

Chapter Seven - The Reunion

Harrod

When my dad returned from work that night, he called me into his room.

“Harrod,” he began. “Have you given any thought to what we talked about the other day?”

“I thought it was a dream, or that you were joking,” I said.

“Tell me, Harrod,” he said in an ominous tone. “In all the time you have known me, do I come across as a person who jokes or fucks around with people?”

I shook my head.

“Then why would I joke about who we are?”

“It’s just hard to believe, to take in all this supernatural stuff just because you say so.”

“Very well,” he said. “You will head to the farmlands tomorrow. I’ll let Grandpa know you’re coming. I am sure you’ll be excited to see your brother. The next full moon is not for another three weeks. You will have plenty of time to understand and get used to things. As you have implied, you will believe things when you see them.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said. I had always wanted to go to the farmlands, but my dad had never allowed me. Now that I could actually go, I wasn’t sure whether I was excited or not.

“I am. I’ll send in your clearance early. You leave at noon tomorrow. It’s best to get there while the sun is out. Pack your things.”

“Okay,” I said, excited.

Around 11:30 the next day, Gabe knocked on my door. “Sir, the jet will be ready to depart in half an hour. I have already loaded your bags.”

I walked down the stairs and across the gardens to the runway. The heat was radiating from the dark asphalt, as though there was water boiling underneath.

After the security swipe, the officers cleared me to go. I hopped on board and prepared for a reunion with my brother. I wondered what he would be like, how tall he'd be, whether he had missed me, what his personality would be like, etc.

I fell asleep soon after take-off. When I woke up, I headed to the pilot's cabin.

"Drew? I didn't know you could fly planes."

"It's how your father prefers it," he said.

"And why is there no hostess on board?"

"Your father's instructions."

"Weird," I said.

"Oh, you have no idea," he said savagely. "Enjoy the view," he said. "We're almost there."

I went back to my seat and opened the shutter. All I saw down below were snow-capped mountains and jumbo trees. If I didn't know better, I'd wager we were in the Swiss Alps, but it takes a lot longer to get there, so I knew we were still in the States.

"Buckle up," said Drew, over the speakers. "It's gonna get bumpy."

We landed on a small runway in a clearing. Drew opened the door and ushered me out. "I have to head back. They'll be here soon."

"Who will be here?" I asked. "Where am I, Drew? There's nothing here."

"Your Grandpa has been alerted of your arrival. He'll come pick you up."

Drew unloaded my luggage and left it a little off the runway, then got back into the plane, nodded to me and closed the door. I watched as he turned the plane around, taxied and flew off, disappearing into the clouds. Then I looked around. The runway was just a small patch of road that led nowhere. There were no roads or buildings around. I was standing in a forest on a mountain surrounded by trees. The trees looked familiar, like the giant ones I saw in my dreams, but the place was different.

"Hello," I hollered into the emptiness around me. "Is there anyone here?"

There was a rustling in the trees and the distant howl of a wolf.

“Grandpa,” I shouted again, the word tasting strange in my mouth. I couldn’t really remember the last time I talked to him or saw him. I’d probably seen him back when Harrison was with us. I almost wanted to run into the woods, out of the clearing, but I stayed where I am. I pulled out my phone to call my dad but there was no service here.

Then I heard more howls, closer this time, more terrifying. I took a step back and looked around, looking for some tree to climb up in case wild animals attacked. In the distance, I saw two figures approaching. I couldn’t tell whether they were human or not. The white clouds were close to the ground, reducing the visibility.

A man with white hair approached, with a woman who seemed to be in her early forties.

“Harrod,” he shouted, arms opening wide.

“Grandpa?”

“It’s been so long,” he said, hugging me tightly. He was surprisingly strong for his age. “Oh, boy, I have waited for this for so long.” He kissed me on the cheek, and I pulled back.

“How are you?”

“I must be a stranger to you,” he said. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten me. You sound so formal.”

“That’s natural,” I said. “You just disappeared from my life.”

“You’ll learn we aren’t big on formalities here, boy.” Then he looked at the woman standing next to him. “This is Mishayev. She’ll be your guide and trainer here and will see to all your needs.”

Mishayev smiled and shook my hand firmly. Her hair was a mix of gray and black streaks, and I couldn’t tell whether it is white with black streaks or the other way around. She looked intimidating.

“Let’s head back to the village,” he said. “It’s gonna get dark any time now.”

There was nothing to guide us, no landmarks, no signs, not even a trail. But Grandpa and Mishayev seemed to know their way and went through the woods like expert navigators, toward what they call The Den.

When I heard the word Den, all I could think of is stone caves, like the ones I’d seen in *The Jungle Book*. After fifteen minutes of ambling through the woods, we

reached a large fence, thick as prison bars, with two guys wearing fur coats standing guard inside. They let us in and Grandpa turned to me.

“So, first things first. Stay away from the fences, they are high voltage. We aren’t immune to electricity. Don’t go outside without talking to me first. Our Den is vast, so you won’t have to go out. There’s nothing for you outside anyway. You are safe only as long as you are inside the fenced boundary.”

“Okay.”

The trees inside the fence were sparse, taller and mostly crooked, forming a roof over the clearing. There were wooden cabins here and there, with smoke emitting from the chimneys. A large fireplace was set in what seems like a sitting area, and a few guys sitting around the fire drinking. Even here the spirit of the holidays had reached. Someone had hung up a large wreath over the opening of one of the cabins. Elsewhere I saw mistletoe bunches hanging from the branches. I spied a red Santa cap even and I could have sworn I heard someone singing carols. There was a deer suspended above the fire on a stick to cook.

There was a great hustle bustle all around, with some children running wild and playing. But my eyes were fixed on a guy walking towards us. The hairs on my arms stuck up as if I’d been electrocuted as he came closer. I looked into his eyes. There was something about them, something familiar. My soul trembled when I saw him and tears welled up in my eyes. It was as if I was getting something that I never even knew I longed for.

He was the same height as me. He was wearing a fur coat, which looked as though he made it himself. He picked up the pace when he saw me and jogged toward us. Unlike the movies, nothing dramatic happened. He looked at my grandpa with innocent eyes.

“Grandpa, I don’t really—” I began.

“Grandpa?” the guy said, a look of surprise and shock on his face. His mouth moved but no words came out, as his eyes fixed on me.

It had to be him. I knew it was him. Tears were running down my cheeks.

“Harrison?”

Chapter Eight - The Training

Harrod

In the days that followed, Harrison and Grandpa familiarized me with the area, the family history and, yes, werewolves. Harrison and I were catching up on each other's lives. There was a slight awkwardness between us, but there was a force that drew us to each other. The brotherly bond we had, it seemed, never died or broke. Cellphones didn't work here, but there was a landline. I talked to Siobhan almost every night. It seemed like things were going somewhere. She wanted to meet and asked me where I was, but I just told her I was visiting my Grandpa. I had never pictured myself living in a forest, but now that I was there it wasn't not so bad. I just wished Siobhan could be there. During my second week, when we sat by the fire, my Grandpa told me that I was a late bloomer, but it was time for me to unleash the inner wolf. Somehow, in spite of everything, I didn't really believe any of this.

"So, Harrod," said Grandpa, as we sat by the fire and roasted the day's game. "Are you still having those dreams?"

"It's funny," I said. "I almost forgot about those. I haven't had any since coming here."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You are where you are supposed to be."

"Time to show him," said Harrison.

"He needs time," said Grandpa.

But Harrison got up, doffed his clothes and stood naked before us.

"What are you doing?" I asked. No one around the fire was surprised by him getting naked. They all acted like it was normal.

Then Harrison started jerking, bending out of shape, his limbs twisting at unnatural angles. He yowled, but ten seconds later he had transformed into a wolf. I was gobsmacked. I looked at Grandpa, at everyone around me, and no one found this weird.

"Harrison, you are freaking me out," I said, in a panicked voice.

Grandpa patted me on the shoulder, and then he followed my brother's lead. One by one they all shifted and I was surrounded by wolves. I looked up at the sky, at the thin moon. It was like *Déjà vu*, exactly like my dreams, except that the full moon was missing. Mishayev came out from behind a tree and told me that it was time to start my training.

"Everything will be easy, boy," she said. "The only part that's going to suck, and you know that I don't exaggerate things, will be the first shifting."

"As in?"

"As in, come full moon you will shift into a werewolf. None of us can keep ourselves from shifting during a full moon. Why do you think your dad comes here every full moon?"

"To hunt," I said. "It's just once a month, randomly. He never said anything about the full moon."

"The full moon doesn't follow your calendar dates. Anyway, even a person as strong as your father can't resist it. You will be coming with him from now on."

"Do all werewolves have to be here every full moon?"

"No, they don't," she replied politely. She thought for a moment. "But after what happened with Harrison and your mother, we believe it is for the best if they are."

"What happened that night?"

"Your father used to lock himself in his study during full moons. Your mother had a spare key because she was working on renovating the study."

"Then?"

"This one night she had forgotten something in there. She unlocked the door and there he was, shifting. Your brother was in her arms. They saw the whole thing, the complete shift from man to wolf. She lost it after that. We tried to talk some sense into her, but she was hell-bent on getting the word out. But then she lost it completely."

"Why did you take Harrison?"

"Harrison was young. Your Grandpa believed that we could prevent serious trauma by bringing him here. Instead of traumatizing him, it would just open a door into a new dimension. I can remember the time when he came here, he was so quiet and meek. Look at him now! It's worked out well. She-wolves throw themselves at him."

“This is too just too much,” I said, and walked off into the woods. I found a quiet place near the fence boundary and looked outside, into the forest. It felt like I was losing my sanity, and I wished Siobhan was there. In the last two weeks, we had only been able to talk on the landline, and boring as it may sound, we had connected. Our ideas about life were similar, and although I’d never thought about marriage before, I believed that if I ever tied the knot, it would be with her. She got me. She was raised in a similar environment to me.

There was a rustle in the bushes. I turned around and saw a wolf staring at me with his bright, yellow eyes, fangs bared. I knew better than to be scared of it, but it was intimidating. It lurched forward to attack me, but shifted into Harrison.

“You scared me, man!” I panted, my heart pounding. “Why did you try to attack me?”

“I didn’t,” he said, grinning. “When shifting back, we just lurch forward like that.”

“Weird,” I said. “How did you find me?”

“I smelled you,” he said. “Your scent is new here, alien. Anybody can smell and track you anywhere on this entire mountain.”

“Right...”

“Come with me,” he said.

“Where?”

“I want to show you something.”

I followed him through the trees and the thorn bushes. There were paths inside the fence, covered with dirt and foliage. After slipping and crawling through this mountainous terrain, we came out on a lake. It looked ominous. The water was dark and still, and the visibility lower than other areas because of a thick fog. Large rocks and boulders surrounded half of the lake.

“This is where I used to hide when I was new here,” Harrison said.

“This looks dangerous.”

“You should come here during the day,” he said. “It’s an excellent spot for basking in the sun. We all come here to relax. This is also where the Alphas used to mate.”

“Alphas?”

“Leaders of our pack.”

“You mean Grandpa comes here?”

“Grandpa isn’t the Alpha. Father was, but he never came here to mate, because mom didn’t know about any of this.”

“Who’s the Alpha now?” I asked.

“I am,” he said, grinning. “After your training is complete, you will become the new Alpha.”

“Oh no, I don’t want to—”

“You have to,” he said. “During your first fight, you will challenge me. And since I have to train you in fighting, you will sure as shit beat me.”

“I’d rather not,” I said.

“You don’t have a choice. If you don’t challenge me, they’ll think of you as a weakling. If you lose, same results. Grandpa says we have to establish authority or the wolves start acting out.”

Another wolf came out from the trees.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

“Mishayev,” Harrison said.

She lurched forward and, like Harrison, shifted into herself.

“Listen,” Harrison said to me. “Grandpa wants to train you slowly. He thinks you can’t handle it. But I know you, and I know you can. We want to speed up your training. Trust us, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

“Now, when you shift, don’t hurt either of us. We are both stronger than you think, and we’ll strike back. We won’t hold back.”

“What?”

“Once you shift,” he said, “remember not to let the wolf take over. Think of me, mom, dad, whoever.”

Mishayev threw a small stone at me, which hit me hard.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“Shift,” she said.

“How?”

Harrison threw another, hitting me on the forehead.

“This isn’t funny, guys. Stop it.”

“Shift,” she said, kicking me off my feet.

I fell to the ground. “Okay, stop it. You’re pissing me off now.”

“Shift,” he said, striking me with a stick.

“Fucking tell me how to shift.”

“Shift,” she hit me in the head.

“Shift,” he kicked me in the stomach.

“This is infuriating,” I shouted. I got up to punch Harrison, but he dodged me easily and kicked me in the shins.

“Shift,” Mishayev shouted again, tearing my shirt off and scratching my chest.

“Fucking bitch, stop it. Fuck off, both of you. Get away.”

“Shift,” she said, throwing a fistful of sand into my face.

My eyes watered and shut reflexively. I couldn’t see anything. I was panting now. All I heard was ‘Shift,’ and then I was being hit. The word ‘shift’ span in front of my vision, ringed in my ears, bounced in the darkness of my head. “Shift! Shift! Shift!”

My heart beat faster, like in the dreams. I could sense someone shifted. They bit my wrist, and blood oozed out. Anger rose up inside me, pulsing in my brain. I clenched my fists tightly.

“Shift.”

I tried to get up, got kicked, fell.

“Shift.”

The anger took over. I thought I was having a heart attack. I started moaning, my chest tightened, my lungs didn’t have enough air.

“Shift.”

I was in pain. I shouted, screamed, whimpered, moaned, shouted again, screamed again.

“Shift.” Another blow. Fuck, these assholes needed to—

I screamed like a bitch as my arms twisted and bended backward. My mouth felt strange, swollen. I couldn't speak. I heard them in my mind. “Shift. Shift. Shift.” My heart pounded in my ears, “Dhub, dhuk, dhub, dhuk, dhub.” I heard another heartbeat and another. What was happening?

“Shift.”

Fuck this.

I got on all fours and looked around. The sand had cleared and I could see better now, better than I could before, as though I was wearing night vision goggles. She was on the left, standing still. He was standing on the right, looking at me. I turned to him, ran on all fours, and pounced. He dodged and grabbed me by the paws. His lips moved, but I ignored him. I wanted to get back at him for hitting me. She grabbed me from the back, pulling hard on my fur, then span me around and hurtled me into the water.

I ran back, ready to attack. She grabbed me from behind again. He held my muzzle, said something. What was he saying? He held my what? Muzzle? What did he just say?

“Brother, come back. Harrod, focus. Remember. Take control.”

I stopped. He patted me, petted me like a dog. Then they shifted.

“You did well,” said Mishayev. I didn't say thank you. I was still furious.

We jumped into the lake, swam, then they showed me around. The dawn was breaking. The stench was unbearable. Mishayev called it ‘scent’.

“You'll get used to it,” she said.

We climbed the boulders and rested there, drying ourselves off. I thought of Siobhan. Tonight's episode kept me from talking to her.

“We'll continue the training tomorrow,” Harrison said.

We dried ourselves off and headed back to our cabins. I wondered what Siobhan would say about all this if she ever found out.

Once everyone was gone, I sneaked into Grandpa's cabin.

"Grandpa," I began. "There's this girl I'm seeing. I don't know what will happen if she finds out about all this."

"Son," he replied. "It is preferable if we choose from our own kind. But, if we don't, it is better to tell them, if they can be trusted. Your mother couldn't be trusted, or your father would've tried to convert her."

"Convert her? Into a werewolf?"

He laughed, and I realized I sounded like a five-year-old. "Yes," he said. "An Alpha's bite can do that."

We talked for a while as I learned more and more about my kind, then he went out and I returned to my cabin to sleep.