

**Blood Of A Wolf**

by

By C. S. Dorsey

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## 1-2-3 PROUD!

“Calderon! You’re up!” I put on my helmet and ran toward the coach. He was pacing back and forth. The stands were filled and the crowd was cheering loudly. It was a hot day—perfect weather for the championship game. The score was tied 3 to 3 in the fourth quarter.

Coach grabbed my helmet. At first I thought he was going to tell me the play, so I could tell the other players on the field. But he just looked at me, with a twinkle in his eyes. It almost looked like he was about to cry.

“Um, Coach, you want to tell me the play?”

“You know,” he started off, “I am really proud of you. It is your time to shine, so... whatever play you think, you tell the others.” He hit me on the helmet three times and said, “Now get out there.”

Well, that was confusing.

I looked back to make sure he didn’t change his mind. *I think he is serious*, I thought. I ran onto the field to huddle up with the guys. I didn’t know what play to tell them. We stood in a circle, and everyone looked to me for the play.

“OK, Ale, what’s the play?” John asked.

I looked down at the grass. My mind tried to work out what play would be perfect for this moment.

“Um, Coach told me to come up with it.”

“What! Oh, great, we’re screwed! Only ten seconds left in the game and Coach lets you decide,” Andrew said, taking his mouthpiece out of his mouth.

“So, what is it going to be, Calderon?” Everyone looked at me.

The only play I could come up with was the one Sean (the traitor) came up with. “Take and fake.”

“Take and fake? Are you kidding me? We have not done the take and fake play since Sean. He was the fast runner.” Everyone on the team missed Sean. I kind of miss him in a way, but I don’t like liars. Especially the kind of liars that tie me up and attempt to take my blood for Lukos experiments. I quickly pushed those thoughts out of my head. I didn’t have time to think about that right now.

“We are going to do take and fake, and Jay—”

“Huh?” He looked up like he’d been called on to answer a question he didn’t know the answer to.

“You’re going to take the ball.”

“I can’t run that fast.”

“Yes, you can. This is the last game of the season and our last game together. Let’s do this.” We all put our hands in the middle of the circle. “Make me proud on three,” I said. “1-2-3—”

“PROUD!”

We lined up to get ready for the play. I looked behind at Jay to make sure he was ready. He looked like he wanted to puke, but I ignored him. I knew he was ready for this play. He was the perfect person for it. This play was the only way that we could win.

The take and fake play is a fake-out. The quarterback, me, fake throws the ball, and gives it to the wide receiver, Andrew. I still act like I have the ball while being tackled, Andrew then

takes the ball and gives it to John, while still running around the field like he has the ball. Then John gives the ball to Jay. By this time we are at the fifty-yard line and Jay is running like his life depends on it.

“RUN!” I yelled as the crowd roared in the stands and Jay dodged every blocker. There were 15 seconds left on the clock, and it felt like everything was going in slow motion. He hit the 20, then the 10. And the buzzer went off. All I saw was the referee’s hands go up in the air.

“Touchdown!”

I fell to my knees.

Everyone in the bleachers ran out on the field and ran to Jay to lift him up in the air. I was still on my knees when the crowd of people rushed my way to pick me up. I took off my helmet and held it up in the air. While looking up at the sky, a tear rolled down my face. For a moment I thought I saw a cloud in the shape of a smile. My ears became deaf to the noise and my body felt like it was ascending up toward the clouds.

I came to myself when I heard my name.

“Calderon! Calderon! I knew you had it in you.” I looked down at Coach and smiled. The crowd slowly brought Jay back, still carrying him. I pointed at him, and said “Take and fake!” He pointed back and nodded with a smile on his face.

The crowd of people under me slowly set me down on my feet. The team gathered around, jumping up and down.

As everyone continued hugging one another I turned my head and saw her standing off to the side looking for me. I pushed my way through the crowd of people, till she finally saw me. She ran to me and jumped up and hugged me.

*You're really acting the part*, I thought, knowing she could hear my thoughts.

“Isn't this how a human girlfriend should act when her boyfriend wins a football game?”

“Yeah. I see you've been studying.” She laughed and then gave me a kiss...on the lips!

This was new. Her kiss caught me off guard. I was waiting for her to pull back, but instead she went in for the gusto. Fran softened her lips and parted my mouth with such demand. I wished we could win the championship every day. My blood was boiling and this kiss was making me hot.

Fran and I have been hanging out for the past two months. She claims she is just doing her job by protecting me, but she doesn't want to admit that she has the hots for me.

She pulled back to catch her breath. “I don't know what came over me,” she said.

“Were you trying to seduce me? Or kill me? Because my heart is pounding really hard and it won't stop.” She had a mischievous smile on her face.

Fran put her arms around my neck and looked into my eyes. “Well now that you have won the Super Bowl, what are you going to do next?”

“I'm going to take my girl to Tackle Tim's Pizza,” I responded. She laughed as I gave her a kiss on the cheek. Then I saw the guys coming toward me.

“Um, we need your boyfriend for a minute,” Andrew said as he grabbed me by the neck.

“Go ahead,” Fran said as she gestured for them to take me away.

“I'll meet you in the parking lot!” I yelled as the guys took me into the locker room. Fran waved, walking toward Lacy and Cherish, who were standing in the bleachers waiting.

As much as Lacy and Cherish hated me, they swallowed their pride and did what Vora commanded: to protect me, and look out for the Lukos who are after me...well, after my blood,

to make more Lukos. Vora said the leader, Heath, is still out there somewhere finding more Lukos to come after me. Punk can't even do his own dirty work.

When I walked in the locker room, I walked into a shower of soda and fizz. Everyone was yelling and spraying soda everywhere. I looked around at the small puddles of liquid that was building up. *The janitors are going to have a lot of cleaning to do tonight*, I thought.

“OK, ladies, let's settle down.” Coach called us to order, but everyone was too happy to calm down. We worked our behinds off this season. Every game we lost, Coach would make us get up at 5 o'clock in the morning for practice, *and* practice after school. No one wanted to get up that early, so we made it a point not to lose.

Coach began with his speech. He was a man of very few words. He took his hat off and rubbed his shiny bald head.

“We came a long way. I'm proud of you all. There will be no other team like this one right now.” He grabbed a yellow envelope off of his desk.

“Alejandro Calderon,” Coach called my name as he looked in a yellow envelope and pulled out a golden piece of paper. I walked up to him. “Here is your full scholarship to Washington State University!”

Everyone cheered in the background as I held the paper in my hand. I was honored, but speechless—I wasn't expecting something like this. I really wasn't thinking much about college at all.

“Thanks, Coach.”

“No, don't thank me. You have yourself to thank.” He put his hand on my shoulder.

So much was going through my mind. As much as I wanted to accept this scholarship, I knew I wouldn't be able to go. My mom would be so excited when I tell her, but the thing of it is, I can't go. How could I tell her that I can't go to college because I am supposed to mature into a Lukos? A Lukos is a wolf that is able to shift into human form. My father was one, but my mother never knew. She'd think I'm crazy. I decided to keep the scholarship thing a secret.

I returned to my seat on the bench between Jay and Andrew. They just smiled and punched me on the shoulders. That's what guys do instead of cry and hug, we punch each other and then laugh.

"You guys are going to go places. Set goals, work hard, and get up at 5 o'clock every day."

We looked around at one another, confused.

John raised his hand. "Um, Coach, why get up at 5?" Coach walked over to him and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Because life will pass you by if you get up when you want to. There will be a lot of things you're not going to want to do, and getting up early is one of them. If you get up and embrace life, you will one day reap the benefits of the great things life has to offer."

"Um...is that why you had us get up at 5 for practice?" Jay asked.

"YES! My brown-haired son. Now you see what happens when you get up at 5 o'clock...you win the state championship!" It took a while for everyone to understand the Coach's "logic," but we finally got it.

"Now, you ladies get dressed and go celebrate."

Everyone got up and cheered some more.

After taking a shower and putting on some fresh clothes, I packed up my stuff and headed out the gym door.

## Of All the Girls, Why Cherish?

“Hey, Ale, can I ride with you guys?” Jay asked as I was walking out the door.

“Um...sure, Jay. Wait, let me text Fran to see if it’s OK.”

“OK, thanks.” Jay had taken Sean’s place after his mishap. Rumor had it Sean got into a car accident while visiting family in another state. The body was incinerated, so the state couldn’t ship him back home.

Jay and I became cool friends. Fran said he was clean and that he was a good guy, but there was one problem: He likes Cherish. I almost threw up my lunch when Fran told me that. No wonder he is always giving her googly eyes cross the lunchroom table. Cherish knows what he thinks, but she hasn’t mentioned anything about it. Maybe she doesn’t want to draw any more attention.

I texted Fran to tell her that Jay was riding with us to Tackle Tim’s. It took her three minutes to text back.

*OK. Cherish isn’t too crazy about him coming. But she can deal with it.*

“You ready?” Jay asked.

“Uh...yeah.” I had knots in my stomach, because I knew Cherish didn’t like Jay. But he was crazy about her. Even though she just looked at him and didn’t say much. I suppose she was reading his mind, downloading information about him, however the heck they do it. The Cerna Kocka (Black Cats) have a unique gift of reading minds. It was annoying at first but I got use to it.

Jay and I walked out to the parking lot. The girls were standing next to an all-black SUV with tinted windows and black rims. Vora was really cool to let them drive her car.

As Jay and I walked toward the car, he keep mumbling about Cherish and how I need to help him talk to her.

“You’re on your own. She is nothing like the girls here, that’s for sure.”

“Aw, come on, you guys always hang together. You must know a way that I can get her to talk to me.”

“Dude, she barely talks to me. What makes you think we are even on that level?”

“She looks so good. Please just mention me in your conversations.”

“OK, I’ll try.” It was one thing talking to Cherish, but talking about her personal life was another. Not that she had one.

Seeing us coming, Cherish and Lacy got in the back seat. As soon as Jay came close to the car, Cherish slammed the door shut. Fran reopened the door and mumbled, “Nebud’te tak.” Cherish rolled her eyes and growled under her breath.

“Hey, Francesca, how did you like the game?” Jay asked as he climbed in.

“It was a close one. You guys did great.” Fran smiled, trying to counteract the negative vibe Cherish was giving off. Cherish turned her head toward the window, so she wouldn’t have to talk to Jay. I felt bad for the guy, because I know what it’s like to be ignored by a girl you really have feelings for.

I cleared my throat. “Shall we go?”

“Yes, let’s go,” Fran said, reading my mind.

I walked over to the passenger side of the car. “Oh, no,” Fran said, holding the keys in the air. “You’re driving.”

My eyes lit up like a child on Christmas. “For real?”

“Yep!” She opened the passenger door and got in.

I couldn’t walk around to the driver side fast enough. I hopped in and threw my bag in the back.

“Watch it!”

“Oh, sorry, Jay.” I turned on the ignition. The car roared like a lion. *I wish Vora would get me one of these for my birthday*, I thought.

“Wishful thinking, pup!” Cherish said, reading my mind.

“Shut up, Cherish!” Fran said.

I put the car in reverse, backed out of the parking spot, and drove off.

Tackle Tim’s is about a fifteen-minute drive from the school. For the first five minutes, the car was dead silent. Then it was broken by a cough from Jay.

“Um...so, Cherish...”

*Don’t do it, man*, I thought. Fran quickly looked at me and then in the rearview mirror at Jay, and then at Cherish, who was still looking out the window. I look in the rearview mirror to give him a shut up signal, but his eyes were on his fidgeting fingers.

“So...um...”

“What!” Cherish snapped at him before he spoke.

I closed my eyes for a moment, thinking about how glad I wasn’t Jay right now.

“So...are you seeing someone?”

“No, I am not...and no, I...”

Fran hissed, and Cherish paused. I sunk down in my seat, accelerating a little. The tension in the car was making me nervous. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Jay sweating bullets. Lacy was playing on her phone, acting like she didn't know what was going on. *Man, I'm glad I didn't fall for Cherish*, I thought. I knew she was going to get me for saying that.

“No, you're not what? You can say it. You're not interested in me...right? Is it because of my freckles? Or my weird-looking hair?”

“All of the above.” She said, looking out the window. Jay's head went down like he was going to cry. Fran and I looked at each other.

Finally, we made it to Tackle Tim's. Relief came over me as I pulled into the parking lot. I needed to get out of that car.

But I hadn't even turned off the engine before Cherish jumped out of the car. I turned to Fran and just looked at her. *What the heck is up with her? Please tell me*, I thought. She shrugged and got out of the car, and took Cherish behind the car to talk. Lacy went with them.

Jay and I walked toward the restaurant. “Where did the girls go?” he asked.

“Oh...um, they went to the store.”

“For what?”

“Um...lip balm or something. You know, girl stuff.” I laughed uneasily.

“Oh...OK?” The poor boy was so naïve.

We walked into the wooden doors of Tackle Tim's. The aroma of pizza hit my nostrils, and my stomach growled hard. It wasn't that crowded, considering it was a Friday night.

“Hey, Ale!” Andrew yelled from across the room. Tackle Tim’s was a decent-size restaurant that accommodated up to 100 people. Even though it’s a family restaurant, we liked to go there because of the downstairs game room, where they have arcade games and air hockey and pool tables. It may not sound like much, but it is the only happening spot in our area. The population of our town is mainly retired people.

“Hey!” I raised my hand to let Andrew know that I saw him. Jay and I walked over to where they were sitting.

“You got some good seats, Andrew,” Jay said.

“Yeah, I had to beg the owner to let me reserve some tables. Tim was giving me a hard time. I even tried to bribe him. He said that he could not be bought, but for fifty bucks he would see what he could do.” Jay and I laughed. Andrew has short, black spiky hair and a tan complexion, though he’s never stepped foot on California soil where it was sunny.

“You know he swindled you, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s cool. At least we got a good area.” I looked around and saw most of the team there. The others couldn’t make it because their families were giving them a separate party. But all the starting players were there.

“Hey, where’s your girl Francesca?”

“Oh, she and the girls went to get lip gloss or lip balm or something. You know girls.”

After a few minutes passed, Fran snuck up behind me. “What are you thinking about?” she asked, touching me on the shoulder.

I exhaled. “You.”

She laughed. “You’re such a liar.”

I smiled, knowing that I could never get away with anything.

“You’re right, you can’t get away with anything.” she said, kissing me on the cheek.

“You two make me sick,” Cherish said, walking past us. She sat down at the end of the table, away from everyone.

Everyone was having a good time, laughing and joking. We talked about the good old days when we were in junior high school together, and how football has always been a part of us. These guys had been like my brothers all these years. I looked around the table and saw how happy everyone was. Then I realized that I was not going to be able to hang out with my friends and play football anymore. I wasn’t even going to college. All of a sudden it dawned on me...*I’m going to be a monster soon.* A sharp pain struck me in the stomach.

“You OK?” Fran asked, rubbing my shoulder. She knew I wasn’t, but I guess she didn’t know what else to say.

“Um...I need to...I’ll be back.” I got up and went to the bathroom, and went in the first empty stall. I sat there with questions rushing through my head. What would my life really be like? When I mature, will I be able to shift back to human form? Or will I stay a wolf forever? And what about my mom and sister? Will I see them after I mature?

Everything was weighing on me. Suddenly the room was spinning and I felt like I was going to throw up. Pain ripped through my stomach, and then my mouth began to water. Oh, no! I bent over the toilet and let out the contents in my stomach. I must have been the only one in the bathroom, because all I heard was fluid dropping in the porcelain.

Once I stopped, I opened my eyes to find that the water was black, like tar. *What the heck,* I thought. Then someone knocked on the door.

“Ale, how are you doing in there?” It was Fran’s sweet concerned voice on the other side of the door.

I quickly flushed the toilet and opened the stall door. “I’ll be out in a sec,” I yelled, to let Fran know that I was OK. I washed my hands and splashed water on my face and rinsed my mouth out, to get the black whatever it was out of my mouth. I looked at myself in the mirror that was mounted on the wooden wall, and wiped my face with a paper towel. I straightened out my clothes, and opened the door.

Fran was right there waiting for me on the other side. She took one look at me and made a face like she was disgusted. “You’re in the early stages. I am so sorry, honey.” She came up to wrap her arms around me to console me, but I just backed away. I was still feeling sick and I didn’t want to risk throwing up on her. She took two steps back when she heard what I was thinking.

“I’m OK.”

“No, you’re not. Ale, I am telling you, you cannot just walk around thinking you can handle things on your own.” I ignored her. I didn’t want to get into a disagreement. She shook her head. “I will leave it alone until the time comes. But there are bigger things going on. Vora called.”

“What did she say?”

“She wants us to come to her house immediately.”

“Why, what’s going on?”

“It’s about the Lukos.” That got my attention.

“Get your royal subjects and let’s go.” She punched me in the arm. She knew I was talking about Cherish and Lacy.

“You need to stop that. They are already in the car.” Fran and I said our goodbyes to the team and headed out the door.

“Hey, Ale, how am I going to get home?” Jay asked as he ran after us.

“Um...ask Andrew if he can take you.”

“Oh. OK,” he said with sadness in his voice. I felt bad as he turned around and walked back to the table.

“Don’t feel bad. He just looks up to you, even though you two are the same age. And also, he likes being around Cherish, even though she turned him down so fast.” She made a crooked smile.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You did me the same way.”

“But I came around. Cherish will see one day, if she doesn’t kill him first.” Fran laughed hysterically as we walked out the door.

“That’s not funny.” I wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“I know, I am just having fun.” We got in the car and drove off to Vora’s house.

## My Uncle!?

As we drove to Vora's, Cherish kept running her mouth about how she couldn't believe Jay had the nerve to try and talk to her, and how she could snap his neck with one twist. I just ignored her and kept my eyes on the road.

"How dare he even attempt to talk to me? Does he know who I am?"

"No, Cherish, he doesn't know that you're a cat, or kitten, whatever you want to be called." I couldn't resist.

"The proper term is Cerna Kocha."

"Black cat, pink cat, red cat, whatever. The point is, you did not have to do him like that. You should be happy that someone wants to deal with your attitude. If I was your boyfriend I would have jumped off a bridge a long time ago to escape your nagging voice." The car got quiet all of a sudden. *Well, I finally shut her up*, I thought. Then I felt an arm wrap around my throat. It got tighter and tighter, until I almost blacked out.

"Cherish, stop it, you're killing him!" I heard Fran's voice; it sounded very far away. The car was weaving from side to side. My oxygen was cut off, and everything began to get dark.

"You better thank the stars that you're seeing right now for Vora and Fran. I would have put you to sleep, dog," Cherish whispered in my left ear. Then she let go of her grip.

"See what I mean, you're crazy," I said, coughing between words to catch my breath.

"Cherish, I know the Lukos killed your parents, but not all of them are the same," Fran said.

“Wait, is that why you don’t like me? Because you think I am like the Lukos punks that killed your parents?” I couldn’t believe it.

Cherish did not respond. We pulled up in the front of Vora’s house and parked the car. As we walked in the house, Vora was coming down the stairs.

“Good evening, everyone. I will meet you in the dining room.” She disappeared down the hall, and we went into the dining room. I was a nervous wreck.

Fran went in the kitchen and came back with a glass of milk. She sat down next to me and started sipping on it slowly. That drove me crazy!

“Sick puppy,” Cherish said as she played with her phone.

“Look, I am not like those Lukos that killed your parents. A few months ago I didn’t even know that I was a wolf. I was a normal teenager with a hormonal imbalance. I’ve done nothing to you, so why are you being this way to me?” I finally said what I had to say to Cherish. It felt good to get it off my chest.

She stared at me, and for a second I thought she was going to lunge at me and choke me again, so I braced myself.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I have just been holding a grudge for so long. But I will let you know one thing. The minute you mature and feel the urge to attack...I will take you out with a silver bullet. I don’t care how much you and Fran are in ‘like’ with each other. Get it...pup?”

“I can live with that,” I said. Fran just rolled her eyes.

Vora came into the dining room wearing a purple and gold house dress that fell to her ankles. She looked distressed.

“I have news from Purr Island. It seems Heath has gathered more Lukos, and they are on their way here. So we really need to keep an eye out. I need all of you to stay close and not stray away.”

*This blows. I know I have some type of rare blood or whatever, but why me? Am I the only Lukos that has this?* I thought, knowing they all heard me. I was hoping someone would give me more answers than just the usual “you’re special.” But no one even looked my way.

Vora continued.

“Another thing. Ale is in the early stages of maturing. When the process goes into full effect, I need everyone to be together. I am not sure what will happen, but a friend of mine that is also a Lukos will help Ale during this process.”

“Oh, great! Like we need another Lukos in the house,” Lacy said. I was surprised—she is generally the quiet one.

Vora put her hand up to her head like she was getting a headache.

“Anyway, Ale, I don’t know when this process will happen, but it could be any day. But don’t worry, we will be right there to help you.”

“Yes, me and my silver gun with silver bullets.” Cherish laughed hysterically. I didn’t find anything funny. I started to think maybe she was serious. “I’m just kidding, pup. Don’t get your paws in a knot.”

“Go cough up a hairball. I bet it will look prettier than your face.”

In one blink the glass she was drinking milk out of shuddered all over the table. Cherish was still panting as her teeth extended into two very sharp fangs.

“Osdoutopeni!” Vora yelled in Czech, and Cherish quickly regained her composure.

“Honestly, Cherish, I don’t know what I am going to do with you,” Vora said, rubbing her temples. Cherish and I looked at each other across the table. She broke the stare by rolling her eyes at me. The tension in the room was thick.

“As I was saying, my friend Truffle will be here tomorrow, so that he and I can go over the process.”

“Truffle? Are you serious? What the heck is up with these Lukos names?” Everyone at the table laughed. I was relieved to have broken some of the tension.

Vora chuckled and shook her head. “Remember, these are not normal human names. The Cerna Kocka and the Lukos and other kinds don’t have last names either.”

I turned to Fran. “So Francesca Rivera is not your real name, is it?”

“Francesca is, Rivera is not.” Every day, little by little, I was finding out things that I should have known in the beginning. “It’s not like we are related or anything,” Fran said, when she sensed my irritation.

“Well, I’m happy about that. That’s one less thing to worry about,” I said sarcastically.

“You don’t have to worry about you and Fran being related—however, you should be concerned about Heath being related to you,” Cherish said, as the room got quiet.

“Shut up! Cherish!” Fran yelled.

“No, Cherish, keep talking. What do you mean I should be worried about Heath being related to me?”

She moved her head in closer, across the table, and whispered, “Heath is your uncle.”

“UNCLE! As in my father’s brother?”

“WOW! I like this Lukos, he catches on fast.”

The room was spinning and it felt like I was going to be sick again.

Vora was at my side in a second. "Let me help you," she said.

"No...No! NO! I got this," I said, slurring my words.

"You need to go and lie down. Fran, grab him on his other side." I couldn't think of any words to say but why?

"Why, WHY! Is this happening? Is this...is he...My uncle...I.. No! I can't...wait. I need to go to the bathroom." I broke loose of Fran and Vora and ran down the hallway, trying not to knock over Vora's imported statues.

"Why did you say that, Cherish? You need to watch it," I heard Fran say before her voice faded away. I ran into the first bathroom I came to, and reached the toilet just in time. *That was the second time I threw up today. I just hope this maturing thing doesn't happen on my birthday,* I thought. My 18th birthday was only two days away and I prayed that I would be human for it.

## Why Me?

“Ale, are you OK?” I heard Fran’s voice, behind the door again. I was afraid to open my eyes, but when I finally did I saw what I was afraid of: more black tar. I quickly closed my eyes and flushed.

“Ale, honey, I am sorry about what Cherish said.” I didn’t know what to say. I was starting to feel like bait. Maybe the Cerna Kocka were using me to lure the Lukos so that they could strike. But once everything was over, then what? What would happen to me? I looked at myself in the mirror. My reflection looked like someone had hit me with a car and then put it in reverse and ran me over again.

“Ale—that’s not true. We are not using you.”

I didn’t know who to believe.

“You can believe me.”

“Would you please STOP THAT!” I yelled at the door. I felt myself losing my temper and tried to calm down. I put my head against the cool door and spoke to her on the other side.

“Listen, I’m sorry, Fran it’s just...I feel like there is more I need to know. I need to know more about my kind. Where do I come from? And why my father and I the only ones with this...duplicate blood type thing?” She was quiet behind the door. I felt like such a jerk.

I slowly opened the door. Fran raised her head up and looked at me with those big sad puppy eyes of hers. She put her head down and whispered, “I am not a puppy.”

“I’m sorry, kitten.” I wrapped my arms around her neck and gave her a few pecks on the forehead. She placed her head on my chest. If only life could be this simple.

“I know it’s...hard for you. It’s hard for me, too. I don’t know how you’re going to act, what you’ll be like, once you mature. Remember in the car after we put down Breaker and the rest of the Lukos?” I nodded my head thinking about what she said. After we took down Breaker, Sean, and their Lukos crew, Fran took me home. She worried so much about me turning just like them, a monster with a thirst to kill and conquer. “I know what it’s like to be uncertain about the future.” She looked me in the eyes and then backed away. “But whatever you decide I will understand.”

I was baffled. “Wait, you think I want to break up with you? Is that what you think?”

“You think we are using you, and we are not. The Lukos are trying to overthrow our setup on Purr Island. Heath must be stopped. If we do not stop him he will find you, use you, and then kill you. One injection of your blood and a human is changed in an instant. No one volunteers to drink the blood. Heath plans on doing it by force, with injections. ”

“That may be so, but wouldn’t my blood run out?”

“Not if he can duplicate your chromosomes.”

“So we are talking about...cloning. So why not mate and make more Lukos monster babies?”

“Because Heath does not want to wait till they mature. He wants his army right now, to inhabit Purr Island,” Vora said, sneaking up behind me and answering my questions. “The Lukos are short in numbers and very hard to find. Some left and now live among the humans. The Lukos leader, Heath, wants to create a small nation on Purr Island. But if they get too powerful, they will slowly—”

“Destroy the human race or try to,” I said, finishing her sentence.

“Correct. Ale, we are not trying to use you as bait. It’s just...”

“It’s just what?” I asked, raising one of my eyebrows, wondering what bomb they were going to drop on me next.

Vora took in a deep breath in. “You’re the only one that can kill him.”

“What? Why me? I thought he was just after me for my blood. What...why? Wait...is that why you’re waiting for me to mature?” I couldn’t believe this.

“Heath is...very powerful. No one can kill him. The only thing that can kill him is the blood of a...”

“Wolf.” I closed my eyes and began to get dizzy all over again. I started to faint, but Fran caught me by the arms.

“Ale, you just don’t know how powerful you are. That’s why Truffle is coming to help you get through this,” Fran said, trying to reassure me.

I had so many questions. I wanted to know what would happen when I matured. But I also knew I was asking the wrong species.

“Don’t worry, Ale, Truffle will be here tomorrow to help us answer your questions,” Vora said, placing her hand on my shoulder, her deep dark eyes looking into mine.

There were so many things I needed to process. The only thing I could say was... “I want to go home. I need to think.” Vora looked at me and nodded her head.

“Fran, take Ale home. But Ale, remember, we need to keep a close eye on you. Call us if you start to feel weird in any way. We will come and get you, and bring you here where it is safe. I don’t want you maturing in front of your family. They may call the local pound.” Vora chuckled to herself.

I just looked at her with sadness.

“I’m sorry, Ale, but try and have a sense of humor about this. Either that, or you lose your mind. And then we’ll have to have Cherish shoot you with a silver bullet.”

I looked up at her. She didn’t even blink. *Would she really have that trigger-happy nut Cherish shoot me?*

“Ale, relax, I am just kidding. However, the truth is, if you get rambunctious and out of hand during maturity then we may have to put you...into a deep sleep. You will still be alive; the sedative works to stop the maturing process. But only if you can’t handle it.”

I took a breath of relief. “OK, I can deal with that—just as long as you don’t kill me. And please don’t let Cherish be the one to give me the shot. She may add something to it.”

“I heard that, pup!” Cherish said, walking down the hall.

My body quivered, but I managed to at least attempt to get her back. “Ooh, your face just gave me a chill.”

She sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes at my comment. “Vora, Truffle is on the phone for you. I think his flight is delayed.”

“Ok, thanks. Fran, take Ale home. And when you come back, we’ll prepare for Truffle’s arrival. Ale, I will see you soon, and remember, please call us if anything seems weird.”

I nodded my head in agreement, and she smiled at me and walked away.

“Shall we go?” Fran gestured toward the front of the house.

I inhaled deep. “Yeah.”

## Love Is Very Painful

As Fran drove me home in Vora's black BMW SUV, I looked up at the night sky through the open moon roof. The stars were shining, and the moon was full. Everything was clear. No clouds, no smog. Nothing.

"So when are you going to tell me about your background?" I asked Fran. I could feel her looking at me while she drove, but I kept my eyes on the sky.

"What do you want to know?"

I turned my head to answer her question. "I want to know everything. I don't know what's going to happen to me. I'd like to at least know everything about the girl I love."

She was silent, her eyes on the road. For a moment I thought I saw some liquid that was forming in her eyes. She swallowed hard. "How can you say that you love someone you know nothing about?"

"In my human mind and heart I know what I feel. I think it's best I tell you now before anything..."

"Don't say that, Ale. I will be right there with you through the whole thing," she said, gripping the steering wheel

"When are you going to tell me about yourself?"

She exhaled and sighed at the same time. "When the time is right."

"The time is right now. We are alone, and Cherish isn't around to threaten to kill me with a silver bullet. So I think now is the perfect time."

She laughed. I thought her laugh sounded like heaven.

“Cherish has a lot of issues. She has always been like that, ever since we met. In our teens.” Fran chuckled, and then stopped as she looked over at me.

“Wait...how old are you? And please, do not lie.”

She exhaled. “I am eighteen...in human years.”

“OK. What about in cat years?” She seemed reluctant. I know it’s inappropriate to ask a lady her age, but I needed to know.

“I am...eighty-eight.”

My mouth dropped open.

“I’m sorry, Ale. Please don’t be mad.”

“So how does it work? When you shift to a human you’re a teen, and then when you’re a cat you’re an old cat?”

“I don’t know. I’m sort of frozen in time. I can shift now but...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know what would happen.” She looked over at me with those big, glowing eyes of hers. I wanted to be with this girl for the rest of my life, but who we are was getting in the way.

We stopped in front of my house. She parked the car, and we sat there for a few minutes looking at the full moon.

“Is true that wolves change when the moon is full?” I asked.

“No, it’s just a myth. They change when they mature. I heard it sometimes happens at age 20 or 21. I have never heard of a Lukos maturing any younger than that.”

“Of course you haven’t. That’s what makes me so special,” I said, sighing and closing my eyes. For one day I just wanted to be a normal human teenager. The worst part was, I couldn’t even tell my mother and sister.

“Just think of it as you’re protecting them and saving an island,” Fran said.

“Yes, but only if I kill him.”

“No one else can, but you. That’s what makes you so…”

“Special. I got it.” I grabbed my bag from the back seat and opened the door. Before I could leave, Fran grabbed my arm.

“We depend on you. We need you, Ale…”

“What am I getting out of it? Huh? Everyone is depending on me to kill a leader—then what? I mean, what if you guys decided to get rid of all of the Lukos, including me? Huh? Where does that leave me? DEAD, with a silver bullet in me.” I could see Cherish laughing over me, pulling the trigger and saying “Dumb dog!”

“Ale, Cherish is…yes, she is a little crazy, but not that crazy. And besides, I will be there to protect you.”

“Blood is thicker in kind. She’s one of you. You will protect her before you protect me.”

She loosened her grip on my arm, and turned her body fully toward me. She looked at me with those big, glowing eyes. And shook her head.

“But love is more powerful. Ale, I…I…love you more.”

I’d been waiting to hear those words from her. I grabbed her neck and pulled her to my lips. Her lips were soft. She parted my lips with hers, and that drove me crazy. She pulled her body to mine as we kissed deeper and deeper. Suddenly I felt her nails digging into my face. Her

other hand was on my back, and those nails were digging into my skin, too. Call me crazy, but I refused to stop—things were getting heated. I left her lips and began kissing her neck. Her nails felt like needles going deeper and deeper into my skin. When I got to the place where her neck ended and her shoulder began, she tilted her head back and hissed. Her nails ripped into my back. I could feel blood drip down my back.

“OUCH! Agh!” I pulled back from the pain.

“Oh, Ale, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened. I got carried away.”

I touched the place where her claws had cut me. Let’s just say that my shirt was shredded and bloody.

“It’s OK,” I said, doubling over from the pain.

“No, it’s not. You’re bleeding!” she said with excitement in her voice. “Oh, I am so sorry, Ale. Something just came over me.” Fran slouched back into her seat, pouting like a little girl in trouble.

I sat up to show her I was OK. A little advice: Never get a girl that can read minds. “Fran, honey, it’s fine,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

“No, it’s not. I am supposed to protect you, but I’m the one hurting you.” Her eyes began to fill up with tears as she looked out into the night sky.

My back was burning. “I’m ok, Fran, really,” I tried again, but my voice was cracking and even I didn’t believe it. It felt like someone was pouring alcohol in each lash.

“Let me see.”

I turned, and Fran lifted my shirt to take a look.

“Oh, my goodness, Ale! I am so sorry. Wait.” She took the keys from the ignition and got out of the car. *Where is she going?* I wondered. Then she came around to the passenger side and opened the door. “Here, let me help you. We need to put alcohol on the wounds.”

I got out of the car, hunched over, and we walked up the front stairs. The lights were out, and my mom’s car wasn’t in the garage. I unlocked the front door, and we went into the guest bathroom. Fran turned on the light and I sat on the toilet seat.

“Take off your shirt,” Fran demanded, holding the alcohol in her right hand and the cotton balls in her left. I did as she said.

“Eww! Ale, it’s worse than I thought. This is really going to burn, so brace yourself.”

I thought she was going to take the cotton ball and gently dab the alcohol. Instead she poured the alcohol down my back. “AGH! What the hell is wrong with you?” I jerked back from the burning.

“Ale, I am so sorry but I had to. The scars are deep.” I held my head between my legs as the burning subsided.

Fran dabbed the scars with a dry cotton ball.

“Don’t I have the ability to heal fast?”

“Yes, but I dug in deep.”

Between her biting me and ripping my skin apart I was starting to think this relationship was sort of abusive.

She punched me on the arm. “I am not abusing you! I said I was sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” Fran hung her head. The thought of hurting me was getting to her.

I knew she felt bad—heck, I couldn’t control myself either.

“If you thought that was something, wait until you began to mature.”

I lifted my head and looked at her, curious. “What do you mean? You know the process?”

She sighed. “No, not really, but I heard Vora on the phone one day with Truffle. She asked him how much pain is involved with maturing. Then she said, ‘Oh, really.’” Fran shrugged her shoulders like it was no big deal.

I didn’t even want to think about it. All I wanted was to get in my bed to sleep. This had been a long day.

## That's Not Funny

As Fran put back the alcohol and threw away the cotton balls, I heard my mom walk in the front door. I told Fran, "My mom is home. Let's get out of here before she thinks something is going on." I put on my shirt even though it was shredded, and Fran turned off the lights. We walked into the living room and found my mom engrossed with the mail she had in her hand.

"Hey, Ma," I said breaking the trance she was in. She looked up, startled, and said, "Oh, hey, honey. Hi, Francesca. How was the game?"

"We won!"

"Oh, honey, I am so proud of you. I hate that I couldn't be there," she said, flopping down on the couch. "We are going to celebrate real big. What do you want for your birthday on Sunday?"

The thought had never occurred to me. *I wasn't sure I would even see my birthday*, I thought. Maybe I'd ask for something ridiculous. "A new car."

My mother laughed hysterically, like I was the funniest comedian ever. "Hahaha! Ale, honey, that was a good one. Maybe I will get you some socks and underwear—you need some new ones. I am a little tired of washing the old ones. Or I may get you that autographed football you've been wanting so much."

"Ma, not in front of Fran, please. We will talk about the underwear shopping later."

"Oh, I remember you use to run around here with your underwear on your head. It was the cutest thing. Francesca, I'm going to show you the pictures one day."

Fran laughed, and said, "I can't wait to see them."

I turn to look at her and thought, *Why would you want to?* She tapped me on the chest with the back of her hand.

“OK, Ma, Fran has to go now.”

“You remember when you use to run around in the backyard naked with just a cape on?”

“MA, PLEASE!”

“Oh, honey, stop that. You were just a boy. Although doing something like that at seven was not normal.” She and Fran laughed so loud the whole room echoed.

“OK! Bye, Francesca,” I said to my mom, giving her the hint that Fran had to leave and to stop talking.

“I will stop. Bye, Francesca. You take care.” My mom waved, and Fran waved back. I hurried up and guided Fran out the front door.

She couldn't stop laughing.

“You can stop now,” I said, growing annoyed at the two of them.

“Oh, I'm sorry. But I saw the images of you running around in your mom's mind. You were so cute.” She could not stop laughing.

“It's not *that* funny!”

“I'm sorry,” she said, holding her stomach from laughter. “But you should have seen your cute little face and your naked body. It was so funny.”

“You should see my body now,” I said raising both eyebrows up and down. She stopped laughing and cleared her throat.

“Yeah, um... so...don’t forget to call me if you experience anything weird. Like an out-of-body experience of some sort. Something that is not human.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Ale, don’t play, this is serious.”

“Now you want to be serious? After breaking into my mother’s memories of my silly youth?”

“That was hilarious. This is serious.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I walked her over to the driver’s side and opened the door for her. She glided into the car with very little effort. I closed the door and she turned on the engine. It purred like a kitten.

Fran rolled down the window. “So what are you doing on your birthday? It’s Sunday, right?”

“Yeah, it is. I don’t know, I might go to Tackle Tim’s or something.”

She looked off through the windshield like she was thinking of something. “Why don’t you and I do something? We never hang out by ourselves.”

She did have a point there. “Yeah, that’s cool.”

“OK, then, it’s set. Now I have to figure out what we are going to do.”

“It doesn’t matter to me just as long as...”

“We are together. I know you think about us being alone all the time.” I couldn’t help that 85% of my thoughts are about her. The other 15% are about sports and food.

“OK, I will come by on Sunday and pick you up. We are going to give you tomorrow off, so you can spend some time with your mom and sister. But don’t forget...”

“To call you guys if I experience non-human stuff. I get it.”

“OK,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me. I think she was searching my mind to find out if I was really going to call her.

“Give me a kiss,” I said, so she’d stop reading my thoughts.

She held up her hand. “I think we’ve done enough of that today.”

“But this might be my last night as a human, you never know,” I said with a sad pouting face.

Fran shook her head. “You’ll be fine. I’ll see you Sunday.” She rolled up the window and drove off.

After she left I had a parking lot flashback. I remembered a few months ago, walking her to her car. She was carrying a ton of books in her hand and wearing shades on a gloomy day. It was hard for her to like me, but now that I think about it she was just doing her job. I gave her my phone number I had pre-written in my back pocket. She took it and threw it on the seat of her old BMW. The one that the Lukos made me crash during our high-speed chase. I still get chills at night thinking about how they had me tied up, lying on that cold steel table. And when I found out that Sean had been posing as my friend for years, it made me very cautious of who I hang out with.

I walked up the stairs into the house and closed the door behind me. My mom was watching the cooking channel. “I really like her,” she said as I sat next to her.

I’d introduced my mom to Fran at one of my games a few weeks ago. She liked her instantly. Fran is just lovable like that. Either that or she had another ability I knew nothing about.

“Yeah, she is great, isn’t she?”

“What were you two doing in the bathroom?” my mom asked, still looking at the TV. She didn’t miss a thing.

“Oh, I hurt myself this afternoon at the game. She was putting alcohol on my injuries. No biggie,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. I felt a “talk” coming on, so I decided to get up and leave.

But I was too slow.

“Sit back down!” *Oh, my goodness, here we go*, I thought.

“I know you’re almost 18, and it may be a little too late to have this discussion with you. This was something your father and I had agreed upon when you were little. He was supposed to tell you about the birds and the bees, and I was supposed to talk to your sister about the flowers and the trees.” She laughed.

I thought, *More like, my father was going to tell me about the Lukos and the Cerna Kochas*. But I nodded, cringing in anticipation of what was about to come next.

She continued. “When a boy likes a girl...let’s see, how can I put it?”

I was too tired for this conversation. So I cut it short. “No, I am not having sex. I think it’s best for me to wait till I get married. So you have nothing to worry about.” I got up and walked toward the stairs.

“Just make sure you protect yourself,” my mom yelled across the room.

“Ma...please stop. I’m getting sick.”

“I’m just saying. You and Fran are getting too close. Don’t get me wrong, I like her, but you guys are moving too fast.”

*Not to mention, she is a Cerna Kocka. And from my understanding we are forbidden to mate. I wonder what would happen?* “Fran and I are...just hanging out, Ma. You have nothing to worry about.” *Because when this maturity thing happens, I doubt Fran and I will even get to date anymore.*

“Well, in any event, just be careful,” my mother said as she turned her attention to the TV. I headed upstairs. I had a lot more to worry about than being a normal teenager with a hormone imbalance. I had to kill the only Uncle I knew of, or would ever know. My mom is an only child, so I knew that if I killed Heath that was it for the family tree.

My heart raced as I thought about what I had to do in order for the Kockas to be set free. I kept going back to *Are they using me a bait? Will they kill me later?* I shook my head and decided to put it out of my head. Fran had made a promise to me, I just had to hope she could fulfill it.

I was too tired to take a shower, so I just lay on the bed and fell straight to sleep.

## This Is Unnecessary

I dreamt of Fran and I walking through a forest. It was really nice. Different-color butterflies flew everywhere. There was a waterfall in the background. Fran had on a pink dress flowing all the way down to her feet. Neither of us had on any shoes. I had on a white button-down shirt and some dark blue jeans. As we walked through the green forest, filled with flowers and trees, all of a sudden darkness came over the light. I began to feel weird, like my insides were making flips. Then I slowly started to shift into a wolf form. Fran stood there looking at me, frightened. Then I was no longer Ale, but a Lukos. Rage came over me as I looked at her. I knew she was a Cerna Kocka, and her scent drove me wild. She backed away as I began to run toward her. Just as I lunged at her, I woke up to the sound of my phone ringing, and my heart racing at the thought of hurting Fran.

“Hello?”

“Just checking to make sure your phone is on.” I looked at the clock. It was 5 o’clock in the morning...on a Saturday!

“Fran, I told you I was going to call you if something...”

“That’s not why I called. Cherish spotted a Lukos hanging around your house last night.”

I really didn’t want to know why Cherish was even near my house.

“The reason she was there is because Vora...felt something. Something just seemed to be off, and she told Cherish to do patrols around your house.”

“Do you guys ever...oh, how can I put this...SLEEP?” I was getting tired of this whole Lukos deal. I was about ready to surrender myself and tell them to take however much blood they needed and kill me, just to get it over with.

“To answer your first question...no. It is hard to sleep in human form, because we can’t hear much with these human ears. Our senses become dull. And to comment on the thought in your mind: Don’t do that. You will be doing exactly what they want.”

I was tired from the game, and my mind was drained from this Lukos crap. “Fran, I love so much, and all I want to do is go to sleep. If the punk Lukos come anywhere near me, then I will kill them myself from disrupting my sleep.” I was so close to hanging up the phone on her. I loved Fran, but I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Ale, listen!” she said, yelling in my ear. “The Lukos know where you live now. They are tracking you. Cherish is outside your house right now keeping a lookout, but we cannot do this for much longer. You need to come to Vora’s until you mature.”

I was too tired to argue with her. “OK...OK...I will go to Vora’s, but what do you suggest I tell my mother?”

“Vora already talked with her.” *When did all of this take place?* I thought.

“This morning. Now get dressed and get in the car with Cherish. She will give you a signal that everything is OK.”

“What signal was that, flashing her gun?” I asked sarcastically.

Fran sighed. “Actually, yes! Now pack a few clothes and leave right away.”

“OK, I am doing it now. But promise me one thing.”

“Yes, Ale we will let you sleep.” I was cool with that, though I was not too happy about sleeping under the same roof as Cherish.

“Ale, just hurry up,” she said, and hung up.

“Argh!!” I yelled. I was not in the mood for this. I got up, threw on some sweat pants and a T-shirt, and grabbed my gym bag. I didn’t know how long I was going to be staying at Vora’s, so I just threw in three pairs of jeans in the bag, some underwear, and some T-shirts. I went into the bathroom and grabbed my toothbrush and deodorant, came back and got my laptop and my iPod, put my cell phone in my pocket, threw the charger in the bag, along with a couple pair of shoes, and I was out the door.

I ran down the stairs and to my surprise, my mom was up. “Hey, honey, why didn’t you tell me that today was the school trip to Seattle?”

I was baffled. “Uh...oh, yeah. We leave today.” I said, making not to say too much, since I wasn’t sure what Vora had told my mom.

“OK, sweetheart. You have everything? Do you need some money?”

“Um...sure!” Hey, I was a teenage kid, not about to pass up money. She looked in her purse and pulled out five \$100s. “Here, is that enough?”

“Um, Ma, I think that’s too much.” I might have been a teenage kid, at least for the moment, but I was not about to rob my mother completely for a fake Seattle trip.

“Nonsense. If you need more just use the debit card I gave you for your account. I will go later today to add money to it.”

“Oookkaay,” I said, not understanding what was going on.

“You have fun. Call me when you get there, and take plenty of pictures.” She smiled and then gave me a big hug goodbye. Whatever Vora said to my mother, it worked like a charm.

I grabbed all of my stuff and walked outside, only to find the pistol-happy nut behind the wheel of Vora’s black SUV.

I opened the back and heard Cherish say, “Good morning, pup, how was your slumber?”

I threw my bag in and got in the passenger side. I held my hand up. “Please, I don’t have energy for your antics today.”

“Aww, I am sorry. You got everything? Your kibbles and chew toy?”

“Would you just shut up and drive.” She chuckled as she started up the engine. I slouched down in the seat, put my hood over my head, and dozed off.

I was reluctant to sleep in the car with Cherish, but I couldn’t fight sleep anymore. After what seemed to be about five minutes I woke up to the car door slamming shut. I jumped up to find that my designated driver had left me in the car by myself. All I saw was the back of her head walking up the stairs. *She is too much*, I thought.

I got out and grabbed my bag from the back. It was foggy outside and there was a slight chill in the air. My shoes crunched on the gravelly driveway. I walked up the stairs and through the glass doors, where Fran was waiting for me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked with concern. I just looked at her.

“Pay Cherish no attention,” she said.

“She needs to be put on a leash.”

Vora headed our way. “I’m sorry about this, Ale, but we have to make sure you’re safe for now.”

“Whatever. Where is my room?”

“Fran, show Ale where his sleeping quarters are.” Fran smiled at Vora and then grabbed my hand, pulling on me to follow her.

“You will meet with Truffle later,” Vora said. I just nodded my head and followed Fran, thinking, *Seriously, this Truffle dude needs to change his name.* I followed Fran down this hallway that seemed to be a mile long. Vora had a bunch of abstract paintings on the wall with gold frames. Even her walls and statues were gold. I was surprised the floors weren’t gold.

“Here, this is your room.” Fran opened the door to what seem like the master bedroom.

“Wow, I’m sleeping here?” I asked.

Fran nodded her head. “This is the guest bedroom.” I looked around in awe. There was a king-size bed in the middle of the room, on a platform that had steps you walked up. I dropped my bag and walked around. I opened one of the doors to find a walk-in closet with clothes hanging in it. Fran come to the door way of the closet while I was inside exploring. “Are these clothes for me?” I asked.

“Vora just doesn’t like empty spaces, so she does whatever she can to fill them up,” Fran explained.

Suddenly questions filled my mind, but the one that stood out the most was *Why is Vora going out of her way to protect me?* “Why, Fran?” I asked as I picked up a sneaker that was my size.

“Why what?” she asked, avoiding the question.

Something felt off to me—things were just not adding up. “Why is Vora protecting me? I mean, I know my father saved her from what the Lukos did to her people and her village...does she feel that she owes him? Is that really it?” I asked, feeling that there was more to this story.

I turned to look at Fran. She was leaning against the doorway of the closet, her head was down. “Your father saved her. What more do you want to know?” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

I wish I could read her mind, too. Suddenly I wasn’t buying it. But I figured it would all come together soon. If not, then I knew Cherish would say something. “You’re contemplating asking Cherish? Trust me, she knows just as much as I do.”

“Whatever. Look, I’m tired from the early wake-up call and I need some sleep.” Fran looked up at me. Her eyes glistened like she was going to cry. I felt like an idiot. “Look, I’m sorry. Just let me get some sleep and I will be refreshed. Right now I’m tired, and talking about this Lukos stuff is giving me a headache.” I thought I had made sense of everything for a moment, but now I didn’t know what to think.

Fran nodded her head. “Alright, I will let you sleep.” I walked past her and out of the closet.

“Get some rest because Vora wants you to meet Truffle.” I raised my eyebrows and nodded my head. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me on the forehead, and gave me a crooked smile and left. As soon as she closed the door I went over and locked it. I stood there and looked around the room, my mind racing.

“What is up?” I said out loud to myself. A question that no one seemed able to answer. I sighed and took off my jacket and threw it on the lounge next to the bed. I walked up the steps to the bed and plopped my body down on it. Before I knew it I was asleep.

### Transformation

“Agh!” I was awakened by a sharp pain in my stomach. It felt like something was ripping my insides. “AGH!” I said again as my breathing became laborious. I curled up on the bed in a fetal position. *Oh, my God! What is this pain?!* I thought as the agony became steady. I was in so much pain I could hardly open my eyes.

Bang! Bang! Bang! “Ale? Ale, open the door!” someone said as they tried to turn the knob. I was in a daze, and my heart was pounding so hard I thought it was going to jump out of my chest.

“Ale! Please open the door!” A male voice said on the other side of the door.

I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn’t open them. The pain was so intense, I couldn’t move from the fetal position. I tried opening my eyes again, blinked and looked around only to find that the room was completely dark. The sun must have went down.

“AGH! Agh!” The pain was unbearable.

“Ale, don’t worry, I’m coming.” The voice sounded so full of concern, but I wasn’t sure who it belonged to. After a few seconds, I heard gunshots go off. The sound ringed in my ears like the trigger was right next to my ear. There was a loud thud as the door swung open. I saw a shadow run to me and felt it grab my face.

“Ale! Oh, honey!”

I couldn’t speak; the pain was getting worse.

“Ale, Ale, hello, I am Truffle... Vora sent me here to help you. What are you feeling right now?”

“Agh! Pain,” I said through my teeth. It hurt so bad I gnashed my teeth together. I felt water running down my face like someone had poured it on me.

“The maturing process has started,” Truffle said to himself.

“Ale, listen, you will be in pain for at least a day. I know it hurts, but your body is trying to form into a Lukos, so that you’ll able to shift. You cannot shift as a human. This process is going to take a while.” He spoke loud and slow so I could understand. I tried to, but the pain was too much for me. I wanted to give up and tell Cherish to shoot me.

“No, Ale, we are not going to do that,” Vora said.

I was shaking uncontrollably. My body convulsed like I was having a seizure. The sweat kept pouring down my face and the pain did not let up.

“Ale, honey, I am here with you. Please bear with us.” I felt some cold hand touch me. I flinched, feeling the need to attack.

“He is already getting aggressive,” the Truffle guy said.

“If he tries anything...I’m armed,” another voice said.

“Cherish, get out of here,” the other voice said.

“Let’s all go. Fran, you stay her with Ale.”

“Uh, what if he turns on her? I need to be close by.”

“Cherish, go outside and clam yourself. Truffle, you and I can talk in the dining room.”

“Wait...Fran is staying in here with the dog while he changes into a mutt?”

“Fran will be fine.”

“Oh, no! Here, Fran, just in case he tries something.”

“Cherish, get out of here and put that away. You know I will never shoot him.”

“That’s the problem.”

My body started convulsing. “Agh! It...It HURTS!” I the cold hand was placed back on my face.

“What do we do? He’s in so much pain.”

“There is nothing we can do,” the male voice said.

“Truffle, explain more to me about this process over tea,” Vora said.

“Alright,” Truffle said.

“Fran, call us if you need anything,” Vora said.

“OK, I will.” While the other voices faded and the door shut, the one with the soft voice and soft cold hands stayed behind.

“Ale...I know you can hear me. I am just going to sit on the bed. You can lay your head on my lap.”

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t talk through all of the pain. I felt her body climb on the bed.

“I put a pillow here so that you can be a little more comfortable,” the voice said as it stroked my hair, which was drenched in sweat. Though the pain was awful, I found comfort when the voice spoke.

“I know you don’t know much about me,” the voice said in a whisper. But it was loud enough for me to hear. She continued stroking my wet hair. The pain was getting even worse, but I tried to focus my attention on the voice that was whispering to me.

“I was born in the late 1800s. My father worked for Vora’s father, Lord Vik, on Purr Island. Purr Island is an island that no one can find unless you were born there. Only those who are from there know the way back. My father and Vora’s father were the best of friends. Vora’s real name is Nyheda. She changed it when she came to the States.

“The Lukos live on a much smaller island nearby, with less vegetation. Their numbers were small, because the Lukos females do not survive childbirth. They wanted our island so bad. We took care of it. We had a castle built in the center of it. That’s where Lord Vik lived.

“The Lukos leader at the time, Aden, would stop at nothing to take over our island and recolonize. Aden wanted to make a deal with Vik that they would get half of the island. Luckily Vik had the gift of honesty, which means he could sense if someone was being honest or not. Well... Liar was written all over Aden’s face, and Vik denied his requests.

“Aden was furious and decided to take the island by force. So they invaded our island and forced us to the outer shore of the island to live. But your father rescued Vora. He didn’t want to be a part of the Lukos plot, so he sat Vora free.

“Years later, I was born to a family of poverty. Vora returned to Purr Island. She told no one who she really was. She wanted to save the new generation of Cerna Kocka, to help them and train them and fight back.

“I was along the shore reading. I love to read.” She chuckled to herself.

“My father approached me, with Vora following behind him. He introduced her, sadly, and told me I was to go with her to the States to train. I looked up from my book at her. I was really young. She bent down to look at me face to face, and she said, ‘Hi, Francesca, my name is Vora. I am here to help our people, but in order for me to do that I need to train the best on this island.’ I looked into my father’s eyes and saw tears in them.

“‘But, Father, I don’t want to go,’ I said, wondering why he wanted to get rid of me.

“‘You have to go, honey. This is to save your life. Your generation may be the only ones that can save us,’ he said.

“It sounded like he had a frog in his throat. I wanted to be an obedient child, so I got up from where I was sitting and stood in front of him. My father was tall, with deep, dark brown eyes and black, curly hair. I hung my head down. I didn’t want to leave my family. But if it was to save my family and help my people I was willing to do it. I hugged him goodbye, and Vora reached out her hand to me.

“‘Come, it’s going to be OK. You will do great things for your people,’ she said. I looked back at my father and he just nodded. I went with her. As I followed behind her I asked her if I would be able to see my family again. ‘In due time,’ she said.

“Vora had her own airplane—she still does. When I got on the plane, Cherish and Lacy were there. Cherish was so skinny and pale. Lacy was always the quiet one. I sat in the back of

the plane, away from everyone.” She sighed. “I didn’t know that that would be the last day I would see my family.”

My body kept convulsing. The pain was steady. The soft voice stopped talking and stroked my hair. It had only been one hour, but it felt like a full day. I was still unable to open my eyes because the pain was so intense.

Somehow I managed to fall asleep. When I woke up, my eyes were glued together. My body was stiff, and my throat was dry. I tried coughing, but even the cough was dry. I moved my body slowly, to see whether it was still in pain, but everything felt fine.

I slowly forced my eyelids to open. It felt like they were tearing apart. I found myself lying on the bed. *Wow, I never want to feel that pain again. Where am I?* I felt so disoriented. I looked over at a big window that had blue curtains covering it. Slowly I moved my body out of the king size bed and over to the window. When I pulled back the curtains, I saw a patio. The sun was shining bright and there were birds of different colors flying all around. I turned back to the room and tried to remember why I was there. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, then walked to the bathroom and turned on the lights. The bathroom was huge, with brown and white marble floors; the walls were painted an earth tone, and the shower doors were gold. When I saw the gold shower doors, it hit me: *Vora? I’m at Vora’s house.* I went over to one of the sinks, which were a gold color as well. I splashed some water on my face, trying to remember everything that had happened in the past 24 hours. All I could remember were voices.

I grabbed a towel hanging near the sink and dried my face with it, then looked in the mirror.

“Wow!” I said, looking at my facial features. My jaw line was much sharper than before. My eyes were green with a gray lining along the pupil. *Freaky!* I think I could get use to this color oppose to the brown color before. My lips were even bigger. I examined my face in the mirror. I was a different person. I looked down at my body and noticed that I had a few extra muscles. *Good*, I thought, *I was working toward that anyway*. I no longer saw Ale the teenage boy. I was a Lukos now. It seems my body went from age eighteen to age twenty-five...in human years. It saddened me to see who I had become, even though I’d known the maturing process was coming. I just didn’t know it was going to happen on my eighteenth birthday.

### The Lukos History

As I was checking myself in the mirror to see what had changed, there was a knock at the door of the bedroom. Then someone twisted the handle.

“Ale?” a soft voice called. The door to the bathroom was ajar and I saw it slowly move.  
“Ale?”

I said nothing. I kept looking at myself.

“Hi, Ale, how are you doing?” It was Fran. A face I will never forget. I sighed as she stood behind me and looked at me in the mirror. I was still focusing on my new Lukos features.

“I’m never going to be him...Ale. I am never going to be Ale again.” I hung my head, and Fran rubbed my shoulders.

“You’re Ale to me. You’re still the same inside here,” she said, touching my heart.

It was kind of her to say those words, but I know what I felt, and I didn't feel like myself anymore.

Fran looked at me in the mirror, her head tilted to the side. "Get dressed and follow me," she said.

"Where are we going?"

"I want you to meet someone." I took one last look at myself in the mirror and turned off the lights. I walked into the room. "Where is my bag with my stuff?"

"Oh, I folded your clothes and put them in the dresser." She pointed at an earth-tone dresser with eight drawers. It looked hand carved and heavy. *I wonder if this was imported as well*, I thought.

"Right, Fran."

"Right, what?"

"You didn't know what I was thinking."

"What were you thinking?"

"You can read my mind, right?" Fran shook her head.

"No, now that you've matured I can't read your mind. You're a Lukos now. We cannot read Lukos minds. They have some special...block or something."

*Good*, I thought. I was tired of her seeking into my brain. I grabbed some black sweats and a white T-shirt and headed out of the room.

The hall was permeated with the smell of coffee and toast. But I wasn't hungry. When I approached the dining room, Cherish spotted me and stared at me like she was in shock.

*I really don't have the patience for her today*, I thought, happy to be able to think what I wanted without everyone knowing.

“Dang! It’s amazing what maturing into a full-fledged Lukos can do.” She kept looking at me. I just rolled my eyes.

“Good morning, Ale, I am happy to see you up and about,” Vora said, walking over to me from the table, where she’d been sitting.

“Ale, this is Truffle. The Lukos I was telling you about.”

The man got up from his seat to shake my hand. He had broad shoulders and was wearing a blue button-down shirt and black slacks, with black shiny shoes, like he was here on business or something.

“Hi,” I said, shaking his hand. He had blue eyes, and his pupils were gray. His hair was cut short and he had a sharp jawline. *Must be normal Lukos features.*

“Vora has told me so much about you. I feel like I already know you.”

I just nodded my head.

“Ale why don’t you have a seat,” Vora said. “Truffle is going to talk with you about the Lukos, so that you can get a better understanding of your kind. I will be in my study if you need anything. Cherish, Lacy, and Fran have errands they need to run for me, so you and Truffle will have plenty of time to talk without being disturbed.”

I nodded my head, not saying a word.

“Ale, there is coffee and tea if you want any. Also, there is toast and fruit,” Vora said, before leaving the room.

“OK,” I responded in a low mumble.

I sat down across from Truffle. He looked at me and smiled. “You look just like your father,” he said, sipping on his tea.

“You knew my father?”

“Your father is a Lukos legend,” he said.

“How is he a legend? He didn’t live very long.”

He sighed, putting his cup down. “Your father was considered a traitor. Which in the Lukos community is not good—just like in the human world. The only difference is, we don’t lock traitors away or banish them. We execute them. If they have a gift we try and figure out how can we take their gift before we kill them. All gifts are powered by our blood. Once the blood is drain from the live Lukos, then we can use it. It is best if the blood is fresh. Once they are dead, the blood is also dead and no more good. This is why Heath wants you alive. That’s why you’re so important in all of this. Your father had rich, special blood. His father did not possess the same gift, so we think it must have come from somewhere up the line. It was pure Lukos, strong. If we mate with a female Lukos, the likelihood of the female living is slim. It is hard to give birth to a Lukos—that is why we are small in numbers.”

“Why?” I asked, wondering how my mother survived giving birth to me.

“Because the Lukos fetus cannot handle the stress of the labor pains. If it feels like it is in distress it will start to shift in the womb, which is very deadly. How your mother was able to survive giving birth to you is simple: You’re half human. The human blood suppressed your shift, therefore your mother was able to give birth the normal human way. Now that you have matured, the human blood is no longer in you, because the Lukos blood has overpowered the red blood cells.”

“So how was my father a legend if he betrayed the Lukos?”

“He is not a legend because of his betrayal...but because of his blood. No one has what you have, and your father had, and that’s the blood to heal, and create others like us. Of course, your father wanted nothing more to do with the Lukos, so he escaped. He tried to live a normal human life, but when word got out where he was, your father did the only thing he knew that was safe: to kill himself so that the blood would no longer be good.”

He took a sip of his tea. All kinds of questions went through my mind. There was still so much that didn’t make sense.

“So Heath, my uncle, is after me to make more Lukos, right? If he is my father’s brother, why doesn’t he use his own blood to make more Lukos?”

Truffle shook his head. “Heath is only your father’s half-brother. They have the same mother, but not the same father. Your father was the youngest.”

“So their mother was able to survive giving birth to them?”

“She survived giving birth to Heath...but not your father.”

“So my father never met his mother?” I asked, trying to piece all the pieces together. This was too much for me.

“That’s right. Heath has a rare blood type. It is hard to kill him—his body is able to heal fast. Nothing really can kill him. We are still trying to figure out how can this be. We, Vora and I, found that only blood from a wolf can kill him.”

“But he is a wolf—how is my blood any different?” I asked, growing irritated. I wanted to know why and how my blood could kill him if he was Lukos himself.

Truffle leaned in closer across the table. “Heath is not all wolf.”

I just looked at him, completely confused. “What are you talking about?”

He sipped on his tea some more, then said, “Heath is half Lukos and half Cerna Kocka.”

My mouth dropped open. “How did that happen?” I asked, wanting to know more about my half uncle with the cat blood.

“His mother, your grandmother, fell in love with a Cerna Kocka. When she got pregnant, the Lukos found out and killed Heath’s dad. She was able to give birth to Heath because he is half and half. Kio, your grandfather, who is Lukos, found her and Heath along the shore of the island. He fell in love with her and raised Heath as his own. When Kayla, your grandmother, conceived your father, she was not able to survive his birth. Kio raised both brothers as Lukos.”

I nodded my head, because finally everything was starting to make sense. “So how does Heath shift, or can he? And what does he shift into?” I asked, my curiosity growing.

“No one has ever seen him shift. He is just walking around in human form. Everyone on Purr Island is terrified of him. He’s a murderer.”

“So why is he posing as a Lukos, or claiming to be one.?”

Truffle got up from his seat and went over to pour more hot water in his tea. He shrugged his shoulders. “That’s all Heath knows, the Lukos ways.”

I sat there trying to assess everything Truffle was telling me. About the Lukos, but mainly about my father, and his twisted half-brother. Truffle and I talked until Fran and the girls came back.

Fran peeked around the entrance into the kitchen. “Hey,” she said, walking in slowly.

“I’m sorry to disturb you. Are you guys finished?”

Truffle looked at me and then nodded. I nodded back at him.

“Um...yes, we are done,” I said, standing up and pushing in my chair. Fran came over and wrapped her arms around me. I felt a little uneasy showing affection toward her with Truffle

around. Even though he and Vora were friends, I got the feeling that he didn't approve of a Cerna Kocka and a Lukos being together.

“Um...let's go outside and get some fresh air,” I said to Fran.

“OK,” she said.

“It was good talking to you, Truffle,” I said, nodding my head.

“I was good talking to you, too.” He nodded back and held his tea cup in the air, as if he was toasting me.

## Happy Birthday to Me

Fran and I walked out of the front door and started walking down the road. We walked a ways in silence, but I guess the silence was killing her. “Whats going on, Ale? Are you OK?” she asked for about the hundredth time in the past few days.

Learning more about my father and Heath was mind-boggling. I really didn’t know what to make of it. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, kicking a few rocks.

“You don’t seem like it. Did your talk with Truffle go well?”

“Yeah, it did. Things are starting to come together now. Did you know that Heath is half Cerna Kocha and half Lukos?”

She stopped in her tracks. “He told you that?”

“Let me guess—you already knew?”

“Well, sort of. It was a rumor, but no one believed it.”

I started thinking about Fran and I and how eventually, when all of this blew over—if it did—that we may not be able to be together. How our kind would never approve of us being together. Suddenly I desperately wanted to be a human teenager again. All of this was too much for me to handle.

“Fran...you know when all this is done? Then...what? What is going to happen to us?”

She looked confused. Her eyes moved back and forth, looking at mine like they were trying to find some kind of meaning. “What do you mean, what’s going to happen to us? We will be together. Is that not what you want?”

“It’s not about what I want. It’s about being realistic. I mean, look what they did to Heath’s father. They killed him because my grandmother fell in love. He was a black cat! I mean, I don’t want anything to happen to us. But I care more about what we are up against.”

“So where are you going with this, Ale? Are you saying we shouldn’t...be together? Because of some law that our forefathers created?”

I looked deep into her eyes, trying to find the exact words I was looking for. I loved Fran so much, but now everything was changing. “We will see how everything pans out. I mean...heck, I don’t even know what I will be doing.”

She stepped toward me and gently placed her hand on my cheek. Her soft, cold touch sent chills down my spine. She smelled like the earth, trees and pine cones.

“You will know who you are when you have defeated Heath. Then it will come to you what your destiny is.”

“Is that a riddle from some kind of folk book or something?” I asked.

She chuckled. “No, that’s from me telling you. Heath is the Lukos leader. Once he is gone they will have no one to lead them.” She raised her eyebrows.

I was waiting for her to finish her statement. “So...they will be free, right?”

She sighed and dropped her head. “Every kind needs a leader. So when Heath is defeated, the Lukos will be looking for a replacement leader.” She smiled at me, and I smiled back. I thought it would be cool if the Lukos had someone that could take charge. Maybe it would be for the best once Heath was dead. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about them being after me.

Fran sighed again. “You, Ale!”

“Me what?”

“You can, and will be able to lead them.”

I suddenly felt nauseous. “What? I can’t do that. That’s not my place. The plan is to get him before he gets me. I am not cut out to be a leader.” The only thing I could do was lead a trail of ants to a gummy bear.

“If you don’t lead them, then who will?”

“What about the Truffle dude in there? I am pretty sure he will be excellent. He seems like the right candidate for the job.”

“It is not his destiny. It is yours.”

As if my life could get any worse than it is now. I ran my hands through my hair; it was in bad need of gel, but at that point I didn’t care what I looked like. I had been through hell and back with the transformation, and now all this. “What will happen if I say no to all of this? Huh?”

“Then Heath will find you and kill you no matter what. Ale...” She stepped closer to me, looking me in my new eyes. “Just think about your father and how proud he would be of you.”

“How come my father didn’t try and stop Heath himself? Why run?”

“Because if he had died, there would be no you.” She pointed her finger at my chest.

I felt like the world was on my shoulders, waiting for me screw up. I had a lot to think about, but not today. It was my birthday, and I wanted to enjoy it. I wanted to go home and be with my mom, but I knew she would be frightened by my appearance. I didn’t know when I was ever going to see her or my sister.

I sighed.

“So...since it’s my birthday, can I get a kiss?” I said, changing the subject. I didn’t want to talk any more about the Lukos or Cerna Kocha. I just wanted to be normal for one day.

“Of course you can,” Fran said, wrapping her arms around my neck. I was happy to have her with me, to keep me at least somewhat sane.

Her lips were soft as usual. I loved kissing them. But there was one problem: Now that I’d turned Lukos, her scent bothered my senses.

I flinched.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, covering her lips. I shook my head a few times to get the annoying aroma out of my nose and head.

“Your scent...it’s...it’s bothering me. Not in a bad way...it’s just... it’s a strong smell.”

“Oh,” she said, her head down. She took her hand to see if she would be able to smell it as well.

“It’s not that you smell bad or anything, it’s just... Don’t get me wrong, it’s nice. I guess now that I’ve matured, my senses are stronger.” I chuckled as she backed off. “Come here, I can deal with it,” I said, grabbing her hand and pulling her body close to mine. I held my breath and gave her a strong, passionate kiss. She went limp in my arms. I stopped, to make sure she was OK. I was still getting use to this Lukos thing—I really didn’t know what kind of effect we had on others.

She opened her eyes. “Wow! You kissed me like it was *my* birthday. I was supposed to be the one to plant that type of kiss on you.”

“Hey, the day isn’t over.”

She stood on her tiptoes to give me a few more kisses. I got a little taller since the last time we kissed. We stopped when we heard someone clearing their throat.

“Excuse me...Vora would like to see you two now,” Truffle said.

“Yes,” Fran said, and she grabbed my arm, pulling me forward to follow after her.

Truffle stood there as we passed by. He gave me a look, and then a voice came into my head: *Don't get too close. Remember, it is forbidden for a Lukos and a Cerna Kocka to mingle.* I slowed down and stared at Truffle, and he stared back at me.

“Come on Ale,” Fran said, pulling at my arm.

Truffle held out his hand and gestured for me to go on. *Did he just speak in my head?* I thought. *Naw, couldn't be.* But anything was possible now that I was living in a mythical world.

When we walked in the house there were dozens of balloons of all colors hanging from the ceiling.

“Surprise!” Vora, Cherish, and Lacy yelled.

“What is this?”

“It's your birthday, silly!” Fran shouted.

“Yeah, but...how did you all...I was here the whole time, how did you do this without me knowing?”

“While you were in the kitchen talking to Truffle, I had the girls go and get balloons and cake for you. I know you normally would spend your birthday with your family, but we thought it would be a good idea to make you feel at home,” Vora said.

I was speechless. “Cherish, I'm surprised, even you went along with it.”

“Well, dog, if you must know, Fran and I talked a lot on our way to get the stuff for your birthday, and she told me how much she cares about you. At first I almost threw up the rabbit I ate for breakfast, but I got to thinking. And so far you have not been *all* bad.”

I was a little sidetracked by the rabbit comment. “Um... You ate a rabbit? Is that what you eat?” I asked, getting a little sick to my stomach.

“Oh, that’s not all we eat, pup. Don’t get so grossed out. You should be worrying about what Lukos eat,” she said, with a devilish smile. I’d been so caught up into turning into a Lukos and killing my uncle, I never stopped to wonder what my diet would be once I did. “Wait, what do we eat?” I asked weakly.

Fran intervened. “Ale, why don’t you open your gifts?” she said cheerfully.

Going through Lukos 101 today was tiring. It could wait. “Yeah, let’s see what you guys got me.”

“Yes, open your gifts,” Vora said with excitement, showing me to a table off of the kitchen, with a blue tablecloth and a bunch of football decorations. “How did you all know I love football?” I said, chuckling to myself.

“We took a wild guess,” Lacy said, smiling. It was weird but comforting to know that they really did care about me.

I walked over to the table. There was a cake placed in the center of the table, with *Happy Birthday Ale* and a brown wolf with yellow eyes leaping in the air, trying to catching a football in its mouth. A few gifts were placed around the cake.

“Here, open mine first,” Cherish said, handing me a small box wrapped in blue paper, with a streamer tied around it to make a bow.

I was a little nervous about opening her gift—I didn’t know what would pop out of it. “Thanks, Cherish,” I said, swallowing hard. I started to open the gift, peeling the paper back slowly.

“Oh, come on now, it’s not going to bite you,” she said with anticipation.

“How do I know that?”

“Just open it,” she said, rolling her eyes at my uncertainty. I peeled back the last corner of the paper. Underneath was a brown wooden box—sort of like a music box. I opened it slowly, pointing the opening of the box away from my face. When nothing popped out, I turned it around to see what was inside. It was a gold-plated football with diamonds along the middle, where the laces of the football would go. I was shocked. “Oh, wow. Thanks, Cherish.”

“No problem, pup. I thought I might make amends with you since I’ve been giving you a hard time.” She looked down at her feet, smiling like she was embarrassed.

“Hey...truce,” I said, sticking my hand out and calling it even.

She narrowed her eyes and gave me a crooked smile. Then she stuck her hand out and shook my hand. “Truce,” she said.

I heard someone sigh behind my back.

“Well, now that amends have been made, why don’t you open my gift?” Lacy said, breaking the ice. She handed me a square box with yellow paper and blue ribbons—much bigger than the one Cherish gave me.

I opened hers a little faster. It was a glass case with a football inside, signed by all the players from the Raiders. “Oh, wow, Lacy, how did you get these signatures?”

“I know the coach.”

“How do you know the coach?” I asked, curious.

“I have my ways,” she said mysteriously.

“OK...Ale, why don't you open this gift here?” Vora grabbed a thin box from the table. This one was wrapped in red velvet, with gold trim along the edges. I removed the cloth. Underneath was a soft blue velvet box, with a golden latch in front. I unlocked the latch and opened it.

I gasped.

It was a gold leash with rubies, diamonds, and sapphires going around the collar. The buckle was gold. It lay in the middle of the box. I just looked at it, almost too scared to touch it. “What... What is it?” I asked, trying to get the words out.

“It was your father's. He gave it to me to keep for you. I never knew what it was for. He said you would know, when the time came.” Vora gently placed her hands on my shoulders. I was in awe of the golden leash. It was breathtaking. But then something dawned on me—not about what the leash was for but about Vora and my father's relationship. Suddenly their “friendship” seemed to be more than just that. Everyone looked at me, waiting for my reaction to the gift. But I needed to know. “What was really going on between you and my father?” I asked, darting my eyes at her.

Vora's eyes got big, and the room filled with silence. Everyone was looking around nervously.

“Tell me, Vora, what was really going on with you and my father? You seem to know so much about him, and he seemed to trust you with everything. Were you two...a thing, an item, lovers? I mean, come on, tell me.”

She inhaled through her nostrils and straightened up her neck. “Ale, we can talk about this in the other room?” she said.

I noticed that my body temperature had increased. It felt like my blood was boiling. I felt like a complete idiot. Here I was fighting against my own kind and forming an alliance with these cats. I just wanted to know the truth, and I felt like I was being given only half information.

“No, we cannot talk about this in the other room!” My voice roared like thunder. I didn’t know where, but it came from somewhere. Vora’s eyes got bigger as she stepped back. Truffle, who had been sitting on the couch, walked over and stood close by. Lacy and Cherish stepped back, too, but Fran moved closer to me.

“Ale, calm down—you really don’t know what you’re capable of,” Truffle said, standing at a distance.

At that point I didn’t care what I was capable of. And I didn’t care who got hurt in the process. I was tired of being a chew toy.

“Ale, honey, please calm down.” Fran calmly placed her hand on my chest. “Ouch! You’re hot.” Fran shook her hand to alleviate some of the heat from it.

I turned all of my attention to Vora. “Did you and my father have an affair? Just answer me.”

She looked at me like a deer caught in headlights, and said, “Yes.”

I closed my eyes, feeling rage go through my body. I felt tingly all over as nerves in my body jolted. *Ale, calm down*, I thought to myself, but there was no calming me down. Something came over me that I could not control. It was like fire in my chest.

“How long, Vora? Before I was born? After I was born?”

“Yes.”

“Yes to which one.”

“All of them.”

The inside of my chest ripped.

“Ale, please calm down. Your eyes are turning red!” I pushed Fran away from me. Her body flew and landed on the couch.

Everyone backed away from me except Vora. Cherish was getting ready to shift. Her nails extended, and her eyes became big and glossy-looking. Vora shot her a look to stand down. Cherish backed away, but kept her nails extended.

Vora turned her attention back to me and said, “I’m sorry, Alejandro.”

*I’m a complete fool*, I thought. I looked around the room; everyone was quiet and nervous. Fran had her head down, like she was ashamed to even look at me.

“You knew this whole time? Didn’t you!?” I asked in frustration. I could feel myself reaching the ultimate boiling point.

“No, I didn’t know to that extent,” she said, shaking her head.

“Ale, no one knew about me and your father. It was something that we did not go broadcasting. The Lukos and Cerna Kocka would have killed us both if they found out. So we split and went our separate ways.”

I was done listening to her. I had to get out of there before I killed someone. I balled up my fist and ran out the glass door—well, through the glass door. Shattered pieces of glass flew everywhere. I didn’t care about breaking the door. It was better than me breaking someone’s bones.

“Ale, wait!” I heard Fran’s voice fade behind me. I didn’t care; I was not going to stop. Vora’s house sat on what seemed like a mountain, and I just started walking up it, fast—faster and faster. I had a lot to think about. I didn’t know if I was going back.

## Purr Island

The sun went to sleep a long time ago. Now it's almost midnight. I've been hanging around in the forest on my own. My vision is so clear, I can see for miles if I focus.

I let the branches and leaves crack under my feet. It's a full moon. Owls hoot, and the crickets make their music. I know Fran has probably left several messages asking where I am. I keep my phone nearby, even though it's off. I don't feel like talking to anyone; I need to clear my head.

I couldn't explain how I'm feeling. Imagine one day being a regular teenager, falling in love with this beautiful girl, only to have her tell you that you are not human, and then tell you you have to kill your uncle and rule over a kingdom far away. That wasn't me. I just wanted to be normal and play football.

I have no clue where I am. I head back in the direction of Vora's house, and turn on my phone. I have 21 new messages.

I sigh. They are probably all from Fran. I press OK, for the messages to play.

*Ale, where are you? Please come back and talk this over.*

*Ale...I am scared. Please call me back.*

*Ale...I love you. Please call me.*

The next 15 messages say the same thing. I hate having to do this to her, to us. But what difference does it make? We are forbidden to be with each other because of our kind.

When I got to the 20th message, it was a different voice.

*Ale...it's...it's Cherish. Listen, I don't know where you are or if you're getting these messages but they...they got her...Ale, the Lukos got Fran. Please call me or come back—please!*

*Maybe this is a joke. Please let this be a joke,* I thought. But from the sound of her voice, she's not playing. I quickly dial Cherish's number. It rings just once before someone picks up.

"Ale?"

"Yeah, Cherish, it's me. What happened?" I hear sobbing on the other end, which worries me. I've never heard or seen Cherish get emotional before—she was always the strong one, ready to fight.

"They got her, Ale!"

"Who? What happened?"

"The Lukos...they got Fran. She went out looking for you by herself. They called us on her phone. At first we thought she found you, but it was them. They said, 'If you want your kitten, come to Purr Island and bring the son of the Lukos traitor.' Ale...we don't know what to do."

I know she is telling the truth. This is my fault. I should have just talked with Vora, instead of storming out of the house like an animal. Of course, that's what I am, but...I should have controlled myself.

"Cherish, I'm on my way." I hang up the phone, and ran. I'm going to Purr Island whether Vora and the girls are coming with me or not.