

Broken by One, Desired by All

C – 4

Zane's Point Of View

“Where the hell am I...?”

The words left my mouth before my eyes even opened. My voice sounded strange... oo smooth, too calm, like it didn't belong to someone who had been beaten within an inch of death.

I bolted upright with a gasp, cold sweat slicking my body as my chest rose and fell in heavy, panicked breaths.

But something was wrong.

There was no pain.

No bruises. No blood. No broken ribs. My body... violated, stomped on, nearly left for dead, felt untouched. Healed. Whole. I wiggled my fingers, flexed my toes. Everything moved. Everything worked.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be.

I blinked and looked around, heart hammering like a prisoner banging on steel bars.

The room was... breathtaking.

Polished marble floors stretched out beneath a ceiling painted like the night sky, stars glittering as if they were alive. Silk curtains swayed with a breeze I couldn't feel. Warm firelight danced from a golden hearth, flickering over the emerald-green wallpaper and casting shadows across fine oak furniture.

It was the kind of room reserved for royalty. Not someone like me. Not a bullied omega. Not the pack's shame.

I glanced down at myself. I was no longer in my bloodied clothes. A soft tunic of black and silver clung to my body, comfortable, almost enchanted in its warmth. My hands trembled as I slowly reached for the bag on the bed beside me.

It was there.

The pocket watch.

Exactly where I'd last held it. Untouched. Still ticking softly like it always had. My hand trembled as I picked it up. I pressed it to my chest, eyes welling with tears.

"Father... what is this?"

The door creaked.

I flinched, my grip tightening instinctively. The memory of fists, of laughter as blood ran down my lip, made my breath catch.

But instead of pain, a voice spoke.

"I see you're awake. That's good. The others were beginning to wonder if you'd ever come around."

I turned sharply.

A man... no, something more than a man, stood in the doorway. He had a presence that made the room shrink. His long, indigo robe shimmered with moving patterns... runes, glyphs, alive and glowing across the fabric. His eyes were violet, too bright, too deep, and his silver-streaked hair fell to his shoulders like threads of moonlight.

"Who are you?" I asked, barely able to speak. He smiled slightly. "I'm Professor Rhyel. A teacher from the School of Ardent Magic."

I stared at him. "Magic... school?"

He stepped inside, his every movement silent, like he wasn't touching the floor at all. "Yes. You activated a keepsake. That light you saw was its magic responding to your despair. It brought you here... a transfer station for all chosen candidates."

"Chosen?" I echoed, stunned. "I didn't choose anything."

"You didn't have to," Rhyel said gently, walking to the foot of the bed. "The magic chose you."

"I don't understand," I said slowly, gripping the sheets like they might anchor me. "The last thing I remember, they... they tried to kill me."

"And they would have succeeded," Rhyel interrupted gently, "if the keepsake you carried hadn't activated."

My breath hitched. "...Keepsake?"

He nodded toward the pocket watch still clutched in my hand.

"That object," he said, "was embedded with an ancient sigil of blood and light, crafted by a powerful spellcaster, likely your mother. When your body reached the brink of death, the watch sensed the critical danger. It triggered an emergency transfer."

"To here?"

"This station is known as the Vestibule. A midpoint between the mortal realm and the Ardent Institute," Rhyel explained. "All Chosen arrive here once their keepsakes activate. It's designed to heal you, prepare you, and assess your magical compatibility."

I stared at him in disbelief. "So... I'm not dead?"

"You are very much alive," he said, lips quirking. "Though not the same boy who was left bleeding in the dirt."

I couldn't breathe for a moment. I looked at my hands. At my unmarred skin. At the room around me.

"How is this even real?" I whispered.

Rhyel tilted his head. "It's not. Not entirely. This space exists between worlds, where magic bends the rules. Think of it as a veil, a cocoon. Tomorrow, you and the others will be transported to the Institute to begin your awakening."

"Others?"

"Yes," he answered.

I took out the pocket watch.

It felt heavier than usual, like the truth now weighed it down.

I turned it over slowly, fingers brushing the old silver casing, tracing the tiny engraved markings I had always assumed were nothing more than decoration.

I had stared at this thing a thousand times as a kid. Father said it was my mother's. He never told me it was more than a keepsake.

He never said it could save my life. He never said it would pull me into a world I didn't know existed.

He never said anything about her death, either, only that it was "an accident." A phrase he always muttered through clenched teeth, with eyes that never quite met mine. And I had believed him, because I was young. Because I needed to believe something.

But now... Now that story was falling apart, like a poorly built wall finally crumbling.

"My mom died," I said, voice flat. "And no one told me why. No one told me how."

"I'll go," I said quietly.

Rhyel smiled. But before he could speak again, I raised my head.

"But I'm not just going there to learn magic," I added, voice stronger this time. "I want to uncover the truth about my parents... and everything they hid from me."

He studied me for a long second. Then that knowing smile returned, edged with something that felt... ancient.

"Then you'll fit in quite well," he murmured. "Most of our students are running from something."

Running, I thought bitterly. No. I wasn't running anymore. I was chasing. Chasing the truth.

I looked back down at the watch.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

"I still can't believe this is real," I muttered to myself, eyes wide as our group ascended the marble steps.

The morning sun bathed the world in gold. Everything shimmered. We walked through a courtyard so vast it could swallow my old village three times over. Floating lanterns hovered in the air, each bearing the crest of the Ardent Flame, an ancient symbol that pulsed faintly with magical heat. A soft breeze swept through the cherry-blossom trees lining the path, their petals glowing faintly like living sparks.

Around me, there were dozens of us... young men and women, all chosen by keepsakes, their eyes flicking between excitement, fear, and awe. Some chatted in hushed tones, others walked in stiff silence.

We were heading to the Temple of Ignis, the sacred hall where the first magical awakening happened centuries ago. Today, it was where we'd be tested.

Where our fate would be decided.

Professor Rhyel led the way, his robe gliding across the stone with quiet authority. The other instructors followed behind, all cloaked in mystery, their gazes unreadable.

I clutched my mother's pocket watch tightly in my fist. It hummed softly against my palm. Somehow, it gave me courage. Even when my legs trembled.

We reached a massive obsidian archway carved with golden runes, and the Temple came into view.

I stopped.

My breath left my body.

It was a masterpiece of magic and architecture. Spires floated in the air, linked by bridges of glowing energy. At its center, a towering dome pulsed with a radiant flame contained in glass, a living fire, flickering as if it had a soul. The entire temple breathed magic. It tasted like ozone in the air, like lightning barely held in a cage.

I couldn't move. Couldn't blink. Couldn't think.

So I didn't notice the boy in front of me slowing down.

Until I walked right into him.

"Oof...!"

He spun around with a snarl. "Watch it, mutt."

My eyes met his.

He was tall, lean, with sandy blond hair and piercing green eyes that glowed faintly with wolf aura. His build was sharp, athletic, the kind of power that didn't have to shout to be noticed. He wore a cloak with the crest of the Silvertooth Pack, a notorious warrior clan from the Western territories.

And from the look on his face, he recognized me.

"You're him," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"...Me?"

He stepped closer, his nostrils flaring. "The half-blood. The one who activated that relic and took my friend's spot." I frowned. "I didn't take anything. I was brought here."

He scoffed. "Don't play dumb. You think they let anyone in? The number of students who can enter through the heirloom gate is limited. Once it's full, everyone else gets locked out until next year."

I swallowed. So it was true. My arrival... had shut someone else out.

"I didn't know," I said quietly. "But everyone deserves a chance..."

"Don't give me that heroic underdog crap," he snapped. "You shouldn't even be here. Half-human filth, dragging the name of werewolves through the mud."

My hands clenched at my sides. "The awakening hasn't even happened yet. You don't know what I'm capable of."

“Oh, I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

He grabbed my collar so fast I didn’t have time to react.

And then... CRACK.

His fist connected with my jaw. Pain exploded through my head. I stumbled back, stars bursting behind my eyes, but I didn’t fall.

I wiped the blood from my lip and looked up.

“You done?” I hissed, voice shaking.

He sneered. “Not even close.”

He lunged forward and rammed his shoulder into me, slamming me against one of the pillars. The breath flew from my lungs.

I tried to fight back, threw a punch, weak and wild, but he caught it midair and twisted my arm behind my back with a brutal snap.

“Aww, poor mutt trying to act tough,” he whispered near my ear. “Do you know how many real werewolves are dying to be here? And yet they let you in.”

With one hand still gripping my wrist, he slammed a fist into my gut.

Once. Twice. Three times.

My knees buckled.

I tasted bile.

I collapsed to the stone path, clutching my side, gasping. The others were watching. Most did nothing. A few turned away. Cowards.

He stepped in front of me, towering. A shadow blocking out the sun.

“You’re nothing,” he snarled. “You’re weak. Broken. You should’ve died in that forest.”

He knows... And this bastard blamed me for surviving. He raised his foot, ready to kick me in the ribs. “You don’t belong here. And I’m going to make sure you leave broken.”

I closed my eyes.

And then... BOOM.

A pulse of pure energy erupted around me. Blinding light. Runes igniting. A crackling, burning sound like fire tearing through glass.

A magic circle flared beneath me... intricate, ancient, blazing gold. Symbols I didn't understand rotated in perfect harmony. The air grew thick, humming with power.

The boy screamed as his foot met the edge of the circle, and was repelled by a force so strong he was thrown back ten feet, crashing into the wall with a grunt.

Gasps echoed around us.

Instructors rushed forward.

But all I could do was stare as the magic circle around me pulsed brighter and brighter, a dome forming from its core, sheer energy shielding me like a living thing.