

## Phase 2.

# THE ORPHANAGE

*Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all.  
~ Emily Dickinson*

When she woke up, Maxima Viteri was in Hell. Werewolf Hell, that is, which is anything that resembles a hospital or lab. Stainless steel and medicinal smells of ammonia and bleach were everywhere. And she was all alone.

The last thing Max remembered was running. Down the mountain, through the trees, and almost to the stronghold. Until she was scooped up by a Hunter who came from the sky and pulled her into a helicopter. Max could hear Dorian's voice calling her name as the chopper drifted up and away.

She blinked against the faint light now, adjusting her vision. There was no sign of anyone of anything inside this room, or outside for that matter.

"Dorian!" Max screamed. "Finn!" She tried to calm her nerves, her heart racing, her breathing rapid. "Mom? Dad? Is anyone there?" But she got no reply.

She tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. She pounded her hands against it and screamed and made as much noise as possible. Then, she couldn't anymore. Maxima sat down on the small, hard bed and hugged her knees, and rocked back and forth. Her parents would find her. She knew it. They would come for her.

But her parents never came. A woman name Nurse Dee joined Max after a few hours and explained to her that they'd picked her up on a vampire raid. Max tried to explain that she had a pack to go back to, the nurse would not listen. She shushed Max and told her that they would take care of her. She told her that her entire pack was dead.

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After a series of tests, an uncomfortable shower, and a slew of stupid questions, Maxima was led down a narrow hallway and into a second wing of the strange, windowless building. There, she found herself in a sort of common room, filled with other young werewolves around her age. Some were older, some younger, but they were all children, and they all smelled of fear.

Max had heard about places like this; Grace Lazaar herself was an investor at one of the orphanages up north. She described it as a place for young wolves to go and wait for the war to be over, where they could live in safety while their families fought and died. Max shivered.

A warm hand gripped her arm and she spun, and suddenly there was a cool sting at the side of neck and she heard the sound of a *click*. She turned and saw a man with a paper mask over his face, pulling a long white syringe away.

Max grabbed the side of her neck. "What was that?" She could feel a small, sore bump under her fingers. "What did you just do to me?"

"Calm, dear," said Nurse Dee. She was a small, slight old woman with curling gray hair and dry, flaking lipstick. "It's just a monitor. So that we can check your vitals without a bother. It's for your safety."

She was the opposite of calm. Max followed orders, took some vitamins, and sat on a couch in front of a television. A news program was playing, releasing the information of the latest developments of the war. It was a human broadcast, and the war seemed awfully strange from their perspective.

“Three more nests of supernatural beasts have been discovered,” said the news anchor, who wore a bright green suit. “Special forces have been dispatched to finish off the last of them and detain any children—”

Nurse Dee changed the station. Max’s vision began to blur as the screen played an old black and white Christmas movie. She glanced around the common room at the other children, who all wore matching blank expressions. Some were already asleep. Others just nodding off. But there was one girl who was wide awake, with her arms crossed over her chest in the corner of the room.

Max looked at this girl, narrowed her eyes and took in her appearance. Short, dark hair, almond eyes, and a scowl that could kill. As Max blinked, trying to keep from falling asleep, the girl smirked at her, and waved. Then Max closed her eyes, and there was only darkness.

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The black-haired girl woke Max up, still on the couch in the common room. Some of the other children were still asleep, and the sun had gone down outside. Max glanced around and noticed that there were no nurses present.

“Wake up, newbie,” said the girl.

Max blinked at her. “What do you want?”

The girl shrugged and spoke in a whisper. “You’re different from the other ones. Got some life left in ya. Come on, I got somethin’ to show ya.”

Max hesitated for only a moment, then followed the other girl as she slunk out of the room, keeping to the walls and the shadows. Max did the same.

“Hey, what’s your name?” asked Max.

The girl stopped and turned around, proudly extending her hand.

“Name’s Benji. What’s yours?”

“Max.” The two girls grinned at each other and shook hands.

“So, I guess we both have boy names, huh?” said Benji.

“I guess,” said Max. “Max is short for Maxima. Maxima Francesca Viteri.”

Benji raised her eyebrows. “You’re a Viteri?”

Max blushed. She was glad it was dark. She flinched and waited for the girl to insult her, waited for the onslaught of cruel names and curse words.

"That is so cool," said Benji. "I've heard about your pack. My parents are huge fans. We're kind of like you guys. Lone wolves and outcasts fought with us, too, when the war came knocking."

Max didn't want to smile, but she did. The war was nothing to smile about, but she'd found a friend who knew her name and didn't despise the very ground she walked on. The Orphanage would have been a much worse place without this girl, and Max was glad she met her.

"Is your name short for something?" asked Max. The two girls continued down the dark hallways, turning corners and creeping through doors.

"Yeah," Benji replied. "Eloise Benjamin Crowley. I'm named after my dad's best friend. He died right before the war."

"Your dad? Or his friend?"

"His friend. My dad's still alive, somewhere. Mom, too. I just don't know where they are."

The rest of the way was quiet. Max didn't know what to say. She had no idea where her own parents were, but she assumed that what the nurse had told her was true. They were dead, and she would never see them again. It was better to not talk about them, than to remember them and wonder and mourn.

Eventually, the two werewolf girls found their way through a makeshift door in the back of the building that led outside. Up above them, millions of stars swirled in the sky, and the moon hung in a bright crescent.

"When it's full," said Benji, gazing up at the moon, "we sneak out, and shift, and run. They used to try to stop us, but they don't anymore. As long as we come back in the morning, they don't care. But if we try to leave... Well, don't try to leave."

"What will they do?" Max asked.

They sat in the grass and laid back to stare upward. Benji propped her head up on her hands. Max mimicked the gesture and stared up at the milky way. She felt a pang in her heart as she thought of Dorian, and Finn. She wondered where they were, if they were okay, if they were looking for her. She hoped they were, and that they would find her soon.

Benji sighed and closed her eyes, and said, "They'll kill you."

Three years passed. The days were hard, and the nights harder, but having Benji as a friend made things a bit easier for Max. When the other werewolves would pick on her, she had a friend to back her up. Eventually, with Benji around, none of the other kids picked on Max anymore. They'd seen what would happen if they tried.

They still wrote passive aggressive things on the bathroom walls and stuck notes under her bedroom door. Things like, *Go back to the gutter, smelly Viteri*, and *Keep your dirty blood away from me*. Max was frustrated more than anything. She was a pure-bred werewolf, born with the curse in her blood. Her mother and father were both born that way, too. There was nothing dirty or tainted about her, but no one would ever understand. Her name gave her the reputation of a gypsy, a criminal, a mutt.

"Don't worry, kid," Benji would say, even though she was at least six months younger than Max. "I'll teach 'em not to mess with ol' Max Viteri." And then she would get into vicious fights or destroy the other kids' things or plant things on them that they weren't supposed to have. Benji tortured the kids who were mean to Max, and didn't mind if she was caught or punished for it. But after three years of showing off how strong and fierce she was, Benji was adopted.

The Orphanage didn't work the way human orphanages did; the kids weren't adopted into wealthy, happy families with loving parents who sent them to school and made them lunches. They were purchased and used as weapons or servants or guards.

"I'll get out," said Benji. She was packing the few possessions she had into a small backpack, her face frantic, her hands shaking. "I'll escape and I'll come break you out of this place, okay? I promise."

Max had tears in her eyes. "Where are you going? Do you even know?"

"No. Some guy bought me, that's all I know."

"You can't leave," Max said.

"You say that like I have a choice!" Benji spun and faced Max, grabbed her by the shoulders. Both girls had grown and changed so much in the last few years, taller and stronger, but with less hope behind their eyes. Benji's eyes were black, endless holes of despair. Her black hair was long now, straight as a pin and shiny, all the way past her shoulders.

Max still had a head full of wild brown curls, with dark skin and swirling brown eyes. Her eyebrows were thicker now, and she'd grown exponentially in the chest. Her shoulders were broad and strong, too.

"What will I do without you?" said Max.

"You'll survive, dammit." Benji wrapped her in a rough hug. "I will come back for you. Believe me. I will not disappear like everyone else." They looked at each other for a long, emotional moment. Then Benji turned, her pale skin covered in goosebumps, and stormed out of the room.

The next day, Max woke up to find four werewolf kids hovering over her bed, and that's when the real torture of The Orphanage began.

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Another year passed, and Maxima felt more like a hardened criminal every day. She shut herself off from the rest of the kids, would not even make eye contact with them out of fear and hatred.

They were cruel to her, calling her names every time she passed, tripping her in the halls, pushing and shoving her into walls for no reason, and playing tricks on her at all hours of the day and night. Max was exhausted. She'd played the good girl this whole time, kept to herself, minded her own business, didn't start fights, and never swung back on the others. But it had gone on long enough.

She'd been exercising for months. Up at dawn every day to work out in the gym, then she did laps around the field during their allotted outdoor time, and when the other kids and teenagers went to bed for the night, Max stayed up, working out in her room until she was too exhausted to continue. She would go to sleep, and wake up to do it all again the next day. She was, as Dorian would have said, a well-trained pup.

Her whole life changed when yet another investor came to take a look at the livestock and pick one of them to take home. Max was on her best behavior, wanting more and more to get the hell out of there with each new visitor. She didn't care where she ended up, as long as she was out of there.

When she saw the investor's face, her heart stopped. It was Grace Lazaar. Her blonde hair was pinned up, though haphazardly, in a bun and she wore a light pink blazer and matching skirt. Her eyes twinkled

when she saw Max, but she didn't emote. She shook her head, just barely, once, and then turned to speak to Nurse Dee.

Max didn't know what to do. Her whole body was vibrating. She wanted to scream Grace's name, to run for her and jump into her arms. She wanted to ask what happened to her parents and beg Grace to take her home. Max strained her ears to listen to the conversation on the other side of the thin panel of glass.

"Any of them?" Grace was asking.

"Yes," said Nurse Dee. "None of these ones are on hold, Miss Lazaar, you have your pick of the whole lot. Take them all if you'd like."

They laughed together.

"My husband would have my head on a pike if I showed up with more than one, Dee." She patted the old woman's arm gently. Then, Grace turned back toward the group of children, all ages and sizes, huddled there beyond the glass.

They all wanted out, they all wanted to be part of a family again. They were hungry and tired of being locked up in this place. They'd all nearly lost hope. At least Max almost had. Her gaze burned on Grace's face, but the woman would not make eye contact with her. She looked at all of the children as if they were bushels of strawberries, and she was trying to choose the ripest one.

Finally, Grace's eyes met Max's. "What about that one, there. With the curls. She looks rather strong."

Nurse Dee scoffed. "That one? She's been nothing but picked on since she arrived. Not once has she fought back or stood up for herself. Trust me, Miss Lazaar, you do not want *that* one."

Max's veins burned. Her throat felt tight as Grace looked away from her, as if she didn't recognize her, as if she were taking everything Nurse Dee said into account, listening to her.

"Very well," said Grace. "I'll return tomorrow to get a better look. I'd like to observe the entire day, if that's alright. I'll be here first thing in the morning."

Nurse Dee agreed, shook Grace's hand, and Max watched the woman who could save her walk out of The Orphanage. The girl felt like she might cry. Her eyes and throat burned, her fists were clenched tightly, her palms bleeding where her fingernails had dug into the skin.

They were all herded back to their beds like cattle and given shots. Max laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, with tears running down her temples and into her hair, until the darkness closed in and she drifted to sleep.

The next morning, Max was up before the doors were unlocked. She did crunches and squats and push-ups and jumping jacks until she heard the *hiss* and *click* of the door, then she rushed out into the halls to make her way to the cafeteria for breakfast. She felt hopeful, excited, sure that she was leaving today.

Then a foot came out in front of her and she hit the floor hard, face first. Laughter surrounded her.

"Filthy Viteri," said Maggie, the girl who had tripped her. She spat at the floor in front of Max and walked away, getting high fives from the others.

Max sighed and stood up, wiping the blood away from her lip, which was already healed. She walked up to stand in line, and waited for the surly kitchen workers to fill her tray with gray eggs and burnt toast. She was certain that they burnt the toast on purpose.

She choked down a few bites of food before disposing of the rest and heading toward the door to go outside. The yard was mediocre, surrounded by a high fence – electric and rimmed in barbed wire – with a few trees and some exercise equipment, and a hopscotch board. It was much less fun now than it was when she was younger, though it wasn't much fun back then, either. Now she just lifted weights the whole time or ran around the perimeter of the yard. Every now and then, she would see cars driving by on the far-off street, or vans full of hunters pulling down the driveway. It was a reminder that there was a whole world out there, and life was carrying on for everyone but her.

Max jogged, and as she rounded the outer portion of the fence, she saw a long, sleek black car pulling up the driveway. She slowed her pace, and then surged forward, sprinting around the yard fast to circle back to the place where she could see. The car pulled up past the fence, past the house, its windows tinted dark. Somehow, Max knew, without even seeing her, that Grace Lazaar is inside that vehicle. She picked up her speed and went back inside.

"Hey!" called a voice. Max looked to see Pria, a friend of Maggie's, glaring at her. "I was just coming out there to kick your ass, *chucho*."

Max frowned at her. "What did I do to you?"

"Nothing," Pria said. "I just don't like you." Her friends laughed, all gathered around her like she's some sort of queen.



Max sized her up. She was petite, but tall. Max was pretty sure she could take Pria in a fight, one on one. But if they fought, Pria had a lot of backup, and Max had none. She wished Benji was there.

"If you don't like me," said Max, "then just leave me alone. I'm sick of this."

"Yeah?" said Maggie, from behind Pria. "What are you gonna do about it? Gypsy trash." She giggled.

Max rolled her eyes. "All these years in this hell hole together, and you can't think of anything more creative than that? I was really hoping to hear something new and fresh, you know, something that actually stings a bit."

Over Maggie's shoulder, Max could see Nurse Dee coming toward them to break up the argument. Grace appeared from the hallway, and stopped her. Max was sure she read Grace's lips correctly; she'd said, "Let them fight."

"Alright, fine," said Max. She flexed her hands and fingers, and claws appeared, sharp and deadly, from her fingernails. "Which bitch to I have to fight first?"

Pria growled, her teeth much bigger and sharper than before. She had no control; even her ears began to come to a point. She leapt at Max, who crouched down low and swung her legs up to launch Pria over and behind her. Pria crashed into a table and slumped to the ground.

Grace clapped. Everyone turned to look at her on the other side of the room. Grace smiled and said, "One more, I think."

Max sighed. Typical Lazaar behavior, she thought. Maggie squared her shoulders and came forward, snarling. Her nails were long, rough claws the color of coal.

"Whew," said Max, "girl, you need to get a manicure."

Maggie charged. Max dodged, then Maggie spun and charged again. Max swung out with a clawed hand and slashed the other girl in the face. Blood sprayed the wolves that stood around them in a circle. Maggie didn't back down, and neither did Max.

Max punched her in the other side of her face, then brought up a leg and kicked Maggie in the stomach, launching her across the room to crash into another table and a stack of chairs. It all came tumbling down on top of her.

Grace was clapping again, and now so was Nurse Dee. Max looked around at all the other werewolves, and saw fear in their eyes. They were afraid of her. She looked each of them in the eye before walking over to

stand before Grace Lazaar. She knelt before her and said, "Whatever it is you want me to do, I will do it if you take me away from this place."

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Max waited impatiently for all the proper paperwork to be signed. Sitting outside Nurse Dee's office, she overheard some of their conversation, but all Max really knew was Grace's cover story. She needed to hire extra protection for her injured husband, and wanted a strong female werewolf who she could train. Max was, supposedly, going to be that werewolf.

After the business end of things was taken care of, Max took her small bag of belongings and followed Grace and Nurse Dee, through multiple locked doors, to the front entrance. She didn't feel the need to say goodbye to any of the others. She despised them all and now they were afraid of her.

Outside the front of the building, a truck was parked. It had a small covered trailer attached to it and inside the trailer was a cage. Max stopped.

"It's okay, dear," said Grace. She looked at Max with wide eyes. "It's just until we get to the house. You'll be fine in there."

Max shook her head. "No."

"Please," Grace said, her teeth clenched.

Nurse Dee stepped toward Max and said, "If you'd like to stay here with us, that is always an option."

Max turned and frowned fearfully at her.

"If not," said Nurse Dee, "then get in the damn cage."

After a few deep breaths and scornful looks at Grace, Max stepped shakily toward the trailer. There were men in paper masks, six of them, lining her path there, as if she would try to run away. They each held a long stick with an electric blue tip. Max knew what those felt like all too well.

She climbed into the cage and gazed out at Grace as the men closed up the trailer and Max was shrouded in darkness. She steadied her breath and closed her eyes, tried to picture a fond memory. This was it, she was finally free. Once they got back to the house, she could be part of the family again. She could get some answers about her parents, her pack. She could finally see Dorian again, and Finn.

After a few minutes, the trailer started to move. It went a bit faster, and a bit faster, and bounced along the driveway before turning onto a slightly smoother road. It wasn't at all comfortable. She rode like this for a few minutes, dreading the long ride ahead. Her back already ached and she'd already bumped her head against the ceiling four times. Then suddenly, the trailer stopped.

Max heard voices outside, talking. She strained to listen, but could only pick up a few words and sounds. She heard feet shuffling. Then, a choking noise, and a cough. And then, she could have sworn that she heard Grace clapping.

With a metallic screech, the trailer opened and Max squinted against the sudden bright light. At first, she wasn't sure who she was looking at. But after a moment, her eyes adjusted, and she saw his familiar eyes, his bright smile, the unmistakable shape of his face.

"Dorian." Max scrambled out and threw herself into his arms. He held her up, her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, and she felt like a child again. Dorian tucked his face into her hair.

"You're alive," he said, as if it were the best news he'd ever heard. He could say nothing else, either. "You're alive," he repeated. "You're alive, you're alive, you're alive."

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No one was more excited to see Max than Finn was. He screamed at an impossible octave and tackled her to the floor the moment she walked into the house. Even Sonny was happy to see her. But the mood changed when Max noticed that Sonny was sitting in a wheel chair.

Max had noticed many things upon being reunited with the Lazaar's; Dorian was eighteen now and had the stature of a young man, and he was very handsome; Finn had grown, too, and was awkwardly tall and thin with wiry muscles, like a greyhound; Grace was as beautiful as ever, but she looked tired and worn and like her clothes hadn't been washed in ages. But this, finding the Alpha of the Lazaar pack laid up in a wheel chair... Max was chilled to the core.

"What happened?" she asked, immediately.

Dorian nudged her. "Tactless."

"Sorry," Max said.

Sonny chuckled. "How old are you now, Max?"

"I'll be fifteen in a month, sir," Max replied.

"So much time has passed," said Sonny. His round eyes were sad, his hair graying, his skin bore scars and wrinkles. "I see a lot of your mother when I look at you. Andrea Viteri was a good woman. A good wolf. A good mother."

Max swallowed hard. "They're dead, aren't they?"

Sonny's head drooped, and he nodded. "I got shot in the back with one of those darts of bane. Your mother was trying to help me." He sniffled. "I told her to go on, but she was dutiful and wouldn't take no for an answer. She told me I was more important than she was. Said I was the leader and my people needed me." Sonny looked up at Max with tears in his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Maxima. They killed her. And your daddy, he helped pull me to safety and he went after those hunters that killed her, and they got him, too. It's all my fault they're dead, Max, I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

Grace moved across the room and rested a hand on Sonny's shoulder. They were like a broken Barbie and Ken, left in the bottom of the toy box for a decade. Max felt sorry for Sonny, carrying this burden on his back all these years.

"It wasn't your fault," she said. Her voice was small, but clear. "My parents loved you, and they would have done anything for you. As would I. I was ready to die for Finn that night." She looked over her shoulder at him, briefly, hardly believing that he was the same boy who cowered behind her in the storage room that night. "I would die for any of you." Now her gaze rested on Dorian for a moment, until she looked back to Sonny. "This war isn't your fault."

Sonny smiled at her. "Thank you."

"If I learned anything while I was in that orphanage, it was that friends and family are the reason life is worth living. Without a pack, we're nothing more than blood and bones. And names." She looked down at the back of her hand, where a tiny mark had been burned, signifying what pack she belonged to.

Sonny eyed her, then smirked. "Would you like to pledge your allegiance to this pack right now? And you can have any name you choose."

Max knew the ways of the old wolves, and she knew that Sonny was a sucker for tradition. She stood before him and recited the ancient werewolf Pledge of Packhood, with her hand across her heart. "I am your weapon. I am your wall. Whatever task is laid upon me, I will carry it out in your name. You can trust me to guide you, protect you, and obey you

in all things. I, Maxima Viteri, pledge my allegiance to you, Sonny Lazaar, and the pack that you claim.”

Behind her, Max heard Finn snicker. She was pretty sure she heard Dorian whisper, “Suck up.” But she kept her posture straight and her face stern.

Sonny grabbed at Grace’s hand and started to stand. Dorian and Finn both watched in awe. Grace held Sonny up as he held out his hand toward Max. The girl took Sonny’s hand and shook it.

“It would be an honor,” said Sonny, “to have a Viteri on my team. Welcome to the pack, Maxima Viteri-Lazaar.”