

Phase 1.

WAR ON CHRISTMAS

*It is forbidden to kill;
therefore, all murderers are punished
unless they kill in large numbers
and to the sound of trumpets.
~ Voltaire*

Christmas would never be the same. Not after what happened to the Viteri's and the Lazaar's that year, just before the end of the Mystic War. The battles had been raging for nearly seven years, ever since the last Immortal Wolf was finally killed for good, and the monster who'd created them was destroyed in turn. The Mystic world hadn't expected what came next; with their greatest immortal threat terminated, Vampires were free to rise and join the world once again. And Werewolves, largely believing the Vampire race to be extinct, weren't prepared.

The two species reignited the war between them, each having their own reasons, and many were lost from both sides. After a while, with so many dead and no real motivation to continue fighting, except to survive, Werewolves and Vampires alike began to back down and wonder when it would all come to an end.

One such pack, eager to move on from their losses and rebuild, was the Viteri's. Known for being travelers, gypsy wolves who multiplied their numbers as they moved from place to place, they had been able to avoid being involved in most of the battles during the Mystic War. It wasn't that they were afraid to fight; the Viteri's were infamously ruthless in battle. However, at the spark of the war, the Viteri's Alpha Pair were busy raising their three-year-old daughter, Maxima, and wished to keep her out of the violence of war for as long as possible.

Now, Max Viteri was ten years old, and chomping at the bit to get her hands dirty. The war, she'd been told, was slowly ending, and it would be over soon. She didn't care; the war had never directly affected her, as she travelled with her pack and lived a rather full life. The Mystic War was something she thought seldom about, though her family seemed to be nervous about it every day.

"How can you worry about the War when tomorrow is Christmas?" Max asked.

Her mother, Andrea, turned to her with a sad sort of smile. "We have to always be ready for war, little one. You never know when it will come knocking at our door."

Max gazed ahead as they walked, a mass of hulking Werewolves roving through the mountains. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw the welcoming view; the long, twisty driveway that trailed up the mountain to where the Lazaar house was nestled cozily out of view.

They came to stay with the Lazaar pack every Christmas, though this year they were a bit behind schedule. Something Max couldn't recall had held them back on their travels. She remembered her mother saying that their path was obscured, they'd have to take the scenic route. It had added two days to their travel time, and Max was nothing if not annoyed by it.

But they had finally arrived, now. Max prompted a pack member, Alexander, to lift her up onto his shoulders. She pretended that her legs were tired, but if she was being honest, she just liked having a higher vantage point, and Alexander was the tallest in the pack. He towered almost two feet over Max's mother, and from her seat on his shoulders, Max looked down into the wild brown curls of her mother's hair. Ahead of them, at the front of the pack, was her father, Carlos; broad and bald.

Most of her pack resembled her family; dark skin, curly hair, sharp features. But there were others peppered in among the masses that had come from other parts of the world, other packs, other cultures. While

Max thought of her pack as beautiful in its diversity, other werewolves considered the Viteri's the lowest of all Werewolves.

Instead, having a reputation for accepting any lone rover in need of a pack regardless of his past discrepancies, they were referred to as mutts, scum, outcasts, and criminals. Max didn't see that, though. She just saw her family, the people who raised her, who protected her, and who taught her how to live her life like a true wolf.

Strangely enough, the Lazaar's were the opposite. They were revered as pure-blooded warriors and heroes, borderline Werewolf royalty. The Alpha Pair of the Lazaar pack held prestigious positions of power and were well respected. It always came as a shock to others who learned that they were so close to the Viteri's. It didn't make sense to Max.

As the Viteri's finally reached the sprawling Lazaar Manor, young Finn Lazaar was the first to greet them. He burst through the front door, beaming, and ran straight for Max. Alexander lifted the girl off of his shoulders as if she weighed nothing and set her on the ground just as Finn leapt forward to tackle her. They rolled around laughing in the grass for a moment as Andrea and Carlos greeted their friends.

Grace and Sonny Lazaar were picture perfect. Sonny was stern looking, but handsome, with a square jaw and tan, sun-weathered skin. Grace looked younger every year, with her flowing blonde waves and bright green eyes that shone like youth itself. Max never could figure out just how old she was.

Inside, the two families greeted one another in a cacophony of hugs and handshakes, smiles and nods. Max and Finn, the youngest of both packs, circled a table of snacks and refreshments, twinkle lights hanging above them.

The whole house was decorated for the holiday, with red and green garland dressing the hearth, lights everywhere, and soft Christmas music floating from one room to another. Everything smelled of cinnamon and it was toasty warm inside, which was a welcome change from the bitter chill that had fallen over the mountains of California as the sun began to dip below the horizon.

Finn tried to make Max laugh by putting baby carrots under his top lip to look like walrus tusks, but she wasn't paying attention. He threw a carrot at her.

"Hey," she barked at him, pulling the carrot from her curls and narrowing her dark eyes. "What was that for?"

Finn shrugged. "What are you looking at?"

Max continued to glance around the room, searching every face.
“Where is your uncle?”

“Oh, Dorian? He’s upstairs.” Finn frowned at her. “Why?”

Without a reply, Max moved toward the staircase and bounded up, taking them two at a time. When she reached the top, she glanced over the balcony to see that Finn hadn’t followed her. He still sat munching on carrots and throwing them at people. She kept the top of his blonde head in her peripheral vision as she moved down the hallway, until he was out of sight.

Dorian’s bedroom door was the last on the right, and she knocked softly on it. For whatever reason, Max could never figure it out, she loved spending time with Dorian. Ever since she was little, he was always her favorite person. He taught her the things her parents said she was too young to learn, and she admired him for it.

The door opened, and Dorian grinned down at her. She was almost a foot taller than she’d been last Christmas, and he seemed to notice.

“Who are you?” he joked. “And what have you done with little Maxima Viteri?”

She punched him playfully in the arm, and he laughed. He’d grown, too, though she was smart enough to know that he was still only a few years older than her. She tried to do the math in her head as Dorian tousled her hair. He must have been fifteen by then, and facial hair had begun to sprout from his cheeks.

“Good to see you, kid,” he said.

“I’m not a kid anymore, Dory, I’m ten.”

“Oh, my apologies, Miss. Double digits, eh? How does it feel?”

Max shrugged. “Same.”

Dorian laughed. “Did your family just arrive?”

“Yeah, we had to take the long way.”

Dorian nodded. He reached back into his room to grab a sweater and threw it on. “Come on, there’s something I’ve been dying to show you.”

Max followed as Dorian led her back downstairs, through the crowds of people. Her mother waved at her just before Dorian pulled her into the kitchen and out through the back door. Once they were outside, Max looked up to see the stars.

Millions were visible out here in the mountains, and she was mesmerized by it. She hated when they stopped for the night in a big city, when none of the stars could be seen. Out here, she could trace every constellation in her mind and see the images projected in the nothingness

of space. She bumped into Dorian and nearly fell over. He laughed and took her by the shoulders.

“Pay attention, Max,” he said. “Remember what I said about being aware of your surroundings?”

She looked at him, the starlight reflected in his white-blue eyes, and nodded. She was always eager to please Dorian, to make him proud, and always took even the slightest bit of advice as a soldier might take a command from his superior.

“The Milky Way,” he said, and pointed. Up above them, the swirling lights were mesmerizing. Stars dotted every inch of the sky in wavelike designs.

Max couldn’t hold back the “wow” that escaped her mouth. She leaned back to see more of it, her head resting against Dorian’s arm.

“Pretty cool, huh?” he asked.

“I could stare at it forever,” she replied.

Dorian chuckled. “Me too, kid.”

###

The next day was Christmas. Max woke up in the top of a bunk bed and hung her head down to see Finn asleep below her. She woke him up and they made their way down the stairs to find presents piled under the tree. Both families gathered around, the adults drinking coffee and the kids sipping orange juice, to open presents and laugh together, as if their two families were one.

A big white tent was put up in the vast lawn behind the Lazaar house, and there was a luncheon in the garden with dancing and refreshments in the tent. The kids were playing in the adjacent garden, running amongst the tall hedges and abundant plumes of herbs and flowers. Butterflies danced in the air around Max as she bounced over large rocks after Finn. She raced Dorian around the garden and the three of them played a long game of tag.

In the middle of a game, Max fell and twisted her ankle. It healed rather quickly, given that she was a werewolf, but she still wanted to take a break.

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Me too,” said Finn.

Dorian thought for a moment. “I think I have an idea. Come on.”

They followed the older boy through the courtyard and around the house. Eventually, they'd found their way into the basement, laughing quietly as they ran, swift and silent, to the basement storage area. A heavy steel door was sealed tightly between them and mountains of food.

Dorian already knew where the key was. He took it from behind a lockbox on a shelf and opened the large door. Max darted inside and found a box of cookies, and Finn was digging through various bags of chips in an instant.

The three of them sat snack and sampling for a while, passing around bags and boxes of all things sweet and salty. They talked about what had happened since they last saw each other; Max talked about the volcano eruption she witnessed and the time she climbed a mountain and swam in a hot spring; Finn told a story about his family's summer vacation to Hawaii where he got to swim with dolphins; and Dorian bragged about taking driver's training and how he would be getting his permit soon.

Max couldn't remember a time she'd felt happier and more alive, no matter how many good memories she could dredge up. Finn and Dorian were her best friends, and she hated having to leave them. She wished silently that she could stay with them forever, that her family would stay here and become part of the *good* pack.

A scream rang out from above them. A normal human would not have been able to hear it, with how far underground the children were and how vast the landscape of the Lazaar estate was. But these three true-blooded werewolves heard the shrieking right away. One scream was followed by another, and then it was a cacophony of howling and screeching that made Max's stomach turn. She looked directly at Dorian, and he looked at her.

"Stay here," he said. He stood up, discarding the bag of cheese flavored crackers from his lap, and headed for the door.

"Wait," said Max, "don't leave us here."

Dorian turned and knelt in front of her. He narrowed his eyes at her and said, "I need you to keep my brother safe. Do you understand me?"

Max nodded. Her sense of duty had kicked in like a gear shifting, and she squared her shoulders, ready to carry out whatever mission she was sent on.

"That right there," Dorian continued, pointing at Finn, "is the heir to the Lazaar pack. He is the son of the Alpha, Sonny Lazaar. If you let anything happen to him, you know there will be a price to pay."

Max began to feel sick. Was he giving her a mission, or threatening her?

“Do you understand me?” He lowered his voice. “If he loses even a drop of that royal blood, it’s on you, Maxima. Protect him.” Dorian stood up, nodded at Finn, and turned to walk out the door. “Don’t open this door for anyone but me, got it?”

Max said, “Yes.” And Dorian left, closing the door tightly.

#

For hours, they waited. It felt like days, time stretching on for miles, as they sat, impatient and worried and afraid. There were sounds, awful sounds. Finn clasped his hands over his ears to drown them out, curling into fetal position to protect himself from the terror that invaded the tiny room. What was once a kid’s paradise – a closet filled with cookies and candy and snacks – had become a prison. And the sounds they heard up above, outside, were torturous.

Screams and cries, and breaths cut short. Growling and hissing and various other animalistic noises echoed down faintly through the walls and ceiling. Max’s ears were throbbing as she listened, unable to block it out the way Finn had. The sickening racket went on and on, and Max wondered if it would ever end at all. Then, all was quiet.

The silence ached almost more than the noise had. Finn slowly uncurled his body and sat up to stare at Max. She hadn’t moved the whole time, tense all over, still as a statue, her body positioned between Finn and the door.

She wanted to say something comforting, to ask if he was alright or tell him that it was over now, that everything would be fine. But she couldn’t. Something was still very wrong, she could feel it, and Max urged herself to remain still, to stay quiet, to wait for Dorian. After a moment, she heard footsteps slowly descending the stairs on the other side of the steel door.

Finn sat up, and Max held up her hand to signal for him to stop. *Stay still*, she thought. She looked into his eyes and focused. *Stay still*.

Finn blinked, and nodded that he had heard her, he understood. The two of them had never thought of their psychic connection as anything special. They both knew that many powers were obtained as a werewolf grew into his or her ears, so to speak, and they’d assumed all their lives that it was normal to communicate this way. Little did they know, a connection like the one they shared was both rare and phenomenal.

The footsteps were slow, careful, and light. Max frowned; this wasn't Dorian. Dorian was much quieter when he walked, and intentionally so. He moved like a hummingbird where whoever was in the basement now was moving more like a cat. Max took a deep, slow breath.

It's not Dory. It's right outside the door. Hold your breath, Finn.

The boy sucked in a breath and held it, his cheeks puffed out and eyes wide. Max listened to the quiet sniffing on the other side of the door, and then the footsteps began to retreat. Max relaxed her shoulders. Finn let out a puff of air.

"That was close," he said.

Max glared at him. She put a finger to her lips. *Be Quiet!*

Suddenly, something flashed across the floor outside and slammed into the door with a shriek. Finn yelped.

Max backed up, hopping to her feet and standing in front of Finn, facing the door with her little claws out, her eyes burning hot yellow. She growled, and her sharpened teeth protruded from her mouth.

The pounding continued on the door, and Max began to see dents. She swallowed her fear and stood her ground as the creature on the other side ripped the door off of its hinges and threw it across the basement.

Max stared at it; a vampire. He was tall and thin, his gray skin hanging from his bones, the entire front of him covered in deep, brick red blood – the blood of werewolves. Its mouth was stained red, too, and its black eyes were glazed over, staring right at her. This guy was either old or hungry, or both.

"Turn around and leave now," said Max. "Or mine is going to be the last face you see, *leach*." This was the closest thing to a swear word she had ever said.

She heard a *thud*. The vampire opened its mouth wide, wider than Max thought it could go, and let out a sickening, gurgling cry. Max frowned. The vampire fell forward onto its face, a wooden dagger sticking out of its back, and slowly melted into wet, black mud and ash.

Dorian emerged from the stairwell, pocketing a second dagger. Max ran toward him and he knelt, wrapping his arms around her. She could feel her heart racing as if it had stopped for a time and felt the fear she'd been pushing back rush through her and fall away like a wave. Dorian held her tightly for a moment, then grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and moved her back to get a good look at her.

He glanced over at Finn, huddled in the corner of the storage room. Dorian was covered in blood – his hands, his chest, his feet. Even his face was covered in streaks of red and splatters of black.

“What’s happening out there?” Max asked.

Dorian looked at her. She could see the pain in his eyes, but he bit his lips together and shook his head. Whatever it was that he saw, whatever he did, he wasn’t going to tell her. Not now, and maybe not ever. “Come on. We have to move, Max.” He gathered up Finn and the three of them made their way out of the basement. “It’s more than just vampires out there now.”

Upstairs, the sticky black remnants of dead vampires were everywhere. Max stared at the floor as she ran after Dorian, with Finn riding on his back. She didn’t want to see it. If there were dead vampires, then there were dead werewolves, too. There had to be. That’s just the way war worked; both sides lost a little to gain a lot. But what was either side gaining, now? Nobody wanted anything from anyone, and here they were, still fighting and killing each other. To what end?

She wondered where her parents were, and if that’s where Dorian was taking them now. She pictured Sonny and Grace fighting side by side with Andrea and Carlos, the four of them moving together as one. Max had heard so many stories like that, about her parents and their strong alliance with the Lazaars, and she hoped that this was her chance to see them all in action.

As they made their way out of the house and across the lawn, through the gardens and the courtyard, Max noticed red more than black out of the corner of her eye. Blood covered every inch of grass, and there was a heavy metallic smell that stung Max’s throat and made her eyes water. The air was thick with death.

She was confused and afraid, and sick to her stomach, but she continued to run behind Dorian toward the woods at the edge of the property. She assumed they’d find tree cover and make their way to safety, perhaps head down the mountain. But where were her parents? Where were Sonny and Grace, and the rest of the two packs?

Dorian stopped once they’d made it into the trees. He pulled Max by the hand to crouch behind a large outcropping of rock in the midst of the forest’s entrance. Finn climbed off of his uncle’s back and sat, looking sick and shocked. Max wondered how much he’d seen and knew by the look on his face that he had seen much more than she had. She felt his terror, his sadness, his hopelessness, as if it were her own.

“Listen,” said Dorian. “Grace made the call to the authorities and they’re gathering the survivors at the old Indian reservation down the mountain.”

“Authorities?” squeaked Finn. “You mean, Hunters?”

Dorian nodded.

Max's jaw dropped.

"They'll be here soon," Dorian continued. "We need to get out of here before they arrive, so they can clean up this mess. The path is probably crawling with bloodsuckers, so you've got to be on the lookout, both of you." He looked at Max, briefly, then turned his attention to Finn.

"You've got to be on the lookout," he repeated. "Your life depends on it."

They were running again, along the edge of the woods toward the safest and fastest path down the mountain. Finn was on his feet this time and keeping up with the others nicely. His fear seemed to have subsided just enough to get his brain working again. Max, on the other hand, was petrified. She sprinted hard across the rough, rocky terrain, leaping over anything in her way, with Dorian right behind her.

Max had encountered Mystic Hunters enough times in her life to know that she didn't want to run into one now. Her family had dealt with these so-called supernatural police on countless occasions, and none of them had ever been any fun.

They heard the helicopters as they worked their way down the mountain, moving quickly but not quickly enough. Max increased her speed, prompting the other two to do the same. The sound of helicopter blades grew louder and louder, and then they felt the wind begin to pick up all around them.

"They see us!" Finn called from the back of the group.

"We're almost there!" Dorian called back.

Max pushed forward. She glanced over her shoulder to see the helicopters, three of them, just coming into view. Her blood turned to ice.

"Those aren't regular Hunters," she called over her shoulder.

"What do you mean?" Dorian asked.

"The helicopters," said Max. "They're not silver and red, like the normal ones. They're all black."

Dorian glanced behind him to see. When he turned back, he ran harder, his face white as if he'd seen a ghost. "Run! Run faster!"

Max tried, but she was going as fast as she possibly could and growing tired. Finn was falling behind, so Dorian scooped him up with one arm and surged forward. Max stayed on his heels, going way too fast for the uneven ground they were on. In the distance, a red X was marked on a broken tree; the entrance to the stronghold.

Max felt her heart banging against her chest, her lungs burning, her legs aching. Dorian was a few yards ahead of her, Finn bouncing uncomfortably at his side, and she ground her teeth together and pushed

harder. Her legs felt like jelly. The helicopter had definitely seen her and was swooping down toward her now.

“Dorian!” she cried.

He spun around, dropped Finn, and yelled, “Maxima!”

Max felt dizzy and everything was in slow motion. Her legs gave out and she fell toward the ground. She looked back to see the helicopter right over her, and a figure descending from it on a rope. Max screamed for Dorian again, and barely heard him screaming back, as the figure took her up into the helicopter.