

Lycanfall

The follow-up to Mortal Creatures of the Dead.

By

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Prologue

The year is 1642. Katherine Dute is a successful huntress specialising in werewolves and lycanthropes in northeast Russia with the help of her two trusted companions: Barley her stallion and Tsar her giant Caucasian shepherd dog.

Last month, under the employ of Lord and Lady Kolovda, she killed Duke Victor Rowandene, a Lycan from the town of the same name. And then, after learning that his wife, Duchess Natasha was also afflicted she killed her on a galleon while at sea. During her adventures and battles, she became romantically involved with a handsome soldier named Christoff. They now have the blessing of her adoptive father, Ivan.

However, not all is as it should be. Katherine has learned of a few life-changing facts: she is the daughter of the two Lycans she killed and is also the heiress to the town of Rowandene and its vast estate south of the town of Kolovda.

Yet these two pale in comparison to her secret, only shared by herself, Ivan and Christoff. She too is afflicted by the Lycan curse. She intends to use this to her advantage in tracking down and killing the head of the bloodline to remove the curse and have a normal life. But for now, she needs this curse to aid her in her never-ending battles.

Chapter 1

Victorious Return Home

* * *

Gostilitsy, northeast Russia

March 1642

Dawn

With two dead werewolves in the cart behind her Katherine rode home to Gostilitsy through the whistling wind and snow on Barley, her stallion. The ragged cart containing her equipment and the bodies from her recent hunt was being pulled by her mare. Although she had owned it for nearly a month she still had not yet chosen a name for it. She only referred to it as her unnamed horse. Thoughts like this were a happy distraction for her since it had been another brutal fight, but she had won. Both werewolves were decapitated and back to human form, now wrapped in sackcloth to deter scavenging birds as the winter weather kept the corpses cold. The ever-falling snow added unwanted weight to the cart, so she kept her pace slow, allowing it to keep up.

Tsar, her Caucasian shepherd dog, strolled next to her, looking over his shoulder occasionally, shaking snow from his mottled thick black and grey fur.

‘Nearly home, boy,’ she said, taking her monocular from a saddle pouch.

She longed to be home with Christoff in her arms and her bed, but first, she had to drop off the corpses to Doctor Alek Petrov, the town’s mortician. He wanted to do autopsies on her latest kills and had offered to pay handsomely for the opportunity. That was why she had not set fire to the two in the cart as she usually did.

The road ahead was clear and, approaching the east gate of Gostilitsy, she smiled, seeing Christoff waving to her from a watchtower. She was a quarter of a mile away but saw him rush down the ladder and mount his horse. Her heartbeat quickened as he galloped toward her.

‘Darling, it’s so good to see you,’ he said, pulling his horse to a halt next to hers. ‘You’re home a day earlier than I expected.’

She leaned over in her saddle to kiss him passionately, wrapping one arm around his neck as Tsar bounded happily around them.

‘Why are you here?’ she asked, slowly releasing him. ‘You’re not in uniform. I expected you to be in Kolovda with your troops.’

‘I moved my leave forwards. I just had to see you. I missed you.’

‘Soppy sod,’ she chuckled. ‘How’s the town?’

‘Quiet. Nothing to report. But I’ve only been here an hour. I haven’t even seen your father or sisters yet. You look like you’ve had a hell of a battle,’ he added, commenting on the battered state of her cloak, and bandaged left hand.

‘The tears in my cloak are from one werewolf. The bandage is from a cut I got in a tavern fight. It was –’

‘Wait, why is Barely covered in blood? Even his tail looks red.’

‘It’s not his blood. You’ll understand when you see what’s in the cart. First let’s go to the morgue, then home.’

They entered through the east gate as men on the top of the guard towers waved enthusiastically, knowing she had won again, keeping the werewolves at bay. Once through the gates, she turned Barley to the north toward Doctor Petrov’s mortuary. His half-timber and brick building on the town’s outskirts overlooked a small paddock where the townsfolk kept some of their goats, pigs, and chickens. To Katherine, it looked idyllic, but she knew what was inside.

‘Doctor Petrov,’ she shouted, banging on the door.

Doctor Petrov flung the aged teak door inwards and appeared in blood-soaked overalls, clutching a blood-stained meat cleaver. He looked anxious, but seeing Katherine, he seemed to brighten up. ‘Oh, thank goodness it’s you. Please come in.’ He welcomed her with open arms.

Katherine waved a hand to her cart. ‘I have what you asked for, two dead werewolves for you to dissect.’

‘Oh, joy,’ he exclaimed then turned, shouting down the corridor behind him, ‘Dima, get the other boys. We have the first two for the –’ he hesitated momentarily, ‘the *special* project.’

With a few simple hand gestures and eye contact Katherine instructed Tsar to guard the horses before following the mortician through a dark grey corridor. It was barely illuminated by wall-mounted candles, as four teenage boys ran past to collect the corpses.

Beneath his balding scalp, Doctor Petrov wore brown leather trousers, a black shirt, and a brown, blood-splattered leather apron. He was a clean-shaven man in his fifties and wore a pair of brass magnifying glasses on his brow. His nails cut to the quick.

As Katherine and Christoff walked behind him, she noticed he walked with a slight hunch, as if he had been bent over medical books and autopsy tables for far too long. The stench inside was beyond stifling.

‘My dear,’ said Alek, talking over his shoulder, ‘following our meeting last month, when you arranged to bring me these specimens, I have made great progress on my work and made so many notes that I’m nearly out of writing paper. I do wish the economy would perk up a bit so I

could buy some more. But don't you worry,' he added with a wagging finger, 'I have your payment ready.' He scuttled across the morgue through the autopsy tables toward his writing desk.

'Thank you, doctor. These were killed two days ago and should be perfect for your studies,' Katherine replied with a glowing sense of pride.

The morgue was gloomy, with only four small, barred windows. But the windows were shut keeping out the cold. In the summertime, they were also shut to stop the smells from wafting out, affecting people buying food in the market. Candles guttered in the breeze from the open front door. Being careful where she trod, it was clear no matter how many mops and buckets Petrov had, he could never remove the bloodstains from the grey flagstone floor. Only one corpse was evident among the ten tables.

'Who's that?' Christoff asked, pointing toward the body.

'That's Mrs Popov. Her husband killed her last night while they argued over the price he paid for a pig. He was intoxicated. Now he's sobering up in the cells of the night watch. Sad, really.'

As the young boys dragged the two corpses into the morgue in hemp sacks, Doctor Petrov handed her a small black velvet pouch, 'I couldn't get pearls or copper kopeks, so I hope silver is okay as payment?'

'That's fine,' Katherine replied, moving her hands steadily behind her back, 'but please give them to Christoff since he handles all of my accounts.'

Christoff dutifully took the proffered pouch, placing it in his waistcoat pocket with a sheepish smile toward Katherine.

'Doctor,' Katherine said while looking at the boys as they hoisted the corpses onto two tables, 'remind me what you think you will find in the bodies.'

'I think that if I grind their bones to powder, we can make a weapon out of them. Perhaps use them on crossbow bolts or even coat musket balls –'

Katherine shrugged her shoulders, 'I'd heard that.' But she knew it was not true. Her father had tried it years ago, but it just pissed the werewolves off even more. 'Try it,' she said with a wry smile. If he did not find out about silver, she was still in a job. And alive. 'Now,' Katherine continued, 'we must be going. I've been away for two weeks, and the stench in here is stagnant. I don't know how you cope.'

Doctor Petrov flipped down his brass lenses, saying, 'It's a lifestyle choice. I started as an apprentice like these young boys. Besides, I've always been fascinated by the dead. They tell us so much.' He chuckled briefly, adding, 'When it comes to autopsies, well, I can tell you about their history even without their diary. Good day.'

Katherine and Christoff bid him farewell then headed toward her home.

Turning west past the blacksmiths and tanners they were surprised to see twenty soldiers outside her house next to two horse-drawn carriages.

‘What the hell,’ said Christoff, ‘they weren’t here half an hour ago. They must have come in via one of the other gates. They’re royal guards. Perhaps Lord and Lady Kolovda are visiting you, but I suspect something else since I don’t recognise any of them.’

‘Maybe,’ Katherine replied, ‘I can’t think of any other reason.’ She pulled Barley to a halt as the soldiers turned to face them. ‘Can I get past?’ she shouted in an authoritative tone.

‘Who are you?’ asked a sergeant with a look of determination as he casually unslung his musket.

‘I’m Katherine Dute. I live here and need to put my horses away in the stables.’

The sergeants’ countenance changed in a flash. ‘I’m so sorry, miss.’ He turned to his troops, ordering them to attention.

Katherine dismounted, leading Barley past them toward the garden path that led down the house’s side toward the stables. ‘Go and introduce yourself to the soldiers,’ she casually said to Christoff, taking the reins of his horse as Tsar stuck close to her. ‘Come in once you’re done. I’ll put the horses in the stable.’

After putting the three horses away, she entered through the kitchen door at the back of the house to hear joyous laughter filling the living room. As she approached, Christoff entered through the front door with a look of pure excitement but without saying a word.

‘Hello,’ she called out as Tsar lumbered ahead.

Her three teenage siblings, Beth, Charlotte, and Irina ran into the hall with glee, first hugging Tsar, then her.

‘How did you do?’ asked Beth.

‘A few less monsters in the world today,’ she replied, hugging them back with a beaming smile. ‘I brought you some presents too. They’re in the cart in the stables. If you all go and unload it and take the boxes and bags to my room, I’ll let you have them before bedtime, okay? And if you could clean Barley, that would be great, plus I’ll pay you for it if you do a good job.’

The girls ran through the kitchen with giddy excitement.

Entering the living room, she saw Ivan, her father, sipping a glass of hot honey and lemon juice in his favourite armchair, ‘Hey Dad, what are all the troops doing outside?’

He smiled, tilting his head, casting his gaze toward the fireplace.

The door obscured her view, so she stepped in, followed by Christoff and Tsar. ‘Oh, my goodness.’

Lord and Lady Kolovda were in her living room.

Lady Ailsa sat on one of their battered armchairs wearing a shining crimson dress and black fur coat. Lord Ladislav was propping himself up on the mantelpiece, sipping a sherry. He looked overdressed as well, in his red military uniform.

‘Hello again,’ she said, shaking their hands, with a slight bow of her head.

Lord Kolovda smiled back, ‘Lovely to see you too, my dear.’ He then inclined his head toward the dining area with a sly smile.

She cast her gaze on a third person sitting on a stool by the dining table. Her first impression was that he was middle-aged and dressed as if he were about to attend a high-society wedding. His red and blue livery was adorned with gems that shimmered, reflecting the sunlight. He also wore a cape of perfect white ermine that lounged around his shoulders, cascading to the floor. His short black beard and tweaked moustache were perfectly groomed.

Tsar growled at the stranger, causing her to gently grab the scruff of his neck, holding him back. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Christoff had knelt on one knee and had his head bowed with both arms crossed over his raised knee.

‘Why are you kneeling?’ she asked, then glanced at Ivan.

Ivan winked back, adding a smile, giving a brief chuckle, yet saying nothing.

At that exact moment, Christoff tugged on her cloak without saying a word.

‘It’s lovely to see you, Lord and Lady Kolovda, but I’m at a loss as to who this gentleman is,’ she added, confused by the silence.

Christoff tugged a little faster on her cloak as if trying to drag her down to his level.

The gentleman rose from the kitchen stool but appeared to limp, a walking stick aiding him. He extended a hand which she shook as her mind raced to comprehend what was going on in her home.

‘Please don’t be confused or alarmed. I’m Tsar Michael Romanov. I have heard –’

‘What!?’ she exclaimed, realising who he was. ‘Your majesty, I’m honoured.’ She still did not kneel or bow or curtsy but stood firm, still shaking his hand as Christoff began tugging on her cloak once more. She gently slapped his hand away and bowed her head briefly before kneeling.

‘I’ve heard so many great tales of your adventures,’ King Michael continued, ‘which reminds me, Ivan and I were just comparing stories about our horse-riding accidents. Your father seems fully recovered, yet my leg still ails me. You may now rise.’ He shook Christoff’s hand and then turned to Katherine, ‘I heard you killed ten werewolves last month between Estonia and here, followed by the Duke and Duchess of Rowandene.’

‘That’s true. And another two this week. May I ask why are you here, Your Majesty?’ Her voice did not falter in its usual sternness, but her heart and mind were doing somersaults.

He resumed his seat on the rickety three-legged stool at the dining table and continued, ‘Two reasons, actually. I’m staying with Lord and Lady Kolovda while we travel north to visit a port town that will soon become a city. I wish to inspect it. If duly impressed I may re-name it after a famous saint. The second reason is that I understand from your father and the Lord and Lady that you are heiress to a vast estate which proffers you the title of Lady Rowandene and that you have paperwork proof.’

‘That’s correct, Your Majesty.’

‘Well, I will travel north and return four days from now by which time I shall have delivered here your official documents, deeds etcetera and award you your official title in person.’ He then turned to Christoff, ‘And as a special gift, since Ivan told me so much about this young fellow, I will award him a medal for his part in all of this. I wish I could promote him but since he is only in charge of a small amount of troops that will have to wait for another day. But I look forward to it. Now I must be off. Lovely to have met you all and –’

‘Where is the queen, Your Majesty?’ Katherine asked. She had never kept up to date on political or royal news or any other news at all. Primarily royal decrees and word of mouth conveyed only gossip or anything significant in the town.

‘The Tsaritsa and I are at an impasse. But I am courting a fine lady just west of Moscow. She works with young children, as a teacher. Again, my courtiers and advisors don’t approve of the match, but love is love.’

Katherine felt hesitant but had to ask, ‘I’m happy for you, Your Majesty, erm... would you like to meet another Tsar?’

‘Another? But I’m the only one.’

‘You’re looking at him.’

King Michael glanced down to see the dog before him, ‘Is that his name? Oh, how remarkable.’

‘Tsar, say hello, boy,’ she said nervously.

She watched with heartfelt amusement as the King and her beloved shook paw to hand.

‘Well done boy.’

‘Perhaps, when I return from the north,’ King Michael replied while kneeling affectionately to tickle Tsar under his chin, ‘I shall bring him a treat worthy of a fellow King. What a wonderful hound. Good day.’

As the guests began to depart, Ivan stood at the end of his garden shaking their hands one by one. Just before waving them off Lord Kolovda slipped Ivan a piece of paper, adding a wink. It stated that he and Katherine would receive word soon that their next mission would be in a town called Doshma, fifty miles south of Rowandene, and reinforcements would be provided.

Bloody hell, he thought, but I'll keep it to myself until it's confirmed.

Re-entering his living room he gently pulled Christoff to one side as Katherine went to chat with her siblings in the barn.

'How's it going, son?' he asked, stroking his grey beard.

'It's a tortuous duality of emotions if I'm honest. Knowing what she is and –'

Ivan slapped him on the back saying, 'You've done great with her so far, keep it that way. Now go and get Kat and the girls and come back to the living room. I have a special announcement.'

'More amazing news?' Christoff replied, raising an eyebrow.

'The best.' Ivan gave a gruff chuckle as he departed.

A few minutes later Ivan addressed them all in the living room. 'As you know our business is never-ending and requests for our services continue to arrive on our doorstep. So, it is with great pleasure that I have invited my *veteran* Wer Hunter friends to be here tomorrow when we shall start training not only Christoff but also you young ladies.'

Beth, Charlotte, and Irina, his teenage daughters jumped with joy, running over to hug him.

'Now, my darlings,' he said, hugging them in return. 'It will only be a small taster of the training I gave Katherine, but it's a start. Christoff, on the other hand, will go through rigorous training, which we all know he must pass. Then, after Kat has been given her title of Lady Rowandene and Christoff awarded his heroic medal, my fellow Wer Hunters shall accompany them both to Rowandene as her bodyguards. I don't know what the future holds for Katherine and Christoff in that town, but with my fellow Wer Hunters, it will be better than being surrounded by strangers.' He then addressed his daughters directly once more, 'The men you are about to meet tomorrow are seasoned warriors: arrogant, bullish and above all professional. I trust them implicitly. Yuri is an expert in muskets. He's seventy years old with a big bushy white beard, bigger than mine. Alexi is built like an Ox, he's about fifty-five and an expert with swords. Vasili is a quiet chap and is a specialist in chemicals. He's also about fifty. Finally, we have Teplov,

highly educated and he has a speciality in languages and swords. He's a youthful chap and is a master of the rapier. So, in conclusion, tomorrow you go out to the meadow for training.'

'Is Kat really going to be a lady?' Beth asked. 'Real royalty?'

'Of course, my dear. You heard me discussing it with the King earlier, now run along to your chores.'

As the children left, Katherine addressed him, 'Dad, it's still not sinking in. This ladyship thing. I haven't a clue where to begin.'

Ivan chuckled, 'I used to know a lady once when I was a young boy. I was a farmhand on her estate. Very aloof and snobbish she was. I don't expect you to act like her. I guess you'll have to pick it up as you go.'

'I'll ask the King, or Lord and Lady Kolovda if they can send someone to advise. I certainly don't want to be going into battles wearing a dress.' She chuckled softly.

Ivan hugged her, speaking over her shoulder softly, 'Darling, have no fear. Oh, my goodness, your imagination... fear not. We will never change.'

Releasing herself from her father's hug she smiled, 'Christoff and I will check the meadow now to make sure it's safe for my sisters. Thank you, Dad.' She kissed him then grabbed Christoff's hand and they both dashed to the stable.

Ivan watched them depart while nervously chewing a thumbnail. He had to reveal to his fellow hunters that silver killed werewolves ten times faster than lead shot but could not demonstrate it. He also feared their prying eyes may uncover the even bigger truth.

* * *

An icy cold, yet gentle breeze ruffled Katherine's bear-hide collar on her cloak as she rode Barley toward the northern gate, followed by Christoff and Tsar.

'Miss? Miss?' a male voice called out from the edge of the market.

She recognised the mortician Doctor Alek Petrov so pulled Barley to a halt.

'What's up?' she asked. The doctor looked so different without his blood-splattered overalls or his magnifying glasses atop his forehead. The blue cape and grey suit he wore made him look younger.

Alek paid for his goods, stuffing them into a satchel, then jogged over to her. 'Miss, I have a question to ask, if that's alright with you? Can I speak freely in front of your companion here?' he added, glancing up at Christoff.

'Yes, go on.'

‘Well miss, I did the autopsies but couldn’t find any lead shot in them. The man had two holes in his torso and one in his head, the woman only had two in her chest. I am confused as to what happened to the third, the shot if there was one, I mean.’

Katherine didn’t want anyone, other than their inner circle to know that silver worked on werewolves. If they did, they would lose all their business overnight. But she remembered pulling out all the shot apart from one that she could not locate. *But he didn’t* mention the crossbow bolts either. *Have I missed one?* she thought. ‘Lead shot isn’t cheap, doctor. I had to pull them out myself. Even the crossbow bolts. I have to go through blood and guts to get my money back.’

‘You’re one fucked up lady.’

She glanced at Christoff, giving him a cheeky wink then turned back to Doctor Petrov giving him a wry smile, ‘My level of fucked up is practically pedigree.’

Chapter 2

The Heiress

* * *

Next morning

Ivan opened his front door with a flourish upon hearing the heavy clatter of horses' hooves on the cobbled street.

'Comrades, welcome,' he shouted, 'Please put your horses in the stable around the back. There's plenty of room, plenty of oats and spare blankets to keep them warm, then join me inside.'

The snow looked heavy this morning, so he felt the need to warm up his friends with a decent hot drink. Re-entering the living room he saw Katherine and Christoff waiting patiently with Tsar on the couch as he prepared the drinks while Beth, Irina, and Charlotte laid the table for the feast.

He heard an icy blast of wind and snow howl its way inside as the four veterans entered through the kitchen at the back of the house.

'Girls bring them in, please,' he said addressing his younger daughters.

A moment later his venerable comrades entered the living room sloughing snow from their coats and boots. Katherine and Christoff rose to greet them as Tsar barked happily as the girls were ushered back to the kitchen to continue preparations.

Ivan noticed Yuri, Alexi and Vasili wore heavy fur-lined coats and looked as if they had not bought any new clothes in a while whereas Teplov had dressed in a cape, dashing dark blue kaftan and matching fur hat. He looked like a royal courtier or aristocrat.

Ivan inwardly tingled at the news he was about to impart as they all swapped heartfelt greetings while they propped their muskets against the wall near the fire and took off their cloaks.

'Gentlemen please be seated around the table. I'm so happy you agreed to my invitation. I have much to tell so help yourselves to a hot drink and the food will be ready later.' He felt elated upon seeing his old friends and was hardly able to contain his excitement. 'Now don't write any of this down. As we all know, mistletoe works well in warding off werewolves and their kind so, I have some interesting news. On Katherine's last hunt, she found that silver, yes silver, is an extremely effective poison against Lycans, dogmen, wolfmen and werewolves.'

'What?' Yuri shouted, slamming his tankard onto the table. 'How did she find out? Seriously? This is fantastic news.'

‘Rubbish,’ Alexi retorted.

Ivan turned to Katherine, gesturing for her to explain.

‘Gentlemen, you all helped in my training,’ she began, standing up to address the room, ‘and my father is almost correct. I found this out when I was fighting Duchess Rowandene. We were on her galleon and about to fight. I fired a pistol at her, yet the shot missed. It hit a bag of silver coins that had been left on the deck behind the helm and as the coins sprayed her right leg she howled in agony and smoke rose from her skin. It gave me the advantage I needed to dispatch her. Due to her injuries, she was severely weakened. I plunged two knives into her ribs as we fell into the ocean. She was no match for me after the silver had weakened her. Christoff pulled me back onboard as the bitch drowned in the foaming black sea.

‘Incredible,’ Teplov said while scribbling in his notebook much to Ivan’s chagrin.

‘You said Ivan was almost correct,’ Vasili enquired.

‘Yes,’ Katherine continued. ‘My last assignment, two weeks ago, was far to the east where I properly tried out silver shot on a husband-and-wife werewolf couple in Ropsha. I had twenty lead shots coated in silver for my musket and pistols and I dispatched them with ease. Gentlemen, it bloody works. After the slugs cut through their skin, they writhed in agony, clutching their wounds which had the appearance of a severe burn. A few more shots and they were dead within a minute and had changed back to human form.’

‘Amazing,’ Alexi said, standing up to shake her hand.

Ivan gestured for Katherine to resume her seat then addressed his friends once more, ‘Adding silver to the arsenal will work wonders for us but *it must be kept a secret.*’ He waved his hands downward then wagged an index finger at all of them, ‘If not, we’re all out of a job. Every mercenary will hear of it and think himself as good as *us*. After our kills, we must remove the silver-coated shot. Do you all understand? And don’t mention it to my younger daughters at all. You know how kids chat in school.’

The veterans nodded in agreement with wicked grins and clanging of their tankards.

‘Now for the feast today we have rabbit, ham, and goose,’ Ivan continued. ‘Kat and Christoff, please inform the girls while you, Yuri, can procure us a small crucible so that we can smelt the silver together in my smithy behind the stable. There should be enough silver in there to coat these fifty lead balls. Enough to go around I think.’

‘Why me?’ Yuri asked.

‘Because no one in town knows you. Or any of you. I just picked you since you’re nearest the door.’ He chuckled out loud, ‘No hard feelings. Ha Ha. Anonymity is key for our future skills and kills.’

‘So how did Katherine get hers made?’

‘Out of town,’ Ivan quickly replied. ‘She did it on the way to Ropsha in a small smithy.’

‘Smart,’ Yuri replied.

Bidding Katherine and Christoff farewell Ivan continued, ‘Gentlemen, please feel free to wander about the town and reconvene here at midday for lunch. The market is remarkably busy today so you should have a good time finding new clothes and settling into your lodgings at the *Fighting Cocks Inn*. I have already made your reservations for tonight, as a thank you, and put some money behind the bar for drinks. Tomorrow you will travel to the meadow for two days of training, including an overnight camp to teach the young ones how to fight and how to survive in the wild. Oh, and one last thing,’ he chuckled inwardly, ‘King Michael Romanov and Lord and Lady Kolovda will be here in three days to award Katherine her title of Lady Rowandene and give Christoff a medal.’ He swiftly turned his back on his comrades to top up his drink and again chuckled to himself, knowing what was forthcoming.

‘What!?’ his friends exclaimed.

‘It’s true, comrades,’ he replied, with a wave of his hand, turning to face them. ‘As you know I adopted Katherine, and thanks to your endeavours we knew last year that she is a descendant of Duke and Duchess Rowandene. She has the proof... and King Michael will make it official.’

‘I’m stumped,’ Yuri said, taking the last slurp from his tankard.

‘It’s true, my fellows. Katherine is royalty. Be about your business. Be back in an hour for the feast.’

He smiled proudly as the Wer Hunters rose to leave but as they did, Teplov remained seated staring at him.

‘What’s up, Teplov?’ Ivan asked with a huff.

Teplov slowly pushed himself up from his dining chair. He did it intentionally as if to make a point that he was pondering his next words ever so carefully. ‘Why does she wear mistletoe today? She’s not hunting or on a mission. We all know what mistletoe is used for. I clearly saw it under her shirt. What are you hiding? What is *she* hiding? She is a descendant of a Lycan. She must be –’

Ivan calmly took a step back and shut the door with the faintest of clicks. He then raised his eyes to meet Teplov’s. ‘You’re a smart fucker, I’ll give you that.’

‘Is she –?’

‘Keep your voice down,’ he hissed. ‘Do you see any traits in her? Use your eyes, man. She’s fine. The mistletoe keeps her urges at bay.’

‘So, you’re saying she is?’

Ivan’s nearly silent words seethed between his lips as he strained to contain his rage. ‘I’m not saying shit but keep it to yourself. Those words will never leave my lips and if they leave yours you know what I’ll do to you. Kat is a good girl, and she’s proven her worth nearly a hundred times by killing what we hunt. We need her. Now only you and I know this, sort of, so –’ Ivan cut his sentence short, having said enough. Shaking his head, he walked back and forth across the room then back to face Teplov with his hand on the sheathed dagger hanging from his belt. ‘Don’t be an asshole all your life. Don’t make me use this. You trust me and I trust you. Just keep your gob shut to the others and we’ll still be in this battle together against the beasts. Do I have your word?’

‘Or what, old man?’ Teplov stepped forward, tucking a dagger between Ivan’s thighs, hoisting it up to his crotch, and standing chest to chest with him.

Ivan winked at Teplov. ‘Just look behind you.’

There was nothing behind Teplov apart from the furniture, so Ivan used the split second of distraction to disarm him and place his dagger under Teplov’s chin. ‘Do I have your word?’ He repeated.

‘I guess so, old man.’

‘Besides,’ he added with an evil grin, ‘you never saw Tsar hiding in the corner ready to kill you on my command. The Dute’s always have a backup plan.’

Teplov gulped as Tsar rose to leave to catch up with Katherine.

As Tsar departed, Ivan clenched his fists and re-sheathed his dagger with a sharp, angry motion. ‘I have made up my mind,’ he growled. ‘After you have completed the two days of training with my daughters, you can ride on ahead to the town of Doshma. That will keep you out of my thoughts, and if you have any wit left in that thick skull of yours, you’ll make yourself useful by bringing back intel on the town and its surroundings.’

‘Why Doshma? I’ve heard of it, but it’s a dump.’

‘Because, Teplov, I say so. If you do this and keep your mouth shut about silver I’ll properly trust you once more.’

* * *

Next day

* * *

At midday, Katherine followed Christoff toward the north gate followed by Tsar, her sisters and the veterans. The town was buzzing with a mixture of traders, travellers, and other strangers so she kept one hand tight on Barley's reins and the other on the hilt of her sword. The unnamed horse travelled in the middle of the group since it towed their essentials for the overnight camp and all were cautious of thieving gypsy children.

'I guess Ivan isn't joining us because of the gypsies?' Christoff asked, casting an eye to Katherine and then her sisters riding their ponies.

'Damn right. There seems to be more and more every time I come home. He'll guard the house and defend it to the death. Why aren't they conscripted into the army?'

'God only knows.'

Once out in the meadow and far from the town, Tsar bounded around the group with happy barks before sprinting ahead to chase some grazing geese, scattering them into flight and bounding across the meadow.

Inwardly she knew two days of training would not be enough for her sisters, but it would give them a taste of what she did for a living, plus give them some life skills other than what Ivan and the school taught them.

Seeing the veterans dismount, she was happy to see them speaking gently to her sisters while showing them the tools of their trade. The men, all battle-hardened veterans, seemed so soft and gentle around them. She was at peace and leant her head on Christoff's shoulder. It was odd seeing her sisters dressed like her in leather trousers and bearskin jerkins, instead of their usual traditional dresses.

Yuri handed Beth a wooden sword and began showing her stances and counters using his own makeshift sword to parry her strikes. Alexi handed Irina a small wooden bow and a few homemade arrows, making her aim for a few geese that had resettled in the field. Charlotte had been handed a short stick, representing a knife, and Vasili was having to parry her thrusts with his wrist armour before he either succumbed to her attack or disarmed her.

Her siblings were giggling, knowing that it was just play fighting.

'This is hilarious but worth it,' Christoff added.

'I agree,' she replied, 'but where's Teplov?'

They both glanced around the meadow while still sat in their saddles.

'I have no bloody idea. His horse is grazing over there, though,' he replied.

'And where's Tsar?'

She called for him breathlessly, casting her gaze from left to right. No reply came.

They both continued to watch her siblings training, but her heart grew restless.

'He never leaves your side, usually,' Christoff added.

She called again, louder, and this time it caught the attention of the veterans and her sisters. They stopped the training and jogged over to her.

'What's wrong?' Yuri shouted.

'Where are Tsar and Teplov?'

They also cast their gaze around the field.

'No idea,' Yuri replied. 'I'll look for tracks.'

'I'm worried. Please, let's fan out and find them. Stick with your partners.' She didn't feel confident ordering them around, but they obliged. 'Tsar wouldn't go with anyone that doesn't feed him pet him or look after him unless... unless he's in a protective frame of mind. Christoff and I will search over here,' she shouted, 'Hurry.'

* * *

Teplov sat on a sturdy ivy-covered oak tree branch ten feet above the patchy snow and grass watching his fellow Wer Hunters training Katherine's sisters in the distance. *I'm so conflicted,* he thought. *My debts mount daily, and this lifestyle only provides so much to allow me to live from week to week. I love my companions, yet I feel torn between staying with our group or running away. It's secure and we have a bond but am I the only one who sees that becoming a Lycan can give me some semblance of immortality? Or better yet, a chance for a new life away from my past? I sit here and feel torn. I know that becoming the enemy will give me an advantage over most but also a huge hindrance. And I kill their kind for a living.*

Glancing down he saw Katherine's dog, Tsar, staring up at him.

Wait, why has Tsar followed me? Does he suspect my ill intent toward her? He shook his head, clearing his mind. *There is no bounty on her head because no one knows. Or perhaps worse, does he suspect my thoughts? No, that's just daft. Yet the hound seems to look at me with a keen intelligence that I have never seen before in such a creature. I've been up here too long. They will suspect I've fled. Yet I feel I can't move from this tree without reason to explain or having chosen which path I must choose myself. Which side to join?* He martialled his thoughts: *For now, I will stay true to my fellow Wer Hunters. Perhaps I shall bide my time and see how the next battle goes, then pick a side. Oh God, I'm fucked up either way.*

He nervously started to climb down, keeping an eye on Tsar, wishing he had a treat to offer.

* * *

'I've found him,' Katherine shouted over her shoulder to the veterans as she trotted Barley toward Tsar. Then she spotted Teplov emerging from a thicket.

'What's he been up to?' Christoff asked.

'Let's go ask him.'

Approaching, she clenched her fists tighter on Barley's reins fearing something was odd. Tsar still did not turn around to acknowledge her, keeping his eyes on Teplov. She had seen this behaviour in him before. She knew Tsar was protecting her but waiting for instructions or permission to destroy.

'I've just been checking out this spot as a possible place to camp for the night,' Teplov said, jogging toward her with a nervous smile.

'Why are you sweating?' Katherine asked.

'Am I? I have no idea. Don't worry, I found a good spot for tonight's camp.'

Reluctantly she thanked him but due to Tsar's unusual behaviour, she had her doubts about his story. 'Fine. Get my horse and cart and set up the camp with enough firewood. There's plenty of daylight left so we need to continue.'

Teplov nodded a deferring smile and jogged to retrieve his horse plus Katherine's unnamed horse and its cart.

As soon as he was out of earshot and the veterans had resumed their training with her sisters she looked down at Tsar, 'Tell me, boy. What do you think?'

He walked slowly toward her with a sad look on his jowly face, but she couldn't read his thoughts.

'What does he say?' Christoff asked.

'I think he thinks Teplov has bad intentions. You know how protective Tsar is. He –'

'He left your side to protect you?'

'I don't know. Let's stay sharp tonight.' She gave him a brief kiss before wheeling Barley back to the training area of the field.

It was nearly dusk when they finished training. Teplov had set up a decent camp and geese were turning gently on the spits above six fires. The girls were giddy with excitement as they swapped experiences with each other about their training before they all settled in for the night, each taking turns to keep the fires lit and watching out for bandits, bears and wolves.

Katherine slowly began to feel her head nodding up and down as sleep crept in. She had been keeping an eye on Teplov with Tsar by her side. Owls hooted and tree branches creaked in

the gentle breeze as she watched bright embers flit and fly. Tsar rested his head on her left thigh, but she noticed he also kept one eye open in Teplov's direction.

She heard a twig snap behind her and froze.

'It's nearly one in the morning,' Yuri said, placing a thick wool blanket over her shoulders. 'Go and join Christoff in your tent.'

'So kind,' she replied with a stretch and a yawn. She wanted to ask him to keep an eye on Teplov but could not risk having to explain why. 'Goodnight,' she said, sleepily after Yuri helped her to her feet. 'Tsar, are you coming?' he glanced up at her then returned his attention to Teplov.

He read my mind, she thought.