at all. It would melt."

There was silence, and then Dorian sat up. He laid his hand at the center of Max's back and she took in a sharp breath, surprised by the gentleness of it. The only time they ever touched, usually, was when they fought with each other. It was always for practice of course, and the two of them were always making sure the other was on guard at all times. Max's sneaking up on him, and Dorian's hiding to jump out and scare her, it was all part of practice. It was all so that they would be ready, always, for another attack. That's all it was. Right?

"You're much smarter than you look," he said.

Max turned to glare at him over her shoulder. "Ass." A strong gust of wind blew and her hair blew with it. She tried to toss the out of place strands from her eyes, but it was no use. Her curls danced on the wind and tickled her nose.

"What I mean is, you'll make a great leader. You'll be a great Alpha of some great pack, someday. I truly believe it, pup."

Max grumbled and leaned away from Dorian's hand. "I'm not a pup." He leaned back on his elbows and Max turned to scowl at him. His eyes were already closed and he wore a smirk that she wanted to slap off of his perfect face. She saw the sweat beading at his collarbone and felt goosebumps all over. She cleared her throat. "I'm almost seventeen, Dorian. I'm not a child anymore. And you're not even that much older than me, so get over yourself."

He lifted his head and locked eyes with her. "Seventeen. I cannot believe it, if I'm being honest. How did you survive this long, what with how reckless and passionate as you are?"

She punched him in the shoulder.

"And we can add violent to the list," Dorian said.

Max stood up. "Whatever. You're the violent one. I'm the one who picks up all the pieces when you decide to destroy something during one of your tantrums, or did you forget about that?" Her eyes burned through his and then she saw the hurt in his shining eyes. Her face went slack. Something ached inside her, and she immediately regretted saying it. She hadn't wanted to hurt him. But she had; it was written all over his face in lines, between his brows, at the corners of his eyes and mouth. She wanted to reach for him but couldn't move. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean that."

Dorian hopped to his feet as if he weighed nothing and brushed past her, avoiding eye contact. "Yes, you did."

"No, I—"

"It's alright," he said. "It's the truth. Don't ever be sorry for speaking the truth, Maxima. Don't ever be sorry for anything."

She finally found the strength to turn around, just in time to see him drop his shorts to the ground and dive into the water. Max stood blinking, her heart beating awkwardly, her ears on fire, her skin burning. Dorian's blonde head broke through the surface of the water and he looked up at her. His eyes matched the dazzling blue-green of the lake, clear and open.

"Get in," he said.

Max shook her head. She felt awful and would much rather go sit somewhere in a dark corner and work on her self-loathing.

"Come on, Max." Dorian splashed water at her. She jumped back, scoffing at him. He smiled at her and said, "Get. In."

She sighed, and gave in. She peeled off her jeans and t-shirt, actively avoiding meeting Dorian's eyes as he blatantly watched her undress. Somehow, it didn't make her feel uncomfortable. Instead, she'd taken the

opportunity to remove everything slowly, putting on a subtle show, letting him get a good look at her. Surely that would help him understand that she was not a child. She was a woman. When Max turned to stand at the edge of the lake, she looked down at Dorian, and saw a wildness in his eyes that told her she'd succeeded. She let him stare a moment longer before plunging into the cool, clear water.

Evenings in the Lazaar home were often quiet and calm. They would make dinner together, sit down to eat together, and clean up together afterward. Typically, Sonny would retire to his room immediately after the meal, and Grace would go with him, to keep him company while he worked. Now that he wasn't able to fight, Sonny still needed something to do. Something that could benefit not only his pack, but all werewolves. He'd decided to take over responsibility for the many Mystic Orphanages in the West. It was, apparently, a lot of paperwork on his part, while Grace would meet with people face to face and visit facilities in his place. It kept his injury a bit more private, which meant that they were all that much safer.

Dorian, Finn, and Max would usually stay up late, watching movies together and making popcorn, or playing video games. In the last few months, however, Dorian had disappeared earlier in the night. He would say that he was tired, and they would call him old, and then he would lie in bed and shiver as if he were fever ridden, twitching and twisting in pain, biting his pillow to keep from screaming. Finn and Max often ended up falling asleep on the couch together, and Dorian would wake them early the next day, having barely slept himself, if at all. Grace and Sonny both frowned on the idea of them sleeping next to each other, even though they'd done it plenty of times when they were younger.

The night after the festival was not one of these quiet nights. Max and Dorian had stayed at the lake until dusk, when they'd climbed the falls and watched the sun set from the top. When they returned, they were both shocked to find the entire house torn apart; furniture tipped over; broken glass on the floors; Grace sobbing at the dining table; Sonny seething quietly with a phone to his ear.

"What happened?" Dorian asked. He rushed to Grace's side and rubbed his hand in circles over her back. "Gracie, what is it? Who did this?" *Gracie*. He'd known her since he was a child, a toddling baby who couldn't speak. Her name had been one of the first words Dorian ever spoke.



She lifted her head and turned to him, her eyes red, her perfect blonde hair frizzing away from her face, wet with tears. "I don't know, Dory. I don't know who did this. But you should go to your nephew. Go to Finn."

Dorian glanced over his shoulder in time to see Max disappearing down the hall. "Maxima will take care of him. Tell me what happened, please."

He pulled out a chair next to her and sat, taking her hand between his. Grace grabbed a napkin from the table with her other hand and dabbed at her cheeks with it, steadying her breath.

"We came home from the festival," she said, her voice shaking. "And this is what we found." Grace held out her arms, gesturing the mess of the house. "There was a note, stuck to the table with a knife." Her eyes flicked over to the gouge in the stained wood, and Dorian saw it, too. She pulled the folded sheet of paper from her pocket and held it out to him.

"What does this mean?" Dorian asked. He read it again, aloud. "The name Lazaar is weakened and your pack will break." He threw it onto the floor. "Dammit! Whoever it is, they know. About Sonny." He glanced across the room at his brother, whispering into the phone's receiver.

"Clearly," said Grace. "How do we protect ourselves from an enemy whose face we do not know?"

Dorian stared into her clear blue eyes for a moment, then dropped her hand and stood in a fury. He moved to stand before Sonny and waited for his brother to look at him.

"Hold on," Sonny mumbled into the phone. He held it in his lap and looked up. "What is it, little brother?"

"Who did this? You have to know."

"How could I know?" Sonny heaved a frustrated breath, as he always did when he wished he could stand up.

Dorian knelt so he could be face to face with his brother. "You have to have some idea. Who are you talking to?"

"I'm speaking with an ally regarding our safety, Dorian, now you can stand here all night and ask me questions I don't know the answers to or you can make yourself useful." He lifted the phone back to his ear and turned his wheelchair away to face the wall.

Dorian turned to Grace, who had her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking slightly. She was always so strong, never wavering. He hadn't seen her like this, not once in his whole life. After all these years of holding everything on her shoulders, she had finally broken.

The pain seared through his veins like fire and ice, and he bit back a groan. He walked carefully to the sofa and sat, clutching his stomach. Glad that no one was looking at him, he doubled forward and ground his teeth together, wishing silently for the pain to pass. He could hear the rustling of the wolf beneath his flesh and begged it to stay back. A whisper like wind wove through his brain and he knew what he was supposed to do, but he couldn't. He wouldn't.

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Max darted down the hallway in search of Finn and found him in his bedroom closet. He sat in the corner, curled up and hugging his knees. He looked so small and childlike, Max nearly flinched as he saw her and unfolded his long limbs, reminding her that he was taller than she was, now.

"Max," he breathed.

She bent down and reached for him, and they hugged. Max leaned back on her heels. "What happened? Why are you hiding in here?"

Finn shook his head. "Where were you?"

"At the lake."

"With him? With Dorian?"

Max nodded. She saw the judgement in his eyes. She didn't need him to explain the anger in his voice, either.

"You should have been here," was all he said.

"What happened?" she asked again.

Finn took a deep breath and scrubbed a hand over his face. "It was like that when we walked in, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Mom thinks that Dad knows who did it."

"Yeah, Dorian does, too, by the sounds of it." Max sat down, crossing her legs and inching closer to him.

"They fought," he said. His voice was airy and broken. "Bad. Mom lost it, screamed and yelled. And then Dad threw dishes at her, and she smacked him across the face."

"Wow." Max had never seen Grace and Sonny fight. They were always standing close to each other, helping each other, supporting each other. They always took care of each other and emanated such love.

Finn nodded. He wrung his hands nervously in his lap. "Mom said that I should be trained to take over. For him. You know, when he dies. I heard her say that. She told him that I should be calling the shots, and he said I wasn't ready. Which is true, I'm not. How soon is he going to die?"

I don't understand." He trailed off and closed his eyes, tears trickling from the corners.

"Oh, Finn." Max wrapped her arms around him again and felt his body convulse in sobs against her. "I'm so sorry." She rubbed his back and rocked him gently, as if he were a child. She didn't know what else to do, or what to say. "I'm sorry, Finn. I'm so sorry."

Weeks went by and a heavy tension sat over the entire Lazaar household. Sonny rarely spoke, and Grace pretended to be happy so much that it was glaringly obvious she was actually miserable.

Dorian was near-absent in those weeks, spending more time in his room or in the woods. There were some days when Max would go looking for him, and she wouldn't find him. She'd search the woods, by the lake, above the falls, and every other place he used for hiding and thinking and being overdramatic. She checked the crawlspace under the house, upstairs in the attic, the old tree fort in the woods, and even the treetops.

On those days she couldn't find him, she worried about him. Not only about *where* he was but *how* he was. She wondered what he was doing, and why, and if he'd want her to find him or if he truly wanted to be alone. On the days when she *did* find him, shirtless and occupying one of his usual haunts, she knew; he wanted to be found. And not only to be found, but to be found by her.

It was the day before Max's seventeenth birthday, and she'd spent the entire morning training with Finn as she had been for a few weeks. He was already gaining muscle mass but needed to work on his stamina.

"How many breaks can one person take in the span of an hour?" she asked. Finn was panting, wiping sweat from his face. She shook his head and chugged an entire bottle of water.

"Are you done for the day?" she asked.

Finn nodded. "Sorry, Max. I'm too tired."

She patted his back. "It's okay. You did fine today. We're going to kick it up a notch tomorrow, so get a good night's sleep, okay?"

He frowned at her. "Tomorrow is your birthday."

"Yeah. So? We're still training first thing in the morning." She tousled his hair and started stretching her legs. "I'm going for a run through the woods. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"I've never been surer of anything in my life," said Finn.

She hadn't been looking for Dorian, necessarily, but she'd found him on her run. She told herself that it was definitely a coincidence that she

happened to run by the lake that day. True, it wasn't her usual path, but she wanted a change of scenery.

"Hey," she said as she jogged toward him.

"What, no sneaking up from behind this time?"

Max shrugged. She stopped next to him, leaning forward on her knees to catch her breath. "I figured you'd heard me coming from a mile away."

"I did." He smirked.

"What," she said. "No more hiding in the treetops to jump on me this time?"

Dorian just winked at her. "How is Finn's training going?" he asked.

"Fine." She stood up, finally able to breathe normally again. "And how have you been holding up?"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about me."

Max nodded. She looked down at the clear, churning water, and so did Dorian. They stood there in silence for a moment before she noticed that she was staring at Dorian's reflection as he gazed into his own eyes. And although the reflection moved strangely with the waves in the water, distorting the perfect lines of his face and the soft wave of his hair, it was still beautiful. Again, she recalled Narcissus. *Let me at least gaze upon you, if I may not touch you.*

"You getting in?" Max asked. She nodded toward the water.

Dorian shook his head. "Nah. I'm tired." He turned and started to walk away. Max frowned and went after him, stepping into stride with him.

"What are you getting me for my birthday?" she asked.

"Birthday?" he replied.

She saw his smirk and rolled her eyes. "Don't pretend like you forgot."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Max shrugged. "Fine, you don't have to get me anything. I don't care."

"You're no fun," he said. "You will find out what your gift is tomorrow, when it's actually your birthday."

Grace made pancakes in the morning, and stuck candles in the top. She didn't use seventeen of them, she said, because she didn't want to burn the house down. But three was plenty. And the pancakes were full of fresh blueberries.

Sonny wheeled his chair into the dining room, patting Max's shoulder as he passed, and parked himself at the head of the table. Even sitting

down, Sonny was huge; over six foot tall and broad. The wheelchair did little to take away from his magnanimous presence, if Max was being honest.

"I thought," said Sonny, "that you kids could go see a movie tonight, on me. To celebrate Maxima's seventeenth birthday." He looked at her warmly. "Happy birthday, little Max."

She blushed. "Thanks."

Finn chuckled. "She punches me when I call her that."

"Well," said Grace, "maybe you shouldn't call her that, then." She sat down at the table, her hair pulled back in a sleek, shiny ponytail. Her eyes were rimmed in green shimmering shadow that brought out the different shades in her eyes; the same color as all the Lazaar's. Sometimes blue, sometimes green, always full of life and luminosity.

"I think that's a great idea," said Max.

Finn shoved a forkful of pancake into his mouth. His hair was still wet from the shower he'd taken after training that morning, and it hung in strands over his eyes. Max had to admit that he'd held his own quite well that day. She was proud of the progress he'd made in such a short amount of time.

She could hardly look at Dorian. He sat across from her with dark circles beneath his eyes, pushing his food around on his plate. She was sure he hadn't taken a single bite yet. He kept glancing toward her, she could feel his eyes on her, but every time she looked up, he looked away.

"A movie would be great, Sonny," said Max. "Thank you."

"Why don't you guys come, too?" Finn asked. He looked at his mother across the table, his cheeks full of pancake.

She smiled sweetly at him and Max saw her love for him in Grace's eyes. *Her baby boy, Max thought. All grown up, and a thoroughly disgusting pig, and she still loves him more than life itself.*

"We have business to take care of." It was Sonny who spoke over the top of his steaming coffee mug. "We'll have a right celebration in your honor this weekend, Max, but tonight, there are matters of the pack to be attended to."

She smiled. "That's alright. You don't need to throw a party for me."

Sonny smiled sadly back at her, then his gaze seemed to drift into another time and place. She heard the sorrow in his voice every time he said the word *pack*, and she could practically feel the sadness flowing off of him. An Alpha, once revered as powerful and fearless and strong, now broken, falling apart more and more by the day, struggling to remain solid for those who relied on him the most. He'd lost so many in the war, and

although they'd invited others to join them in attempts to rebuild, many refused. And it was, in large part, due to Sonny's condition. They didn't feel safe following an Alpha who couldn't even walk.

Now, it was only them; the Lazaar's. There were four or five others who lived in the guest house, but they kept to themselves, mostly. Once a month, the two families would join one another to shift under the full moon and run through the night together, but in the morning, they went back to their separate homes, their separate lives.

It was nothing like how it used to be, how the Lazaar's had always been. They were a family before the war, sharing everything with each other, spending all their time together, staying close in physical and spiritual ways. Now, everything they'd built their name on was falling apart, the foundation of the Lazaar pack was crumbling, and it was taking Sonny with it.

Finn sat on the hood of the car, a forest green station wagon, and picked at the frays in his jeans. Max paced back and forth in front of him, the sun dipping below the treetops the cast sparse shadows on the ground.

"Quit pacing," said Finn, "you're making me anxious."

"What's taking him so long?" Max asked. She stopped and turned to stare at the house, up toward the window of Dorian's bedroom. They'd been waiting for him for almost twenty minutes now, after he'd said he would "Be right there."

"Dad's probably lecturing him," said Finn. He puffed out his chest and lifted his shoulders, impersonating Sonny. "Now listen here, little brother, you'd better make sure nothing happens to those kids or else I'll have your pelt as a rug in my office, you understand me?"

Max laughed. She mimicked his gesture and did her own impression, of Dorian. "Trust me, brother, if any harm comes to them, I will accept any punishment you see fit. I am nothing if I cannot protect them."

They both burst into laughter and then Dorian came out, storming down the front porch steps as if his boots were on fire.

"What's so funny?" he barked. "Get in the car."

The lobby of the movie theater was bright and loud, and it was driving Dorian insane. Flashing lights from arcade machines and children running by, spilling popcorn everywhere. There were so many people, everywhere he turned. All faces of strangers that seemed to look at him, stare at him, as if they knew something that he did not.

He felt pressure on his arm and looked down, blinking, coming back from that terrifying place in the back of his mind. Max's hand was gripping his forearm. Dorian looked at her, and she smiled.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked. But the look in her eyes asked another question. *Are you okay?*

Dorian nodded. "Sure. Water's fine."

Finn cradled a humungous bucket of popcorn and was already busy eating it. Max handed Dorian a bottle of water, and carried her own drink and Finn's, leading the way down the dim corridor to the theater. Dorian felt the tension ease from his back as they moved away from the shrieking laughter and bustling activity of the lobby. But just as they reached the theater door, there was a hard pain in his chest that made him gasp, as if all the air had been punched out of his lungs. He fell to his knees and found that he couldn't breathe.

Max spun around when she heard Dorian gasp. He was on his knees, the water bottle rolling away down the hall. She thrust the cups she was holding into Finn's arms and knelt at Dorian's side.

"What's wrong?" she said. She moved to sit in front of him and grabbed his shoulders, lifting him up to look at his face. His eyes were bloodshot. "Dorian, what is it?" Panic crept in as she realized that he wasn't breathing. She turned around to look up at Finn, as if he would ever possibly know what to do.

He put down the popcorn and drinks and knelt at Dorian's side. Max watched him, could see his mind working as he reached out and laid his hand on Dorian's back. Finn wound up and *smacked* him as hard as he could, in the center of his back, and Dorian coughed violently. He gasped and clutched at Max. She held his hands as he gulped in air and steadied his breathing.

"What just happened?" Max said, incredulous.

Finn's mouth hung open as he stared. "I have no idea."

Dorian looked from Max to Finn, then sighed. "Finn. Thank you, nephew, I think you may have just saved my life."

Finn just nodded, as if to say, *Of course, why wouldn't I?*

"You good?" Finn asked.

"Yes." Dorian looked at Max. "Could I talk to you, alone, for a second?"

Finn gathered their snacks and headed into the theater with some hesitation. As he went, he glanced at Max and she heard his voice say, *Be careful. You know how his temper can flare up when he feels weak.*

When he was gone, Dorian moved to sit against the wall, letting his head fall back against it. He looked thoroughly exhausted.

"I know that, lately, more often than not, I've been... distant and angry." Max sat in front of him and listened. "I hope you know that I don't mean it. To lash out. It just happens, sometimes, and I can't stop it."

Max watched as a damaged sort of hysteric look came over his face. It was as if he could feel millions of secrets bubbling out through his throat and could do nothing to keep them inside. She could see the truth in his eyes, knew that he was baring his soul, spilling a dark secret he'd chosen to share only with her.

"At night," he continued, "I don't dream." His voice shook. "I see images of alternate pasts, futures, presents. I hear voices whispering to me, saying awful things, telling me horrible lies, asking me to do terrible things. Things I would never do. I've tried to make it stop, but I can't. No matter what I do, every night, it's all horror and fear, and pain. So much pain."

He crumbled forward and Max caught him. She'd never seen him like this, so broken down and vulnerable. He was so tense, as if he was afraid to relax, as if he would shatter to pieces if he did. But he had always been the strong one, the fierce one, the soldier. Seeing him like this broke Max's heart.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. Dorian was taken aback at first, before sliding his arms around her waist and pulling himself up against her. Max knew the feeling, that wanting of closeness, no matter how brief, no matter what the reason. She drew back her arms and pushed against his chest gently. He leaned back until his shoulders hit the wall, and he was lying against it, Max resting her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry," said Max. "I never know what to say. But I'm so sorry. I wish that there was something I could do to help you. I wish that I could make it stop, whatever it is. I can see that you've been suffering. I just want to help you."

Dorian chuckled softly, his hands tangled in her hair. "You are helping me right now."

When the movie was over, which Dorian and Max had only seen the last half of, the three of them shuffled out to the dark parking lot. It was going to be a long drive back through the city and up into the mountains. Max sometimes wished that she could just stay out here, in the woods



somewhere or in the city in some abandoned truck or something, instead of going home. She wished she could live the way her family used to; traveling and sleeping outside or crashing on couches, renting cheap hotel rooms. They were vagabonds. It had been fun.

Now, she rode in the passenger seat of Dorian's station wagon, with Finn snoring in the back, through the lights of the city toward the highway and the mountains.

Quiet music played from the stereo and Dorian was silent most of the way. Max had hoped to fall asleep on the ride home but found that she couldn't. Though she wasn't sure if it was because of the potholes in the road or Finn's snoring. Maybe both.

"You still haven't given me my birthday present," said Max.

Dorian nodded. "That's right. It's in the glovebox if you want to open it now. I was going to wait until later, but..." He trailed off. Max was already tearing open the glovebox to procure her gift.

It was a small square box, heavy, but hollow-feeling. It was wrapped in purple tissue paper and tied with a silver ribbon. A little tag affixed to the ribbon read *For Maxima, with love, from Dorian.*

She glanced at him, grinning as he drove along the highway, passing mountains and rivers and glimpses of the ocean to the other side. Behind them, the city lights shone brightly, falling into the background, drenched in night sky and clouds.

Max tore the paper from the box and slowly lifted the lid. Inside was a necklace, and on the thin silver chain was a small glass vial, which held a tooth. Not just a tooth, however. A long, sharp vampire fang.

Max gasped. "Dorian, where did you get this?"

"I found it," he said. "A long time ago. When I was young, before the war, and our family was vacationing out East. I found it in the street in Massachusetts, in a pile of ashes. There were two, but I sold one of them years ago. Its value will only increase with time."

Max laughed. "What a weird gift."

"But you love it," he said, "don't you?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I do."

The smell of smoke invaded her nostrils as she clasped the necklace around her neck. She and Dorian both peered ahead to see thick, black smoke billowing from the mountains. Dorian pressed harder on the gas pedal and they raced forward. There weren't many other cars on the road, but of the few that were, Dorian made it past them, swerving through traffic as he barreled down the street and onto the exit ramp toward home.

The stench was un bearable as they made it into the mountains. Finn coughed and sat up in the back seat, rubbing his eyes. “What’s burning?” he asked. He blinked and squinted out the windshield to see what the other two were seeing.

Max heard him gasp. She couldn’t look away from the smoke that rose ahead of them as the car sped up the thin drive that wound up the mountain to the Lazaar home. No one said a thing, time passed strangely; surging forward one moment and crawling by the next. They didn’t have to say anything. There was nothing else that could be burning. It was their home.

They reached the top of the mountain and had their worst fears confirmed. Flames had engulfed the entire home, and the guest house, too. Nothing was visible beyond the hot orange and yellow of the fire, the raging, billowing smoke, all gray and black, covering the sky. Max coughed, choking on the fumes of burning paint and plastic, all the furniture. Finn wept as he stared at the fire, knowing what they all knew. They could smell it; the blood, the flesh, the hair; all burning body parts. Everyone had been inside the house.

Dorian fell to his knees and let out the cry of a banshee. The pain, the anger, the sorrow and remorse and guilt that laced that cry tore Max apart inside. Her family was gone, and now Finn and Dorian’s family was, too. Everyone she loved was dying, two by two, and she had no idea how to make it stop.

It took hours for firefighters to arrive, and by the time they did, the fire was nearly out. It had burnt everything there was to burn. There was nothing left but dust and rubble. A week later, they’d known beyond a shadow of a doubt that both Grace and Sonny were burned alive. The family taking up residence in the guest house were dead, too, all five of them. There was nothing to be salvaged, nothing that survived the fire. Nothing that told them who had done this, either. Everything was gone. Everything and everyone. It was just the three of them, now. The only thing left of the Lazaar empire was the Alpha’s scrawny son, his unstable younger brother, and a Viteri.

Dorian left it to Finn to decide what their next move was, though it had torn him apart to do so. Every fiber of his being told him to take charge, to claim his brother’s proverbial throne, to take his rightful place as Alpha. But it wasn’t his place, it was Finn’s. It had been promised to Finn since the day he was born, and Dorian wasn’t going to take that away from his nephew. If only he’d known that Finn didn’t want the

responsibility in the first place. The last thing he wanted was to lead a pack, and especially not one like this; mismatched, inherited chunks of other dead packs.

Max hadn't protested the idea of rebuilding on the same land, but only because it took Finn nearly a month to make the decision. She figured that whoever burned the first house down would just come back and burn this one down, too, but Dorian seemed to like the idea of staying there, the land they grew up on, *home*.

With lots of help, a smaller house was built where the old one used to be, and it was the perfect size for the three of them. They moved in, and now that the first task was done with, Max was ready to move on. She was ready to find out who took their life away. But Finn just wanted to move on, recruit, explore their options, take their time to mourn and adjust.

Max knew that if she stayed still for too long, she would lose her mind. She had to *do* something, had to have a job to do, or else she found herself thinking of all that she'd lost, that they'd all lost, and how on earth they were supposed to move on. She couldn't see any glimmer of her future, and it was terrifying.

She laid in bed one night, staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of the new house settling. They'd lived there for only a few weeks when Dorian's nightmares began. He'd always had nightmares, and horrible ones, but never had he screamed and thrashed, calling out for help, half-shifting in his sleep.

Max heard him whispering that first night and crept to his door. She listened. *Please. Please.* He was begging for something. But who was he talking to? *I don't want to hurt anyone. Please. Don't make me hurt them.*

Max's skin prickled with goosebumps all over, her stomach turned to stone. She knocked gently on the door, but he didn't hear her. He whispered again, a cry coming up his throat. *PLEASE.* And then he started to scream.