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BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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EXCERPTED FROM  
**THE LIVING BOOK OF LORE . . .**

**The Lore**

*“ . . . and those sentient creatures that are not human shall be united in one stratum, coexisting with, yet secret from, man’s.”*

- Most are immortal and can regenerate from injuries, killed only by mystical fire or beheading.
- Their eyes change with intense emotion, often to a breed-specific color.

**The Lykae Clan**

*“A proud, strapping warrior of the Keltai People (or Hidden People, later known as Celts) was taken in his prime by a maddened wolf. The warrior rose from the dead, now an immortal, with the spirit of the beast latent within him. He displayed the wolf’s traits: the need for touch, an intense loyalty to its kind, an animal craving for the delights of the flesh. Sometimes the beast rises. . . .”*

- Each Lykae possesses the Instinct, an inner guiding force, like a voice whispering in one’s mind.
- Mate for life. Over eternity, they seek their fated one above all things, revering matchhood as other species do gods.
- Royal seat is Kinevane in the Scottish Highlands.

**The Ubus Peoples**

*“Descendants of demons, reapers of pleasure. Thrice in one’s arms, forever enslaved. Separation begets grave sickness, yet only through death can the envenomed be freed.”*

- Female: succubus. Male: incubus.
- Derive nourishment from the sexual enjoyment of others.
- Possess the ability to sexually madden their victims. A succubus uses *stren*; an incubus *stav*.

- After a third mating, they form a bond with their conquests, a mystical tie called *venom*.

### **The Accession**

*“And a time shall come to pass when all immortal beings in the Lore, from the Valkyrie, vampire, Lykæ, and demon factions to the witches, shifters, fey, and sirens . . . must fight and destroy each other.”*

- A kind of mystical checks-and-balances system for an ever-growing population of immortals.
- Two major alliances: the Pravus Rule and the Vertas League.
- Occurs every five hundred years. Or right now . . .



## PROLOGUE

### *Woods of Murk, Scotland*

CENTURIES AGO . . .

**I**n a dark forest, in a dour land, stood an enchanted cottage. Within it, Uilleam MacRieve was about to bicker with his mate, Lady Ruelle.

Yet again.

As the blizzard outside gathered its strength, Will sat on the edge of her bed, wearily preparing for battle.

“Just once more, my love,” Ruelle sighed, letting the silk cover dip to reveal her bare breasts.

In the past he’d have stared agog at that generous flesh; now he scowled at her antics. “You know I canna stay.” Always with these antics. Could she not tell how deep she’d already drawn from him this eve?

“’Tis hours till dawn.” She rose up on her knees to purr at his ear, “I needn’t keep you long.” Her words were accented with the flavor of distant realms.

In these northern lands of the Lykae, Ruelle was a rarity, a foreign female who dressed in lace and silks and had no skill with a sword. She lived alone here in the Woods of Murk—a place of fairy rings and curses, of portals to different planes and creatures of old that even Lykae feared.

Only a dare from other boys had coaxed Will’s feet into that eerie forest the first time.

“Once more?” He rose to wash, doubting that he had another bout in him. Nay, not a bout—that would imply two contenders. “And after that, you’ll demand yet another.” Even if he was physically capable, he needed to get back to Conall Keep before his family realized he was gone. “Already I’ve yielded to your wishes.”

At her basin, he gazed into her oversize mirror—his Ruelle could be a *tad* bit vain—and spied her behind him. In the firelight, her hair appeared burnished, her cheeks and lips rouged to match, the colors stark against her milk-white skin and gray eyes.

She pouted prettily. Everything she did was pretty, even lovemaking—unlike the trollops his older cousins routinely tugged in the hayloft.

Afterward, those wenches would be heavy-lidded with satisfaction, even as they looked like they’d just gone to war in the hay: faces and chests flushed from exertion, hair and clothing disheveled.

Ruelle never looked like that. With a pang, he admitted to himself that she had never been completely . . . fulfilled when he’d left her.

She often cajoled him to mate her again and again until he was exhausted. “Look at you—who can blame me?” she’d ask, explaining that his kind was like catnip to her, that his face alone made her sigh. One time he’d jested that she was trying to kill him, and she’d grown cross.

Sometimes being with her was like a swim in chill water—enlivening, until the deep threatened to pull you under. On occasion, he struggled to breathe when she had him beneath her, his lungs seeming to shrivel up.

Which was a shameful weakness. Ruelle was beautiful and sensual—any lad would count his blessings to be in her bed. And she was *his* mate. They were both sure of it.

“You could eat again.” She waved to indicate the banquet she’d prepared for him, sweets and delicacies that were rarely allowed at his home. He shook his head, had already eaten his fill.

In the beginning, she’d gotten him to glut himself. With a laugh, she’d pinched his slim fingers and declared him underweight.

Now he said, “Ruelle, *nay*. I’m leaving.”



“’Tis your own fault for being so tantalizing.” She ogled him as he washed thoroughly. Early on, she’d warned him that his family could smell her on him.

“You’re the one insisting that we keep this secret. If I could tell my da—”

“No! That’s not possible.” She paled beneath those tinted cheeks. “They will never accept what’s between us.”

“Then I must be there for chores.” He had work to do at sunrise, and his twin brother, Munro, was already suspicious of Will’s sneaking away late every other night.

“You come from one of the richest families in the land—the Sentinels, for gods’ sakes—and still your father makes you work like a serf?”

“Da believes it builds character,” Will said, pulling his tunic over his head. The garment was tight, hugging his chest and arms. He and his twin were both growing like weeds, too fast for the harried seamstress at Conall.

He gazed at his own reflection and ran a hand over his lean face. *Still no whiskers though?*

“Ah, Dùghlas MacRieve, the great Lord of Conall, says it builds character? Your father is mistaken—your character is already built! And finely too. You are a man in your own right.”

“*I know* I’m a man,” he averred, while thinking, *I might no’ yet be a man.*

Nay, of course he was. Whenever Will and Ruelle quarreled, he comprehended that he was truly maturing—a grown Lykae. Adults bickered; they had concerns and cares that the young did not.

Yet if he was grown, why couldn’t he satisfy her? A flare of anger took him by surprise. “If you have call to criticize my da, you should do it the Lykae way: to his face.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted them. Her species was made to love, never to fight.

The idea of Ruelle openly criticizing someone so much stronger was laughable.

As if on cue, her gray eyes misted with tears. She even cried prettily.

"You know I cannot do that, can never show my face to them. They will kill me, just for what I am."

His parents wouldn't necessarily welcome her into the pack with open arms, but surely Ruelle exaggerated about their reaction. "No Lykae would ever harm another's mate. We revere matchhood above all things."

"What if they don't believe what we know to be true?" She pulled the silk covers over her breasts defensively. "Why do you continue to argue with me?"

"Because keeping this secret for so long sits ill." Lately it'd been weighing on him more and more, but he'd at least wait until after his mam gave birth to her bairn before revealing his secret. She was a couple of months along, just starting to show. Her "three braw lads"—as she called her husband, Will, and Munro—all sensed she carried a daughter and were ecstatic about the fact. Mam wanted to call her Isla.

A wee lass to spoil? Even now Will's lips curled with anticipation. He and Munro could scarcely wait until she was old enough to learn how to hunt, to fish.

Aye, his family needed no tumult now. Best to get back. He quickly donned his boots. "We'll speak of this in the future."

"No, we will *not*." Her gray eyes flickered to jade green, usually the only sign that her emotions were running high. "If you can't respect my wishes in something so important, then do not return for four nights."

Will froze. The fire in the hearth crackled. The wind whipped snow against the windows. "You doona mean it."

"I do."

"Four!" he bit out in disbelief. "You'd punish me thus?" The longest he'd gone was three. He'd barely survived the sickness.

"I wish that you hadn't forced me to."

"*I* forced you?" Everything was always his fault. When he'd panicked during their first time making love and wanted to wait, she was not to be denied—and it was his fault for being "irresistible" to her. He'd wanted to bring home all the gifts she'd given him—mainly to lord them over his

twin—but she’d refused: “Your parents will suspect; it’s not *my* fault that you were born into a closed-minded family.”

And now he was to go the better part of a week without returning. At the thought of the agony he’d soon experience, his Lykae beast stirred. Though his da, uncles, and older cousins were training him to harness that wild force within him, Will unleashed it each time Ruelle mated him.

“One day, Ruelle, you will push me too far.”

“Oh? And then what will you do?” she asked with a triumphant look, for they both knew the truth.

He was bound to her for eternity. Doubly so—not just because she was his Lykae mate, but because of the tie he’d willfully borne after three visits to her bed.

He was fettered to her for the rest of his life. Or for the length of hers.

“But before you go, my love, I truly do need once more.”

With a painful surge, his exhausted body reacted against his will, readying for her to take. He grimaced, panic setting in, his breaths shallowing. “You told me you’d no’ use your strew again!” It was how she’d gotten him to mate her in the beginning. He shuddered to remember those times. A sickly feeling roiled in his gut as he struggled to withstand her, knowing how futile it was.

“Why fight me?” Eyes glowing green, she dropped the sheet. “Any male would kill to be with me.” She traipsed over and embraced him, pressing his face against her breast, against scented white flesh.

He couldn’t get enough air. “I canna—Ruelle, nay!” Already his beast was rising, protectively.

She pulled back, grasping his chin, hard. “Your eyes turn blue,” she said with a satisfied smile. “Your beast and I will take care of everything. Just as we always do.”

“You promised me!”

She pressed him down on her bed, then rose above him, the position she chose without fail. “Look at you, my love. Who could possibly blame me?”

And the deep dragged him down. . . .



*Conall Keep, Northern Outpost of the Woods of Murk*

THREE NIGHTS LATER

All day the sickness had grown worse until Will's body was a mass of pain. By midnight, he felt like his bones were breaking. Outside, the storm gusted winds, but the great Conall Keep was indifferent to them.

He wrapped his arms around himself, rocking over his damp sheets, praying he wouldn't be plagued with hallucinations this time.

No use fighting this. He would go to Ruelle tonight.

The idea of running for leagues through a blizzard in this condition made him shudder. Not to mention that he'd be entering the Woods alone, weak, in the middle of the night.

Fantastical creatures teemed in that forest, bloodthirsty beings from other realms.

Munro stirred in his nearby bed, as if sensing his twin's distress, even in sleep. Will envied Munro, who could remain snug in his bed, warm and safe within the impervious keep of their ancestors.

This place had been built by them for future Sentinels of the Woods, the warriors tasked with making sure the creatures of Murk never strayed beyond its boundaries—and that Lykae never ventured within.

When Will rose to dress, stabbing his legs into trews, Munro roused and sat up. "Where are you going?" He lit a candle, illuminating the room they shared.

"'Tis no concern o' yours."

A flash of hurt flickered in Munro's golden eyes—eyes exactly like his own, only . . . graver. Despite being identical twins, he and Munro had opposing personalities. Will was oft called impetuous like their mother, Munro solemn like their da.

"You used to tell me everything, Will."

Ruelle had warned against that. She'd helped him see Munro's jealous nature. Munro was envious of his twin, simmering with hatred toward his slightly older brother, the heir.

*I'm much more mature for my age, and Munro knows it, canna stand it.*

In fact, she'd helped Will see the faults in all his friends.

"Are you going into the Woods?" Munro asked, pulling on his own breeches. "To see that female in the odd cottage?"

A stark contrast to the dreary woods, Ruelle's home was brightly painted, with intricate eaves and spindles, as if from a fey's dream. And Munro had never even seen the inside! It was not only fantastical, but *mystical*—she'd told him it had been standing for centuries, immune to decay.

"What do you know of her?" Will asked, struggling to focus his vision as another wave of pain hit. The tunic he'd just donned was already moist with sweat.

"I know the tales surrounding her."

"That she's a hideous old crone who lures youths to their doom? That she fattens them up, then feeds on their flesh? The rumors are false." The fact that Ruelle cooked feasts for him and then used his body for nourishment wasn't lost on Will. "Are you going to tell Da?" Or, gods forbid, their mother. No she-wolf could be fiercer than Ailis MacRieve.

'Twas one thing that Will had found his mate in a different species; 'twas another that he'd been lying to all of them.

"No need," Munro said quietly. "Mam and Da already suspect you've been sneaking out."

"Because you told them!"

Again came that flash of hurt, like a creature kicked in the flank. "You ken I would no' do that, brother."

Will . . . believed him. At these times, when Munro continued to prove loyal to him, Will couldn't reconcile all the things Ruelle had told him.

His beast was cut from the same soul as Munro's; it longed to run beside his brother's forever. Surely Munro felt the same way?

"What has happened to you, Will? Why do you never talk to me? Why do you never play or laugh anymore?" Munro looked wary and vulnerable—a mere boy.

*Do I look so young?* "It's complicated. Just let me handle this as I need to, and I'll be back soon." Will finished dressing. "Mayhap we'll talk then."

Without a backward glance, he hastened from the room to descend

the main stairs and head out into the blustery night. He'd just felt the first crunch of snow beneath his boots when he heard, "And where might you be off to, Uilleam Andriu MacRieve?"

Mam. *Oh, shite*. He turned to face her, trying to disguise how bad his shakes had gotten.

She emerged from the shadows, joining him under the swirling snow. Her cheeks were pink, her doe-brown eyes narrowed. "You were too ill to come down for meals today—or to do your chores—and now I find you stealing away in the middle of the night?"

He had waited too long, should've made a run for Ruelle's last night. If Mam kept him from her tonight . . . Much longer, and he'd grow crazed. A hallucination danced at the edges of his vision, the dark closing in. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other; both felt like they'd snap at any second.

She tilted her head. "You go to meet a lass, no doubt. Thirteen is too young, son. Your da will tell you the same."

"I know, Mam. I'm sorry." *Ah, gods, my bones*.

She cupped his clammy face, her eyes going wide. "Ach, my Uilleam, you're burning up!"

"I have to go!" He could almost scent Ruelle's perfumes. Could almost taste the rouge with which she adorned her skin.

He could all but feel her milk-white arms wrapping around him. "Can you no' trust me, Mam?"

"You're sick, no' thinking clearly. You canna be out in the snow; you need to be abed."

"Please, just go back inside and doona worry over this. I'll return anon."

She snatched his arm and yelled over her shoulder, "Dugh! Come out here! *Now*."

Will heard two sets of footsteps stomping down the stairs into the main hall. Da and Munro.

Desperation boiled up inside him. "I've got to go!" He flung his arm free, shoving against his mother.

Mam tripped, falling down into the hard-packed snow. She gaped up at him, her eyes watering. “Will?”

He was horrified. He would rather die than harm her. “I’m so sorry! Have I hurt you? The babe?”

Her hands went to her belly as if to protect the wee girl. *Protect Isla from me?*

But then Mam’s tears dried. Her inner beast began to rise, her eyes turning ice blue. Never, never, a good sign. Shite!

“You’ve no’ hurt me, boy,” she growled, her fangs lengthening. “Best worry for your own hide.”

Just as Da and Munro made the doorway, she snapped to Will, “Hie your arse inside. Now!”

Da helped Mam to her feet, glancing from her to his son with his jaw slackened. “Have you lost your bluidy mind, Will?”

Aye! Will glanced over his shoulder toward the Woods of Murk, imagining the relief, the end of this pain. He whimpered—

Da’s massive hand clamped Will’s neck. “In you go!” He squired Will to a seat before Conall’s great hearth fire. After getting a better look at his son’s face, he added another log to the flames.

With his tall form outlined by the flickering light, Da looked even more intimidating than usual. Will swallowed, darting a glance at his twin.

Munro’s slow nod and steady gaze seemed to say, *We’ll get through this. Keep your head.* It helped.

Their mother crossed to sit close by her mate. Mam and Da were always near each other, as if their beasts were tethered with an invisible leash.

Her ire was clearly fading as she stared at Will’s sweating face. “Dugh, we need to send for a physic.”

“I fear I know what’s wrong with him.” Da turned to him. “Where were you going, son?” He seemed to hold his breath.

Will couldn’t lie to his face. And more, he had to trust what he knew of his father’s character—and Lykae law—over Ruelle’s overwrought predictions. *No Lykae will harm another’s mate.* “I was going to see my female, a woman who lives in the Woods.”

Silence reigned. His words seemed to hang in the air.

When Da exhaled a stunned breath and Mam looked stricken, a marked unease stole over Will.

Ruelle had predicted that they wouldn't understand; she'd never mentioned that they'd be *disgusted*.

Turning to Da, Mam muttered, "Too young, ah gods, he's too young." She rose unsteadily to gather a blanket. Wrapping it around Will's shoulders, she said, "Warm yourself, lad. You've a long night ahead of you." He noticed with dread that her eyes watered once more.

"*Why* am I too young? Humans wed when they're no' much older than I." Of course, he'd prepared these arguments, fashioning them from those he'd heard Ruelle say.

"Humans must!" Da began to pace. "In these harsh lands, they scarcely live longer than your age! But you, Will, you can potentially *live forever*. In any case, you're far too young to be in the clutches of one like her."

This was his mate they spoke of! Surely she was.

"Do you no' know what she is?" Da spat the words: "She's a *succubus*."

"Ruelle told me this, right off?"

"Aye, but do you understand what the word means, what her kind do?"

Will's eyes darted. "It means that we are so connected we'll suffer without each other." After three nights of mating a succubus, a male would take on her essence, her mystical venom, binding himself to her until death.

Mam said, "It means she's a parasite." Her tears fell. "One who sank her claws into my lad." He'd never seen his mother cry before this eve. "She's envenomed you. 'Tis why you have sickness."

"Then I need to reach her. It's been three days. If I'm feeling this way, then so is she."

Da shook his head. "Unlike you, she can take another. I'd be shocked if she does no' have a stable of lovers. Even in the Woods, she could lure others."

Impossible. Ruelle loved Will alone.

Da finally sank down beside Mam. "How long have you been seeing her?" Will hesitated.

In a tone brooking no disobedience, Da snapped, "How—long?"

Forcing his shoulders back, Will answered, "I first went to her cottage four years ago."

Da shot back to his feet. His mother pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to stifle a retching sound. Had there been a glimmer of rage in Da's eyes? A glimpse of his beast? Never had Da unleashed it before them.

Should Will be denied his mate just because he and Ruelle were born in differing times? How could his parents react so violently to something that was natural? They were not usually judgmental.

Will hugged the blanket tighter, struggling to hide his shudders. Pain was like a drum inside him, beating him, breaking him. His bones . . .

"My precious lad," Mam choked out, rising to her feet. "'Tis a vile perversion," she told Da. "I doona understand how he survived her hungers when so young! He's far from his immortality."

Survived? Could he have *died*? All Will had done was bed a beautiful woman.

"His beast is stronger than most, a pure alpha," Da said. "Like Munro's. I've spoken of this before."

Will remembered. Da had sounded both proud yet fearful at the same time. The beast could be a blessing and a curse, lending strength but robbing reason.

"Did your beast rise up when you were with her?"

Will absently nodded.

"Otherwise, she would've killed you—a fact she well knew, son."

Nay, 'twas not true. Nothing could make him believe Ruelle had ever jeopardized his life. She could be demanding, pushing him to his limits, but only because he was strong and could take it. He *was* strong for his age. She'd repeatedly said so.

"Look how our son shakes even now. Her venom's work. This must be answered!" Mam declared.

"It *will* be, love. I set out for the Woods at dawn. I'll petition for entry. The Elders will grant it before they let a pup suffer."



*Answered?* Will still didn't quite comprehend their crime. His older cousins were forever tumbling females, and they'd started when they were not much older than Will was now.

*But I started earlier still.* He glanced at Munro, seeking an ally. Munro cast him a baffled look.

"Nay, Dùghlas!" Mam's own beast was rising once more. "I know her kind! She'll be winsome and manipulative, and she'll twist you too. The men of this pack have said for ages they would run her out of the forest, and naught comes of it."

"They're no' our woods to patrol!" Da ran his hand over his face. "And she's never targeted our young before! She's never envenomed any of our males. Our lad will be free of this by tomorrow eve. The day after at the latest. I vow it."

"Free of this?" The only way out was Ruelle's death. "I-I need to see her. Just tonight." He and his mate could run.

*Leave behind my family?*

*A lifetime of drowning . . . ?*

"Nay!" Mam bared her fangs. "Over my dead body! You will never see her again!"

Da wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Take a moment, love. Just . . . take a moment. Collect yourself. Think of the babe."

"If I canna protect the bairns I have, I doona deserve the gods to give me more!"

"Whisht, love! I will talk to him, and tomorrow we will end this. Go take your tea and calm yourself."

She lurched from the room, casting a look over her shoulder. The rage in her expression changed to something like . . . pity when she met Will's eyes. "Never one like *her*, my Uilleam." Then she was gone.

Pity? Realization struck. *I've done wrong. I've hurt Mam.*

Before, he'd wanted to tell the world about Ruelle; now he felt shame, even though he didn't quite understand *why* he should. He'd been mating a beautiful female, his female, so why did his skin feel like it was crawling?

His nose burned, vision blurring. Tears? He was sick of tears—had

shed them aplenty in the first year he'd been with her. His voice broke as he said, "I dinna mean to do wrong, Da. Are you angrier about my age or about what Ruelle is? How old *should* I have been?"

"You are no' there yet, son. And, as your mother said, *never* with one like her."

"But she's my mate."

His father snapped his fangs, as if Will had blasphemed. "No—she's—no'!"

Will had never seen his da this angry. Still he asked, "How do you know?"

"Because she's sick in the head!" He shoved his fingers through his thick black hair. "If she were yours, your Instinct would ring loud and clear, telling you that she was. Has that happened?"

Will's Instinct, the guiding force all Lykae possessed, was usually quiet with her. But it hadn't been at first, had warned him not to enter the cottage, had whispered of peril within.

Peril from a delicate beauty like Ruelle? The idea had struck him as ridiculous.

"Think, son—if she were truly your mate, you would have felt the overwhelming need to mark her neck. You would have gotten a babe on her after all this time. But I know you have no' done either."

Will shook his head, muttering, "Ruelle *must* be mine for me to feel this way."

"No, she's entranced you—it's their way. Grown males are swayed by them, trapped by their wiles and their strewing; at your age, you stood no chance."

Da was making her sound like a sorceress or worse, a witch. Just like the rumors . . .

"You have doubts. I see it in your eyes. Do you no' ken, son? When you find your mate, it feels like the hands of gods have reached out to touch you, like your soul's been branded. There is no *doubt*. And there is no way you could willingly part from her, as you've obviously been doing with the succubus for years. Will, heed my words: where your mate goes, you follow."

Will grimaced as a sharper surge of pain hit. Da continued talking, clearly aiming to distract him. He told Will and Munro all about the first time he'd met Mam, a tale they'd heard before. But tonight it highlighted aspects of Will's own meeting with Ruelle.

She'd lured him to her cottage with sweets. He'd been reluctant, half terrified of her, half fascinated. When he'd tentatively entered, she'd lavished gifts on him, complimenting him, as if she were . . . taming him.

Or *trapping* him?

The firelight had just begun to dim when Will's Instinct suddenly commanded —*SAVE HER!*—

Da and Munro must've received the same warning. They shot to their feet.

"Ailis?" Da crossed to the hallway with long strides. "Come join us."

No answer.

"Love?" His father tensed, lifting his face to scent the air. Will and Munro did the same.

Mam was gone. Will didn't scent her anywhere in the keep.

There was only one reason she would have left home in this storm.

Like a shot, Da charged for the front door. Will and Munro followed him out into the blizzard, sprinting through the snow as he tracked Mam's scent and footprints toward the forest.

With each step, Da was turning, his Lykæ beast surfacing. His fangs and black claws lengthened, his face angling into a more wolverine shape. His muscles burgeoned, the shadow of his inner wolf rising to hover over him: a vicious, towering creature with maddened white-blue eyes.

Will could see his da struggling to keep the feral beast at bay, to think clearly, to reason.

To best protect his mate.

Will and Munro began to lag behind their desperate father's pace. Two young Lykæ in the Woods at night. They had not reached their immortality yet, couldn't regenerate from injury.

As the storm strengthened, shadows closed in on them, snow swirling, trees shuddering. The winds howled, disrupting Will's hearing and

sense of smell. Gusts brought confusing scents all the way from the sea he hadn't yet beheld.

His teeth clattered. Pain throughout his body had merged until he couldn't distinguish one area of agony from another, his aching bones from his splitting head. . . .

Will squinted through the snow as they ran, barely making out Da as he closed in on Ruelle's cottage. Between painted shutters, the windows glowed, softly lit and fogged.

Da barreled through the door. Even over the winds, Will heard his roar.

Of anguish.

*No!* Ruelle couldn't have hurt Mam. Will's mother was a she-wolf in her prime, fierce as this storm. Ruelle was weak and helpless.

The brothers burst through the splintered doorway and froze at the sight before them. With a sheet secured around her, Ruelle stood trembling behind a terrified lad who looked not much older than Will.

—*Vampire*.—

Their natural enemy. Here, this far north? Will had never seen one, just knew he needed to kill the creature.

The leech was brandishing a bloody sword to protect Ruelle against Da—whose beast was completely risen. It shadowed over him, monstrous and shocking even to Will.

No wonder the vampire was terrified. But why was the male half-dressed? Whose blood coated his sword? Where was Mam?

Will edged deeper into the cottage. Behind a settee . . . he saw her.

Part of her.

Shock robbed him of breath and muted his thoughts. Dimly, he wondered, *Where is my mother's head?*

Da roared, shaking the cottage until dust rained from the rafters.

The vampire could have traced away, teleporting to safety in an instant. Yet he seemed bent on protecting Ruelle—as if he loved her. With a broken yell, he attacked, tracing around Da, landing blows that the older immortal didn't seem to feel.

The leech disappeared again and again, until Da predicted where he'd appear next. With one swipe of Da's flared claws, the vampire was no more.

When Da turned on Ruelle, she backed away. As if from a well-pump, her tears flowed at once. "We had n-no choice. She attacked us, had come to destroy me."

As Da stalked her with a murderous look in his ice-blue gaze, Ruelle eyed the vampire's sword, could have reached it; instead she clasped her hands to her breast, pleading to Will, "My love, help me! He will kill me!"

She would forgo a weapon in order to plead?

Will realized she still possessed her most powerful weapon: her guile. She looked fragile, defenseless, and so damned beautiful. Even now, the urge to protect her seized him.

"My love, I beg you! Do something!" Her eyes glowed green.

He was horrified to realize that he was stumbling over his mother's body to reach Ruelle. *I've done wrong*. Though he knew he was no match for his father, Will rose up in front of his female—

Da bared his fangs and backhanded him, connecting with his jaw. As Will reeled to the floor, Da raised his hand once more. With another slash of his claws, he decapitated Ruelle.

Vision swimming, Will watched as her head tumbled. But her body collapsed slowly. Even in this, she was graceful.

With her death, Will's bones instantly ceased to ache, the fever leaving him. His body was free. But his mind . . .

Sorrow, guilt, horror, hatred—all warred within him.

Da dropped to his knees beside their mother's covered body. Munro must've draped a blanket over her.

Will was numb, incapable of moving. *Wrong. Everything's wrong. All my fault.*

Somehow he found the strength to rise. Through watering eyes, Will gazed over his shattered family.

Munro knelt beside Da, squeezing his shoulder, crying openly. Da clumsily patted Mam's limp hand, his beast receding somewhat. In this

half state, Da was awkward, his hands too big, his claws too long. Tears streamed down his wolveren face. His blue eyes were blank.

He lifted Mam's hand to his face. When it did not lovingly stroke his cheek, as it had thousands of times before, Da roared once more, then whimpered with grief.

Mam had come to this cursed place for Will, to save her son. He didn't know what disgusted him more, his part in all this—or the fact that he grieved Ruelle's death nearly as much as Mam's.

At the thought, he bashed his fists against his head, face twisting. *What is wrong with me? Sick, sick!* His beast kept trying to rise, to shield Will from pain. But Will wanted the agony, needed it.

Because of him, all was lost. Their family broken.

Ah, no, the wee babe. Little Isla. He pulled at his hair, falling to his knees beside Munro. *All my fault.*

He wished to every god in the heavens that he could die bloody, die on the spot, could trade his life for his mother's.

Munro turned to him—but instead of the hatred Will expected, Munro's watering eyes flickered over his face with what looked like pity. *I don't deserve pity!* He wished his father had struck him harder, and more. He wished Munro would hit him.

As Will's own tears fell, he and Munro stared at each other. *Hate me, brother! As I hate myself!*

After what felt like hours, Da turned to his sons, emotion burning in his eyes. But it was not the grief Will had expected.

It was *resolve*.

And Will knew his father would be dead within a week. *Where your mate goes, you follow. . . .*





“Fire comes in all intensities. A hotter tongue of flame can devour another. Surely the hottest can sear a man clean.”

—UILLEAM ANDRIU MACRIEVE, CHIEFTAIN OF THE  
NOVA SCOTIA SETTLEMENT OF CLAN MACRIEVE

“The right place at the right time never comes to people standing still.”

—CHLOE TODD, A.K.A. BABY T-REX,  
OLYMPIC HOPEFUL, UNWITTING IMMORTAL



## ONE

### *Starfire Stadium, Seattle, Women's Soccer League Finals*

PRESENT DAY

**Y**ank my jersey again, Todd, and I'll shove my cleat up your vaj," number eleven said.

Wide-eyed, Chloe gasped. "Who told you I like that?" Chloe and her teammates on the Seattle Reign called this player Handbagger, because she hit like a little old lady. "Your cleat should be so lucky, Handbagger." For good measure, Chloe yanked on eleven's jersey again as she jockeyed for position against the much larger girl.

Trash-talking and rough play were all a part of professional soccer. Chloe had the scars—and foul mouth—to prove it.

On the other side of the field, the ball went out of bounds. She took a breather, pulling up the hem of her jersey to wipe her face, rolling her eyes when camera flashes multiplied. She gazed over the stands, saw the line of shirtless fanboys painted with the Reign's colors: royal blue and midnight black. At halftime, they'd sung "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling" to her, and yelled, "Marry me, T-Rex," her soccer nickname.

Despite being the league's smallest center striker—traditionally a tall, burly player's position—Chloe was arguably the best and a crowd favorite. Fans liked that she was ferocious on the field, liked that she still had attitude off it.

She ran her fingers through her short hair, analyzing earlier plays. Tonight she'd been unstoppable, seeing openings and lanes as if other players were moving in slo-mo. She'd already scored a brace—two goals—against the Boston Breakers, tying the game. One more goal would earn Chloe a hat trick, not bad for the championships.

Somewhere in the stands, the assistant coach for the Olympic team watched this nail-biter keenly. Even Chloe's dad had carved out time from his constant work travel to be here. He stood off by himself in the corridor beside the VIP seats, giving her hand signals. Her part-time trainer and biggest fan.

Yes, she'd been on fire this game. But she was also seriously on edge. Over the last few days, she'd been going through some . . . changes, as if all her senses were becoming supercharged.

Or, she was going crazy.

She'd see tracers in her vision and hear sounds from much too far away. Even now she swore she could smell the roll of Tums in Coach's pocket.

And the cherry ChapStick one of the fanboys wore.

Each night, she'd been waking up drenched in sweat, fresh from bizarre dreams that left her shaken. . . .

The ref blew the whistle. Ball in play. Uneasiness forgotten. She and Handbagger jockeyed.

"Here comes the boom, bitch," Chloe said as she spun, evading her. She secured a flying pass, did an inside hook turn, and readied the ball for the launch—

Suddenly she stumbled. Above all the noise in the stadium, she'd heard a single cell phone ring, a pinging so loud she winced. Handbagger capitalized, almost snaring the ball, but Chloe passed it behind her with a heel kick; luckily a teammate was right there to collect. It would all look planned.

Only her team would know something was off. Whenever Chloe got the ball within this proximity to the goal, she was lethal—and selfish. As a finisher, she'd been trained to ball-hog in the strike zone.

As Dad liked to say, “You don’t hand off to a weaker player, and they’re all weaker players. They feed the ball *to you*.”

So why had she botched her shot? Why had she heard one phone above all the rest of the sounds? She glanced at her dad, saw he’d taken a call, pacing the corridor. What the hell was more important than his only daughter’s championship game? Sure, he often had work concerns, but if he managed to get to a game, he was *here*.

Across the field, the Breakers’ right wing snagged the ball with a clean tackle. Chloe could only wait and hope as the player ran it down the field. The crowd was now deafening, the other team’s momentum building.

Yet Chloe could somehow hear her father’s voice as if he were just beside her.

“Is the Lykae capture complete?” he asked.

Lykae? Capture? Even weirder than hearing her father was that she could make out bits and pieces—from the caller. She detected tons of background noise, like you’d hear from a war zone on CNN, and a man’s voice: “*In progress, sir . . . not going down without a fight . . . tranquilized him . . . matter of time now, Commander.*”

Had he just called Dad “Commander”? Of freaking what?

“How much damage?” Dad asked.

“*. . . threw our own tank at us, sir.*”

Dad scrubbed his hand over his salt-and-pepper buzz cut. “I warned you against targeting a wolf without Magister Chase present.”

Magister. Wolf. Lykae. Tank-throwing. What the hell?

Her dad was ex-army, now sold computer systems to military installations. Dustin Todd was, in essence, a tech guy. The driest, most *unfanciful* man ever to live. He simply didn’t talk about paranormal stuff, much less riff with some guy like they were Dungeons and Dragons fanatics.

She grew light-headed, the moment surreal. How could this be possible?

“I still don’t understand the soothsayer’s insistence with this one,” Dad said. “What’s the tactical value of one werewolf? Did she say?”

Dear God, her dad was talking about a mythological monster and a psychic.

*"No, sir . . . left as soon as we'd laid the . . . wolf's going down at last. They're moving in . . . I'll confirm the capture."*

Apparently, her dad was having some kind of psychotic break.

Maybe she was too. She couldn't actually be hearing him. She was losing her sanity and—equally important—this game.

"T-Rex!"

Chloe jerked her head around. She had missed a pass, missed the entire tide of the game changing. And now Handbagger had the ball, charging across the midfield, about to pass to her own striker. . . .

Eyes narrowed, Chloe ran down the woman, giving her a two-foot slide, tackling the living hell out of her from behind.

"You twat!" Handbagger screeched, just as the ref blew the whistle.

Dirty tackle. Yellow-carded. *Shit!*

Coach went ballistic on the sidelines; Handbagger got a free kick in scoring range.

As the woman positioned the ball, Chloe told herself she couldn't fix her dad's breakdown right now—all she could do was finish the few minutes left of this future-making game.

Dad was the one who'd taught her to focus, to stand her ground and see things through when the going got tough.

The keeper snagged Handbagger's missile—*aww, too bad*—then punted it into Breaker territory.

One of her midfielders fed Chloe a hospital ball, a pass that would likely result in injury.

She charged for it anyway with Handbagger breathing down her neck. The bitch slid, knocking Chloe off the ball and onto her ass. Chloe's ankle twisted. Handbagger couldn't resist a late hit, a nice elbow to the throat.

No whistle? As Chloe scrambled up, she raised her hands in a WTF gesture. Tied game, two minutes left in regulation—she didn't have *time* for this shit. The crowd booed, but the ref gazed on stonily.

Trying to shake it off, Chloe trotted to position, wincing as her ankle began swelling up like a balloon.

She ignored the pain, repeating to herself, *Rub some dirt on it.*

For all of Chloe's life, coaches had been telling her that in response to everything from a skinned knee to a concussion. It was coach-speak for *Grin and bear it, or I'll send in second string.*

The saying had become her life view. Bad practice? Rub some dirt on it. Fender bender? Rub some dirt on it. It'd turned into an optimistic catchphrase that allowed her to grit her teeth at any obstacle, and muster an *I'm just happy to be here, Coach* smile. It made her hunt hard for an upside.

Her dad going loco was hovering outside the realm of dirt rubbing. There was no upside. He was all the family she had in the world.

*Concentrate, Chlo. Focus.*

But just as she finally settled in and got her head back in the game, from the other end of her dad's phone call came a . . . *roar*—the most terrifying animal roar she'd ever imagined. Chills breaking out on her sweating skin, she swung her head toward her father.

Then stood there, in the middle of the field with thousands of spectators, gaping in shock.

Because when Dad had heard that sound, he'd *smiled*—

A toe-kicked ball took her square in the face like a cannon shot. Her body was sent airborne. Pitched onto her back, she lay there dazed, watching the stadium lights swirl above her as the crowd grew quiet.

*Rub some dirt on it.* Upside? She now had her dad's full attention, his call disconnected, and the wolf's haunting roar was no more.





## TWO

### *Orleans Parish, Louisiana*

ONE HOUR EARLIER

**N**ever let it be said that you doona drive like an ace,” Will told the three-thousand-year-old mad Valkyrie in the driver’s seat beside him, “but if we’re in a hurry, perhaps driving *in reverse* is no’ the best solution?”

Nix the Ever-Knowing was doing about twenty miles per hour in the left lane on the Lake Pontchartrain bridge section of I-10. Backward.

She was slinking along with the flow of traffic, somewhat, but the headlights of her abused Bentley were beaming the driver following them.

To navigate, she used the rear-view mirror—and bloody foresight, for all he knew.

Though vehicles were backed up for miles behind her, she seemed oblivious. Cars would pass, their bellowing drivers shooting her the bird—until they got a look-see at the hot mess that was Nucking-Futs Nix.

She was preternaturally beautiful but vacant-eyed, with a tangled mane of wild raven hair. She wore a neon pink T-shirt with big bold letters: S L U T

In smaller text below that: SEXUALLY LIBERATED UNINHIBITED TART.

Atop her shoulder? A live bat.

The soothsayer was fairly much crazed, losing track of time, of reality. Understandable, since she’d been seeing the future for millennia.

With a wrist slung over the wheel and Jay-Z on the radio, she said, "It's ridiculous that a car this expensive doesn't have cruise control for reverse."

"You want me to drive, then?"

She'd called his private number, divining the digits he supposed, wanting to meet alone. She'd made him vow to tell no one about their "rendez-vous," not even Munro. Will had already asked why she'd wanted to meet him (answer: blank stare) and if he could do anything for her (answer: blanker stare).

"Mayhap I should call one of your sisters? You're looking a wee bit tired, Valkyrie."

"I'm fine," she said absently. "I have Bertil with me."

Oh. The bat. Will decided that if Nucking-Futs Nix wanted to drive backward and answer none of his questions, to hell with it.

He had nothing better to do than enjoy the ride, so he relaxed back in the plush seat, proud of his nonchalance. Though he didn't like surprises and loathed it when females pressured him to keep secrets, he was managing his unease tonight.

Mayhap he'd finally—finally—started to turn the corner.

Just then, Nix glanced at Will, blinking in surprise, her expression saying, *Well, how'd you get in here, fellow?*

Her face brightened. "Hot of the Hot and Hotter Twins!" she said in greeting. "Or are you Hotter? I can never tell you apart—both of you with those smoldering golden eyes and dreamy features. Perhaps one of you has slightly longer hair?"

He and Munro hated it when females called them Hot and Hotter, as if they were interchangeable cogs in a joke. "Nix. It's good to see you," he said, for the second time tonight.

At least she was interesting to be around. And most would consider a meeting with her to be priceless. She could help a Lore creature get out of whatever predicament he found himself in.

No present predicaments for Will. Unless Nix could send him back in time or make him forget the past, he'd keep idling.

For the last few centuries, he and Munro had lived in Bheinnrose, a colony they'd founded in Nova Scotia. Will was the leader of that arm of Clan MacRieve, but for fuck's sake, who couldn't do that job? All he did was sign a lot of forms. Customarily after Munro read them.

Without a nice grisly war to occupy them—or missions from their king—the brothers had headed south to Louisiana, looking for a change of pace. During an Accession, something was always happening near a Lore hot spot like New Orleans. Such as a meeting with Nix.

Plus, Will had burned through all the available nymphs in the North, since he never slept with the same female twice.

Usually by mutual agreement.

A big-rig driver pulled abreast of the Bentley and blasted his horn so loud the car vibrated.

"Mortals," Nix sighed. "So what did you want to talk to me about, Oolay-ahhnm?"

He frowned at the slaughtered pronunciation of his first name, but thought he caught a twinkle in her eye. "Just call me MacRieve. As for the meeting, you rang me, remember? I assumed you wanted to talk about Munro."

"Umm, no."

Awkward silence. Well, as long as he had a soothsayer here . . . "Mayhap you want to give me the goods on where to find his mate." One of a Lykae's most compelling drives was to find his fated one, and Nix had helped three members of the clan locate and win theirs—against all odds—during this Accession alone.

"You ask about his before your own?"

"Munro craves his." He needed that female in order to get the bairns he was keen to have. He longed for offspring more than a mother hen did. Already his brother was fostering two Lykae lads in their house.

Yet Munro had best be careful what he wished for; an old oracle had once predicted he'd be cursed with a "harridan" for his mate.

"And you don't crave yours? Spill to Nixie. I won't tell anyone anything. This night is *our little secret*."

As if those words weren't disturbing enough to Will, Nix's bat chose that moment to climb down her front, unfurling its wings to span her collarbones, its wee talons embedded in her shirt.

"It's complicated." He'd once thought he'd possessed his mate. *What a bluidy fool you were.*

"Don't make me turn this car around, wolf."

He raised a brow. "Verra well. I've envied other males who've found theirs. But I'm no' in a good place right now." He pulled on his collar. Understatement. *Hi then, I'm MacRieve, and this is my Lykae beast. Get used to him, because you'll be seeing a lot of him.*

Even so, he couldn't stop himself from asking, "Have you foreseen mine, then?"

"Oh! Here's my exit!" With expert precision, Nix cut across the second lane of traffic to an off-ramp. They turned, still in reverse, onto a smaller country road.

Before he could repeat his question, Nix asked, "So what are you going to wear to the apocalypse? I'm thinking something sparkly and transfixing."

"Apocalypse?"

"We all must band together, enemies and allies, gods and men. Or *they* will win."

"And who would *they* be, Valkyrie?"

"The Møriør. Bringers of Doom. By the time I even foresee them, it's already too late."

Ominous words. "You can't drop a line like that without unpacking it."

"Just did, *You-Lame!*"

"It's MacRieve!"

"Where?" she gasped, jerking a glance toward the side of the road. She swerved sharply before righting the car. They collected another horn honk.

"Nix, answer me."

She faced him again, waving that away. "Let's just put it this way: smoke 'em if you got 'em."

Will tried to muster the appropriate apocalyptic concern. But if you'd

lived as long—and as badly—as he had, impending end-of-world scenarios lost their bite.

Nix's expression perked up. "Here's our turn."

He finally twisted in his seat to glance over his shoulder. It was a dirt road overgrown with banana trees and kudzu. As they wound deeper into a gloomy, fog-laden swamp, Will again felt sorry for this Bentley.

After bottoming out—backward—for a fourth time, Nix pulled into a small clearing and parked. "Oh. We ended up being early."

"For what?" Did she want to show him something out here? "Where are we?"

"Our destination. Consider it a waypoint."

"Why? Am I going somewhere else?" he asked, the hair on the back of his neck rising. Was there a threat? He scented nothing, and his Instinct remained quiet.

But then, these days it was usually quiet.

In any case, Nix would have foreseen any trouble, and she'd specifically driven to this place.

She turned to face him, giving him the full view of her crazy. The bat's placement on her T-shirt made it seem like Bertil had been captioned SEXUALLY LIBERATED UNINHIBITED TART.

Nix was so lovely and so . . . damaged.

"Let's talk a sec, just you and me. Relax, don't you trust me?" she asked in a playful tone.

"Face it, Valkyrie. There are few in the Lore that I trust, and you're one of them." She was a tested and true ally of the clan.

"How sweet, Ahllomeam—"

"*MacRieve*, Nix." Just because she was trusted didn't mean she couldn't be a pain in the arse. "Could you call me MacRieve? Or wolf, or prick, or anything but my given name? Now, back to my mate. When will I find her?"

"Before Munro finds his."

"That tells me nothing. Are we talking decades, centuries?"

"How boorish of me, divulging all while you're divulging nothing." She leaned in closer to him. "Look into my eyes. Let me see your history."

History? Not just foresight? “I doona know about this—”

“Ruelle did a number on you,” she said softly. “But I already knew that.”

He jerked his head back. “And what have you heard, then?” Whisperings of his shameful time with the succubus had passed among the older Lykae of the clan.

Had other factions learned of that?

“Not *heard*, wolf. Seen . . .”

He swallowed. Could Nix see that he’d wiped out most of his family by succumbing to that parasite? Could this Valkyrie see that Ruelle still seemed to control his mind and body even from beyond the grave?

When he had been not yet double-digits in age, that bitch had gotten her claws into him. *And I’ve borne them in one way or another ever since.*

She’d ruined the boy he’d been and perverted the man he would become.

Nix gazed at him with pity, and he knew she could see. Gods, he *despised* the pitying looks. Had received them all his miserable life! Was he truly so pitiable? *Just because I hate myself and have no control of my beast?*

“Yes, wolf, I see *all*. And by all, I mean *some*.”

Sweat dotted his upper lip.

“What is it the nymphs say about you? I remember! You’re all ‘good and fucked up,’ ‘dark and twisted.’ But they don’t know *why*.”

They called him Bucket List, one to do before they died—because they knew they wouldn’t be getting vanilla.

He had nothing to give *but* dark and twisted.

Suddenly, he had difficulty catching his breath, as if a weight pressed on his chest. As if Ruelle pressed on his chest.

He wanted away from the soothsayer, from this car, this swamp, this bloody state. His earlier nonchalance had vanished. Mayhap it was time to return to the North—

“And then, as if Ruelle wasn’t bad enough,” Nix said sadly, “you had to endure Dr. Dixon’s tortures.”

Will froze. He didn’t know this person. “Never heard of a Dr. Dixon.”



“The psychotic mortal scientist? From the Order’s island prison?” At his confounded look, she said, “Surely you must remember all those experiments she performed on you when you were captured by humans? Electrocutions, beatings, weapons testing, vivisection? How could you forget when she cracked open your chest with a rib separator and sliced out your still-beating heart? She beamed proudly as she showed it to you. Of course, she was only following Webb’s orders, but she did seem to take a sick interest in you.”

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. “Nix, these things have no’ happened to me. I’ve never met this Dixon woman or anyone named Webb.”

The Valkyrie looked puzzled. “You don’t remember being blasted with electricity, then trapped like an animal for weeks? After the prison overthrow, when everything was pandemonium and death, you organized the Vertas shifters, saving them from wholesale slaughter! That’s one of the reasons a wisewoman dispatched you there.”

“You are unnerving the hell out of me, Valkyrie.”

“Oh.” She frowned, petting her bat fitfully. “I must have misread the future for the past.” She shrugged. “It happens.”

“The future?” He swallowed. “You’re saying these things are *going* to happen to me?”

“Yes, wolf.” Nix’s face abruptly went cold. “And all because you were betrayed by a soothsayer.”

Spotlights blazed around the car, temporarily blinding him. They were suddenly surrounded—by mortals with weapons.

“How? I scented nothing! What the bluidy hell is this, Nix?”

“You need to rebreak that bone.” She casually gestured at *all* of him. “It didn’t set right. . . .”

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from MACRIEVE!

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