Because of a Bear

Because of a bear, the fates of two are entwined.

Robert Wolfe was enjoying his rest after a long day’s work, when something awoke the werewolf. He walked to his window, gasped in shock, and yelled, “Hey! Get away from him!”

“What is it?” Julia asked, awoken by the commotion.

“There’s a bear on the ground, a very large one, and it’s attacked William,” Robert all but yelled. “Keep the kids inside, and make sure that the barn door is secure. I’ll deal with the bear!”

He ran down the stairs, punched the code for his gun safe, messing up twice in his haste, before finally getting it right. He grabbed the high power killing rifle, and a box of bullets, loading the firearm as he ran. All but kicking down his front door, he aimed, and fired, the roar of the firearm almost as loud as the roar from the bear, as it took off, missing a large chunk of fur, right out the open gate.

Julia came out to meet him. “Did you kill it?”

Robert sighed. “The front gate was open.” He passed the firearm to his wife. “Keep me covered, just in case That one was big enough to swallow a human whole.” He then ran out, stopping at a huddled and bloody mess. “William?”

“I’m sorry,” came the weak response from the badly injured human.. “I was trying to shut the gate when it came out of nowhere. It got me good.”

Robert took a look. It didn’t take a degree in veterinary school or a passing grade in human biology to let Robert know that his aging Prime Grade Breeder, and Herd Leader, and someone he’d called in private moments, a friend, since boyhood, was dying.

“Is there anything you want me to do for you?” Robert asked, as he knelt down, to hold the dying human’s hand. “Any special requests, ways you want done up, or to be remembered.”

William coughed. “Place my bones in pet cemetery. Name a son after me. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Robert nodded. “Tell my sire I said hi.”

A bloody smile came to the human’s lips, as their last breath escaped their body.

A sigh came to Robert’s lips, as the werewolf walked up to the gate, and made sure that it was shut, the electricity on. He then walked over to the body, lifted it up, and carried it to the storage building. Then, he went through the process of collecting what genetic material he could, before gutting and deboning the human. Prime Grade meat wasn’t to be wasted, regardless of the situation.

At around the same time, a group of hunters were sitting around a campfire, laughing as sections of a deer roasted.

“That was a beauty of a shot with your bow, son,” the one said, to the youngest. “Nailed it just right – no spoiling of any prime organ meat and the antlers will make for a nice trophy to hang on your wall.”

“Thanks dad,” the young hunter said. “Think we’ll be able to capture a human come sunrise?”

“The signs are rather clear,” said another hunter, who was the hired tracker. “There are at least twenty of them.”

“What if they come to the camp during the night?” the young one asked. “There are stories of hunters that get their throats slit, and robbed.”

Yet another hunter scoffed. “Humans run from vampires and werewolves like us,” they said. “They are nothing more than prey, for blood and meat.”

“Is that what you really think, that we’re nothing more than just blood and meat?”

The hunters looked, and watched as a male human walked into the camp, bolder than most travelers. The human thrusted with their spear, stabbed a section of venison that had been set aside to cool, lifted it to his mouth, and started eating it.

The human looked at the younger hunter. “How old are you, pup?”

“Sixteen,” the young werewolf said.

The human looked at the older werewolf, which was the younger one’s father. “I was fifteen when my parents were killed. Mother was braindeaded, for me and her had been taken to one of those blood places. They’d started with her first. My father managed to break into the place, freeing me. However, he was severely wounded, and dying. Told me to get out of the place, as he set it on fire. Your son’s luckier than me in that regard – had you a year longer than I had mine. Will he continue to stay lucky? Or, will he end up short a father, like I did?”

“Just who do you think you are, saying such things?” the father asked. “I don’t take kindly to threats.”

The human took another bite of the meat. “John Wrangler, and last I knew, my blood was worth fifty thousand to the right buyer.” He looked at the one that claimed that humans were nothing but blood and meat. “Hey bat-boy – hands where I can see them.”

“Do you think that you can scare me?” the vampire asked, with a chuckle. “I mean, your spear is occupied.”

John took another bite, just as the vampire made his move. At the same time, John made a move of his own.

The vampire screamed in pain, as he looked at his hand, a knife sticking into it, and piercing the wooden handle of the handgun he’d been reaching for.

“It’s easy to carry knives as backup weapons,” said John, turning away from the vampire. “Count your blessings I didn’t go for your throat.” He finished the meat off, and looked the tracker. “Show me the capture tags.”

“Why should he do that?” the father werewolf asked.

“If you have capture tags, I’ll let you all live,” said John. “Otherwise, only the cub will be allowed to survive the night.” He turned to look at the young one. “The stories about hunters getting their throats slit in their sleep are true – there’s some that do that. Not my style though – I like killing them when they are awake. I like watching as their arrogance becomes fear, because there’s something out there more dangerous than them – me.”

He looked back at the tracker, who had pulled out the capture tags. He looked at them, and then he looked at the young one. “Your luck still holds. Your father gets to survive the night.”

Stabbing another piece of cooling meat, John walked over to the vampire, placed a foot on their wrist, and yanked the knife out of the handgun, and hand. He then wiped it off on the vampire’s shirt, and sheathed it.

“Drink some blood, and that should heal up fine,” he said. “Come morning, leave camp, and leave this place. Otherwise, as I’ve said, only the cub will be allowed to live.” He walked away, vanishing into the brush.

At this, the tracker started packing things up.

“What are you doing?” the vampire asked. “We’re not leaving.”

“Then you go without me,” the tracker said. “I’ve been in the business long enough to know when a Feral comes into your camp, unafraid, steals your food, injures you, yet lets you live, you do as he says. Otherwise, the next time you meet, you’ll end up dead.” He looked at the father werewolf. “You and your son have just encountered what’s known in the business as a Dangerous Feral. Instead of running away, that one will hunt you down, and kill you.” He pulled out a small blood pouch, and tossed it to the vampire. “That should be enough to heal your hand.”

“Well, I’m not running away,” the vampire said. “Fangs don’t back down from a challenge.”

“Any connection to a Marcus Fang?” the tracker asked. “Large blood producer?”

“That’s my cousin,” the vampire said. “Come morning, I’ll be hunting that one down. Fifty thousand per ounce ten years ago, worth a lot more now.”

The tracker looked at the father werewolf. “Do you intend to go after him too, or do you want to go back?”

The father looked at his son, and saw the fear in the young werewolf’s eyes. “I’ll head back, along with my son. As you’ve said, that one’s Dangerous.”

“In that case, say ‘Good Bye’ to Mr. Fang,” the tracker said, as he continued to pack. “He won’t be around to see tomorrow night.”

“What makes you say that?” the vampire asked.

“In the last five years, any time someone connected to Marcus Fang decides to hunt humans, and the herd they go after is that of the Wranglers, the hunter ends up dead,” the tracker said. “Most other hunters, unless they are poachers, simply get busted bones and other healable injuries. Poachers though, they end up dead.”

The vampire scoffed at this, as they drank the blood, healing his injury. “I’m not afraid of them.”

“Neither are they afraid of you.”

The next afternoon, Robert finished laying William’s bones in the ground, carefully arranging them in their proper placement. Breakfast had been bittersweet – sweet for the fact that the meat had been delicious, bitter because the human had been around since he was a cub, and had been like an uncle, or something. As his father had said, lines between those with a long, and strong, relationship between owner and livestock often blurred. William was more than just livestock, he’d been family. Thus, his request to have his bones placed in the pet cemetery was one that Robert had been willing to grant.

“I’m going to miss you, William,” Robert said. He then filled in the hole, and placed a temporary marker for the grave. He then walked up to a tree upon a hill, which overlooked almost everything. He looked at the livestock, who had been watching the burial of their herd leader and protector, among other things – for a number, William had been their mate, or father.

Robert sighed. He was going to need to locate another Prime Grade male – either through purchasing, or capturing them himself.

Julia walked up to him. “Anything wrong?”

“Aside from William’s death, do we have any money that’s not been already spent, or tied up, on things we need?” Robert asked. “A good Prime Grade buck is going to cost five million, and that’s if we’re lucky. The few we already have are too young for breeding still. If we can find one that’s cheap, say a million, we’d be alright.”

“What about Feral ones?” Julia suggested. “Perhaps the local herds have an older one that wouldn’t mind spending the rest of their days on a farm.”

Robert chuckled. “Something to think on. Most Feral Humans don’t just decide to become livestock, even if they have injuries that would make survival in the wild difficult.”

“I’ll see what extra money we have,” said Julia.

Meanwhile, Mr. Fang was having his own issues. With the tracker baling on him, taking the other two, things were not going according to plan. Initially, he’d found a lot of signs of humans – things seemed good. But now, it felt like things had changed. Instead of feeling like a Hunter, he was feeling like the Hunted.

It was at that moment, he heard a sound. He turned, only for an arrow to enter his main shoulder, the pain forcing him to drop his handgun, as he screamed. He tried to reach for the firearm with his off-hand, only for a second arrow to pierce his other shoulder. He looked up, and watched as John appeared before him, with a hunting bow, and a quiver full of arrows.

“Not as fancy as a store-bought set of arrows, but sharpened sticks with goose feathers do the job against deer,” John said. “Seems to be just as effective against vampires.” They pulled out another arrow, nocked it, and looked at Mr. Fang. “How does it feel to be hunted, Mr. Fang?”

“What do you want?” Mr. Fang asked.

“To give you the chance my mother and father didn’t have,” John said. “Start running.” He pulled the bowstring, and arrow, back, and released it, the arrow going through the side of the vampire’s mouth, taking out a fang in the process.

Mr. Fang’s eyes widened at this. He started running away from the human.

A grin came to John’s face, as he nocked the arrow, and loosed it at the vampire, hitting them in the back of the leg.

Mr. Fang started to hobble, as a result.

“What’s it like?” John shouted, as he walked forward. “You said that humans were just prey – nothing but blood and meat. How does it feel to be reduced to that level?” He nocked and loosed another arrow, hitting the vampire in the other leg, forcing them to the ground, breaking the arrows in his shoulders.

John placed the bow on his back, thanks to the use of a nail and piece of plastic tubing. He then pulled out a nice long machete, walked over to a sapling, and chopped it down. He then sharpened a point on the one end of it.

Mr. Fang rolled, to try to look at him, breaking the arrows in his legs. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Heard about some vampire about five hundred years ago in this one book I stole,” said John, as they looked at the sharpened sapling. “They liked to impale the human slaves and pets of his enemies, before collecting their blood. I think it’s fitting that the relative of a blood producer experiences what it’s like to lose a lot of blood rather quickly.” They started to walk towards the vampire.

“Please, don’t,” Mr. Fang pleaded. “I have a wife, and a son.”

“I had a mother and a father, and your cousin took them from me,” John said, as he readied his improvised spear. “Of course, if it makes you feel better, I too have a mate and a son. You were going to take me from them. Looks like I’m taking you from yours.” He made to stab the vampire, only to stop, and look up. He then chuckled. “Well, change of plans. Looks like I won’t be taking you from your family.” He pointed. “They will.” He then started running.

Mr. Fang looked, and saw a rather large bear missing a large patch of fur coming towards him. He only had enough time to scream once, before the bear chomped on his neck.

That night, Robert was going through his finances. A sigh came from his lips. There was no way he could come up with the money to purchase a good Prime Grade buck within the year. A Prime Grade buck could mean the difference between success and failure on human ranches and farms. A Prime Grade could raise the lines of other livestock by at least one letter grade, sometimes two. He could limp along with a couple of A+ Grade bucks for a couple of years, but any successful farm needed at least one Prime Grade to make a difference in the long run. The ones he had just wouldn’t be ready for at least ten years.

He looked at Julia. “Do we have any capture tags left?”

“Just one, until you can get more in six months,” said Julia.

“It will have to do,” said Robert. “We need a Prime Grade buck.”

At the same time, John was enjoying his supper.

“Did you have fun today?” his mate asked.

John chuckled. “There’s one vampire that won’t be hunting humans anymore, Bella,” he said. “I let a big bear take care of that one. Thing was missing a patch of fur, like someone just grazed it along the side. Guess they were in a hurry.”

Bella chuckled. “So were you, given that you decided to take off instead of finishing the vampire yourself. That being said, I need to tell you something.”

John looked at her. “What is it Bella?”

“John, I’m-”

At that moment, a young human, seven years of age, ran into John, almost knocking him off his feet.

“Tobias, watch where you’re going,” said John. “I almost lost my supper.”

“Mom says that you were out hunting,” the child said. “Tom’s father takes him hunting. I want to go hunting too.”

“When you’re older, Tobias,” said John. “Even then, I doubt your mother would let me take you on the sort of hunt that I was on.” He set his plate aside, and picked his son up. “You’re getting pretty big though. Almost big enough to help out around here, with your mother.” He set his son down.

“But father-”

“No buts,” said John. “You’re helping your mother out.”

“I want to be like you dad,” said Tobias. “I want to be a leader, and a protector, and a hunter, and-”

“Do you really want to be able to do all that?” John asked.

Tobias nodded.

“Then your first lesson is to listen to your leader,” said John. “For now, you’ll be helping out your mother. When you’re older, I’ll take you hunting.”

Tobias grinned, and ran off.

John smiled. “Takes after me for sure.”

“I hope so,” said Bella. “He is your son after all.”

John chuckled. He then looked at Bella. “So, what were you going to say?”

Bella smiled. “Another time.” She then kissed him.

Some days later, Robert was in the market place, trying to give the auction a chance. However, the Prime Grades being offered for sale were out of his price range, or were fairly old, even older than William had been. One just didn’t get rid of a Prime Grade without a very good reason – they could improve almost any line to the next letter grade up. With careful breeding, a farm with even mediocre stock and a Prime Grade, and their eventual replacements, could set up their family for generations. However, to Robert’s personal annoyance, none of those available were ones he wanted to buy, or could buy.

Robert then noticed the law talking to a Tracker-for-Hire. Generally, it was a bad idea for the law to have to talk to someone, as it tended to be really bad news. Whatever it was though, the law seemed to be satisfied with the tracker’s response, as the law walked away from them. Getting an idea, Robert walked over.

“What was that about?” he asked.

“Oh, Fredrick Fang was found, having been mauled by a bear, after he decided to leave my hunting party,” the tracker said.

“Any relation to Marcus Fang?” Robert asked.

“A cousin, of some sort,” the tracker said. “But, while I haven’t seen the body yet, I think that Fred ended up dead because of a certain Feral known as John Wrangler.”

Robert looked at him. “Explain.”

“Over the last five years, anyone connected to Marcus Fang that goes after the Wrangler herd, they end up dead,” said the tracker. “Most law-biding hunters, they get broken bones and other healable injuries. Not those connected to Marcus Fang – they end up dying in horrible ways. Poachers too for that matter – they also end up dead. I think it’s because John’s been doing it. I could read it in his eyes – that one’s Dangerous.”

Robert grinned. “My family has a reputation for being able to handle difficult humans. What can you tell me about him?”

“He’s quick, good at throwing knives, pretty observant, and the only reason any of us might have made it, is because my other client had brought along their eldest son,” the tracker said. “Lad was on his first hunt – got a beauty of a deer – but when a Feral decided that he’s kill the father if the father didn’t leave, there was a lot of fear in their eyes. Client decided to leave with the son. As for me – I know when to take my losses and walk away from a dangerous target.”

“Not Fred though, I take it?” Robert asked.

“That Feral threw a knife that went through Fred’s hand, into the handle of his handgun,” the tracker said. “He didn’t like that. Also, it seems that John’s blood was worth fifty thousand and ounce, ten years ago.”

Robert’s eyes widened at this. While he didn’t deal in blood production, that tended to be the value of high quality humans that were used for such things – A+, if not better. He certainly didn’t want the Fangs to get a hold of a human of that quality.

“Where can I find him now?” he asked.

Around the same time, John loosed an arrow into the side of a deer, fatally injuring it. He got out a second arrow, and managed to get another good shot, dropping the animal before it got too far to just walk up and start cutting it up. As he started the process, he kept an eye out. He got rid of the organs he didn’t need, like the stomach, intestines, and such. He used a bottle of water to clean his hands and knife of blood. The bear from the other day had him on edge. It was a big one – bigger than most. It was possibly big enough to swallow a human – he’d been surprised that anything had been left of the vampire when the searchers finally found the body.

Dragging the deer, he made it back to his herd, where some other members started working on the deer, so that it could be used. He breathed a sigh of relief as the rest of the hunters and gatherers returned to the rest of the group.

“Something on your mind?” Bella’s father, the prior Herd Leader, asked.

John looked at the older human, their leg being something made from wood. “The bear from the other day. I keep seeing sign of him. It’s not the ordinary sort. We need to move. I feel that the herd is in danger.”

“Is that what you feel?” the elder asked. “It’s your decision these days.”

“I still turn to you for advice,” said John. “There’s also hunters. Some are getting bolder. There’s only so many I can kill before someone decides that I’m better off dead.”

The elder nodded. “I did well, asking you to be my replacement. You want to know what I’d do, before making your decision. If you can’t win a fight, best to move, until the advantage is yours. Towards the setting sun, I have kin that we could join up with. Tobias can spend time with his relations. Hunting and gathering will be better this time of year too.”

John nodded. “Good.” He looked at the rest of the herd. “Get what you can tomorrow, and get ready to move. We leave in two days.”

In the morning, two days later, Robert kissed his wife, had a good breakfast, and grabbed his capture gun, some tranquilizer darts, and his capture tag, letting her know where he was going. He then got into his truck, and drove off. He hoped that he’d make it back. After, he had a family to take care off.

At the same time, John had his breakfast, kissed his mate, and made sure that the herd was ready to move out. He looked at his son. Already, he was listening to his mother. John hoped that the boy would become a good leader – he wanted to see it with his own eyes.

An hour later, Robert was in the area that the Wrangler herd had been in. The sign was clear – the herd was on the move. As he followed, he saw something that concerned him – sign of a bear. A curse escaped his lips, as he checked his hip – he’d left his handgun in the truck. He began to move a lot quicker.

At around the same time, John was watching the herd move. Twenty members, all his friends, and the family he knew. For them, he’d do anything. He then saw his mate’s father in the back, moving carefully, helped along by a thick staff, which could also do a decent job of protecting him from would-be attackers of any sort. He decided to join him, as did his mate and son.

Half an hour later, Robert caught sight of the herd. It was nice and healthy, save for an elderly buck in the rear, but even they were in an okay shape. In fact, the whole herd was well led. A younger buck, as well as a mare and a cub, walked alongside the elderly one. Other members of the herd would turn, say something, the young buck would talk to the elder one, the elder would say something, and the young buck would let the initial speaker know what was going to happen. Realizing the importance of the elder, Robert aimed his rifle, and pulled the trigger.

As he turned to speak to the elder, John saw a dart sink into old man’s back. John turned, and caught sight of the werewolf hunter, just as the old man collapsed.

Bella let out a scream, as she saw her father collapse. She then turned. “I’m going to kill that hunter!”

John reacted quickly, picked up the elder, and shoved him at Bella.

Bella caught the elder.

“I’ll take care of the hunter,” John said, as he grabbed the walking stick. “You take care of your father – he’ll be alright once the dart wears off. Now go! That includes you Tobias!” He then ran towards the hunter.

Robert was impressed, at the young buck coming towards him. He hadn’t expected that sort of response. He placed another dart in his rifle.

The buck got within ten paces of him, before stopping.

“You’d better have capture tags, or else you don’t get to live,” the buck said.

Robert had to chuckle at the Feral human’s audacity to demand proof of a capture tag. He pulled his out. “I’m looking for the one called John Wrangler,” he said.

The Feral narrowed his eyes, as he seemed to grip the staff tighter. “I’m him,” he said. “What do you want with me?”

“I simply want to know if you’re Prime Grade, or not,” said Robert. “If you’re not, I’ll just walk away.”

“And if I am this Prime Grade?” John asked.

“A rather large bear killed my Prime Grade Breeder the other day,” said Robert. “So, I need a new one.”

“I’m not interested in being locked up in a pen,” said John. “My family is too important for me to just give up my freedom.”

“Normally, it’s only locked up at night,” said Robert. “I might even let your herd visit on occasion.”

“I don’t fancy becoming livestock, same with any member of my herd,” said John. “Walk away now, or every bone in your body will end up broken.”

“Just a quick test is all I need to d-”

Robert didn’t get a chance to finish, as John charged, a look of anger on their face, clearing the distance. They swung their staff at Robert. Robert used his rifle to block the strike, and ended up firing the dart by accident.

It was at that moment, both of them heard a sound, which made them face in the same direction. That was when a look of fear came upon both of their faces.

“That’s the bear that attacked my place,” said Robert, quietly.

“It also ate a vampire and has been snooping around the woods,” said John, just as quietly.

“I think it’s worse – creatures like that, if they eat a vampire, they become like one – it’s going to be hard to stop, and harder to kill,” said Robert. “So keep quiet.”

“That, and its been killing for fun,” said John. He looked back, and saw that his herd was still too close. He looked at the werewolf. “Listen – my family means everything to me. We make it through this; I’ll visit your place on occasion.”

Robert nodded. “Wolfe Family Farm,” he said. “I’m Robert.”

“Any connection to Marcus Fang?” John asked.

“My family and his are rivals – he wants my farm, but I won’t let him buy the place for any amount of money,” said Robert. “I don’t like his methods – they are unnecessarily cruel, with braindeading and such – affects the taste of meat too much in my opinion.”

“I think I hate you less already,” John muttered.

“Sounded like sarcasm,” said Robert.

“Maybe,” John said, as he grinned.

Robert chuckled, as the situation was a bit funny.

Another sound made them look at the bear, which was looking right at them.

“It sees us!”

“Run!”

Human and werewolf ran.

“Will those darts work on that thing?” John asked.

“That thing’s too big for them to do anything but piss it off!” Robert yelled back.

“What about a killing gun?” John asked.

“In the truck!” Robert shouted. “I wasn’t expecting a bear to interfere!”

That was when Robert made a mistake, and looked over his shoulder – this caused him to miss spotting a root. Falling to the dirt, the bear was upon him. It slammed his body. Robert heard, and felt, the cracking of bones, as it smashed him. Then, it bit through his side, grabbing him by the ribcage, and tried to toss him.

That was when something else happened. John ran up, and smashed his staff into the bear’s head. The bear let out a roar, dropping Robert. The werewolf watched as the bear attacked the human. The human tried to avoid the blow, but the bear’s claws sliced through both the staff, and the human’s leg, causing the human to fall. The bear made to make the final blow, only for the human to throw the now sharpened staff through its throat, causing it to bleed out rather quickly, making it collapse. John also collapsed, laying still.

Robert painfully stood up, walked over to the bear, and saw that it was still alive. “Still alive?” He pulled out a hunting knife, which had once belonged to his father, and grandfather. “Not for long.” He then cut his way into it, reached inside, and pulled out the creature’s heart, which he then ate. The meat jumped his healing abilities. He looked at the unconscious human, and then looked for the human’s herd – he couldn’t see any of them.

“John, don’t you dare die on me,” he said, as he bandaged the human. “I owe you too much.” After he did what first aid he could, Robert carefully lifted the human, and began the walk out of the woods. It would be much faster, now that he didn’t have to watch for sign of anything. It still took a while for him to find a signal for his phone, and another half hour or so for an ambulance to arrive. During this time, Robert came to an important decision, in regards to John. He took out his capture tag, and placed it on John’s wrist.

That night, Bella was looking at the body of the bear, as others carved it up.

“Any sign?” she asked, as searchers came back.

“Must of got into a vehicle and drove off with John,” the lead searcher said. He looked at the site of the battle. “If you’ll forgive me, but it looks like John might be dead – given that both he and the werewolf aren’t here, and the bear’s dead, and missing their heart. Werewolf took the heart of the bear, to heal up a bit, and then took your mate. I’m sorry, Bella. I really am.”

“We’ll find him, some day,” Bella said, as she looked at her belly.

“Is there something you want to say?” the elder asked, still recovering from the earlier dart.

Bella sighed. “I didn’t get a chance to let him know that I was pregnant.”

“He still would have gone after the hunter, and still would have tried to lead the bear away,” her father said. “He did it to protect us.”

“Is father dead?” Tobias asked.

“We’ll find him,” said Bella. “Someday we’ll see him again. He’ll be on a hill next to a creek, daffodils in his hands.”

Waking up on a hill next to a creek with daffodils would have been nice. However, when John awoke, and saw that needle in his arm, he tried to reach for it, only to find out that he’d been restrained. Anger came upon him.

“No! You’re not braindeading me that easily!” He started to thrash, attempting to break free. A hand placed itself upon his shoulder. A despite surge of strength coursed through him, causing him to break the links on one of the restraints, and he punched the person in the face.

“Is that how you treat the one that saved your life?” the person asked, holding their hand to their jaw. “You busted at least two of my teeth.”

John’s anger slowly subsided, as he looked at the person. “Robert, right?”

The werewolf nodded.

John looked around. “This is a hospital, right?”

“Hospital/Vet Clinic,” said Robert. “It’s been touch and go the last few days.”

John reached for the needle in him, only for Robert to, carefully, place his hand on his.

“You don’t want to mess with that,” the werewolf said. “That stuff’s been keeping you alive for three days.”

“I’ve been out that long?” John asked, as realization set in.

“You lost a lot of blood, John 3160,” Robert said.

“It’s Wrangler,” John growled out. “I’m not yours.”

“I’m afraid, you are,” said Robert. “This place doesn’t threat Ferals. Slaves, Pets, and Livestock, they will treat, but not Ferals. I Claimed you so that you could get the treatment that you needed. I owe you enough to do everything that I could, for you. You saved my life, therefor, you’re Protected.”

“Protected?” John asked. “What does that mean?”

“Slaves, Pets, and Livestock that protect their owner’s life are Protected, along with immediate family,” said Robert. “That’s you, your parents, siblings, and offspring.”

“What about my mate, Bella?” John asked.

“I’ll see to it that your offsprings’ other relations are included in this Protection,” said Robert.

“So, just what does this Protection mean?” John asked.

“Simply put, an assault on you, is the same as an assault on me,” said Robert. “Anyone that harms you, will be treated as if they harmed me. Anyone that harmed your children, will be treated as if they harmed mine. Same with anyone else in your family. Furthermore, I get first dibs on buying them, if they end up on the market.”

“But I wasn’t yours when I killed that bear,” said John.

Robert chuckled. “Let’s just keep that between you and I.” He looked at the broken restraint, and felt his jaw, again. “Tracker wasn’t kidding when he said that you were Dangerous. You were only restrained because you were newly captured – most wouldn’t have the strength to break free.”

“Not my first time being captured, and not my first time being hooked up to medical devices,” said John. “I hate needles, and I hate being touched without permission.” He then looked at his wrist. “I see that you’ve Marked me. Your Brand?”

“Let me explain it,” said Robert. “Mind if I touch the marks?”

John nodded.

Robert pointed. “Mark of Owner. Blood Type. Gender. This one means that you are Protected. And then there’s the Grade.” He lingered over that. “John, you’re Prime Grade. Worth at least five million.”

John snorted. “Like that matters to me. I’ll find a way to escape this place, and you.”

“That might be difficult,” said Robert. “Your leg was badly damaged – you’re lucky it’s still attached. It’s going to take you a while to be able to walk again, a couple of months at any rate.”

“You were messed up too,” said John.

“Yes, my ribs got messed up pretty good,” said Robert. “I got the bed next to you. The doctor wants me here for a couple of weeks until they heal up.”

“I’m surprised that they didn’t just feed me to you,” said John.

“You don’t just get rid of Prime Grade humans that easily,” said Robert. “If you were C-Grade, maybe, but not a Prime Grade. When the time comes to eat you, I’m going to make sure that you’re a Meal to be Remembered. Although, my family tends to remember all of our Meals.”

“What do you mean?” John asked.

“I normally only eat one human a month, same with each member of my family that can swallow one whole,” said Robert. “I Ask them a week in advance if they want to be my Meal – if they tell me No, I don’t eat them, but if they say Yes, then we spend the week getting them ready, and they have a journal, that they can write their thoughts in. Likes, Dislikes, What they thought of me, and How they want to be remembered – plants, flowers, name a relative or non-human pet.”

“How did my predecessor what to be remembered?” John asked.

“He asked me to name a future child of mine after him,” said Robert. “William, or Wilma – depends on what we get.”

“Is your mate pregnant?” John asked.

“It’s been a little while,” said Robert. “Probably ought to spend some quality time with her.”

“I think mine might be,” said John. “She was trying to tell me something the other day, but Tobias interrupted her.” He looked away. “Guess I’ll never know.”

“John, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry that I’ve done this to you,” said Robert. “In a way, I wish that more vampires and werewolves were like you. You could have easily left me to die – you risked your life, and lost your freedom, to save me.”

“That bear would have killed my family,” said John. He looked at Robert. “I hope you’re not going to force me to breed with your mares?”

Robert chuckled. “I don’t force them to breed. Might make suggestions, but I don’t force them to breed if they don’t want to breed. I have found that cooperation between me and my livestock makes for a better product.”

“What do you raise humans for?” John asked.

Robert chuckled. “For meat – Grades C and up are good eating.”

“And lower ones?” John asked.

“Ds are more Pet Food, and Fs are Fertilizer,” said Robert. “Still, my lines are such that, along with general conditions, I rarely get an F as a Final Grade, and the Ds are among the best Dog Food one can buy.”

“Do they die quick and painlessly?” John asked.

“Well, if they are afraid of the dark, but still want to be eaten, we’ll snap their necks, with their permission of course,” said Robert. “Others though, they want to rub our bellies from the inside – death tends to be within thirty minutes from asphyxiation.”

“And these Meals, they’re all Willing?” John asked.

“Yes,” said Robert. “The only reason I’d eat an Unwilling human is if they’d tried to kill me, or my family, or my livestock.”

“So, you’d only eat me, or mine, if we allowed it?” John asked.

“You have my word,” said Robert. “And, I keep my word, even to Livestock.”

“Mind removing my restraints?” John asked.

Robert chuckled, as he pulled out a key, and unlocked John’s wrists.

John carefully sat up, and looked at his leg. He’d never be able to run again. Escape would be very difficult now. “I’ll find a way to escape.”

“Yes, but here’s the thing,” said Robert. “The reward for catching an escapee is a livestock of one grade lower, if not equal to the escapee. Also, suppose you made it to your family, and they too were captured – the fact that you escaped might keep me from being able to buy them.”

John glared at him. “If I get a chance, I’m going to finish what that bear started.”

Robert chuckled. “We shall see.”

John looked away, only to look back at Robert. “Why would someone want to rub your stomach from the inside?”

Robert smiled. “Oh, it is part of a fun activity I have with them called Stomach Baths. Some get a certain amount of pleasure at being inside of a werewolf’s stomach, rubbing their bellies. As for me, I enjoy a good rubbing. Of course, unless they are a Meal, I let them out within ten minutes after swallowing them. It’s quite pleasant actually.”

“Doubt you’ll get me to enjoy it,” said John. “You’ll never have a chance to have me rub your belly.”

“There’s a simple test,” said Robert. “Let me swallow your arm.”

“Not interested,” said John.

“Alright, let’s make a deal,” said Robert. “If it turns out, that you do like being swallowed, I’d like for you to be my Livestock’s leader, and given how good you are in a fight, their protector, in addition to breeding those you want.”

“No,” said John. “Not interested.”

“That being said, if you don’t get any pleasure out of being swallowed, I can start you on your path to freedom,” said Robert. “I can set you up to be a Pet – given that you are a Mature Feral, it will take two years for things to allow you to be a Pet. Be a Faithful Pet for five years, I can set you up to be a Slave. It’s another two year process. Still, ten years after that’s come to pass, and you’ve been a good slave all that time, no escapes, or anything, I can set up the process to make you considered a Domesticated Human – a year after that, and you’ll be a Free Person, and that includes the fact that you are seen as Protected. You could go wherever you want, even back to your herd.”

“So, if I don’t get any pleasure while getting swallowed, and I behave for you, I’ll be free in twenty years?” John asked.

Robert nodded. “Also, the only time the gate is locked closed is at night, or if there’s a bear, or there’s newly purchased or captured livestock, or if there’s a serious danger outside the fence. As long as you stay on my property, you could do what you want – hunt, fish, forage for food.”

“How do you keep track of your Livestock on your unfenced property?” John asked.

“Cameras and microphones hidden in the trees,” said Robert. “Between that, and hidden ones in the rooms, I’ll know if you’re trying to escape, or planning one.”

“Alright,” said John. “Let’s do this test of yours. But know this – harm my family, and I will kill you, no matter what.”

Robert chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, your arm?”

John carefully offered the werewolf his arm.

Robert gently took it, and began to lick, carefully.

Much to John’s personal horror, he found out that he enjoyed the sensations. The feeling was very similar to the times Bella gently rubbed his arms before they’d engaged in sex. His body reacted accordingly. He looked away in shame.

Robert carefully lowered the human’s arm. “I was expecting to work a lot harder to get a rise out of you.”

“Bella and I used to do something similar, before we-” John let the sentence go unfinished. Anger at himself filled him then. He looked at Robert. “One day though, you’ll wake up, and the entire herd of livestock will be gone. One day.”

Robert grinned. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Fifteen years later, Robert sat under his favorite tree on the hill, as he looked at the empty pasture, and at the opened gate. His belly, it was full. He gently patted it. John had been getting ill lately, so, a couple of weeks back, he’d taken the human to the vet, for a routine check-up. The results had come in a couple days prior. John had stolen them. The human found out that he had cancer. At the same time, his still Feral family had managed to find him, somehow. They’d also figured out how to mess with the cameras and microphones. Then, on Big Meal Day, John had convinced the Meals-to-be to take some slow acting, yet heavy duty, sleeping pills. Between Meal and the pill, Robert and Julia had been sleepier than normal. John had made a very simple offer – his life, for the herd’s freedom. It was, in both Robert’s and John’s eyes a fair trade. All the evidence would show was that the Wolfes were the victims of a well thought out rustling on their herd. They’d get plenty of insurance money.

Robert had to chuckle. Breakfast had been rather delicious. John had seen to it that Robert would be able to enjoy him, before he’d become an F-Grade. In an hour, he’s place a call, report the theft. He and Julia would get their blood tested – the drug would be found.

He then remembered how they’d first met – a bear had brought them together, in many ways.

“I gave you my word,” Robert said. “Next child I have, they’ll be named after you. I’m glad your mate will be naming your next one after me.”

A smile came to the werewolf’s face, as the sun rose.