

## THE TRANSFORMATION BACK

Not all revolutions end how you'd expect them to. Some seemingly never truly end. They just take detours. Damn, I hope this is a detour.

The last we spoke, I had returned from Chago's crazy plan to take over the human race through a world war via the United Nations. Even as I write that, I cannot believe it was real. But it was. At the very last minute, The Lycanthrope Society, also known as TLS, came to my rescue, right when Chago was about to chop my head off. Instead they chopped off his. At least I think they did. I kind of blacked out at the last minute.

Not that I came out of it unscathed.

Not even close.

Instead, they had to fast track me to the emergency room to have me looked over and treated. Although I had passed out in the ambulance from the screaming pain - my muscles felt like they had been torn from my bones, my mind on fire with an inconceivable migraine from the mental battle with Chago which caused me to only see clouds of darkness, and my body covered in tears from the physical stand off of werewolf to

werewolf. I jolted awake in a secret TLS location raging forward, my mind still in battle with the nearly immortal killer, Chago. Four caregivers held me down as a doctor injected me with a painkiller that, after a few more moments of me battling to get away, finally caused me to pass out. When I awoke again, it was in a high security patient's room, my mind still drowsy from the drugs and my body numbed by whatever they had given me to help encourage my wounds to heal. That said, the simple act of moving my head or lifting my arm brought forth the kind of muscular pain similar to what an athlete must feel after completing a marathon. Holy smokes.

All of this said, another good thing about my bloodline is that descendants of Ulf and Freya tend to heal rather quickly, so I was able to return home to Javier relatively fast. Remember, he was still in the hospital being treated after that wicked attack by a druggie. At least that's what we thought at the time. Luckily, I was healthy enough to be released the night before Javier was permitted to leave the hospital. I was there beside the wheelchair when the orderly wheeled him out to the car.

I drove him home with orders to make sure he rested and didn't do anything crazy. He had taken a rather serious hit when the supposed drug addict, later to be revealed to be a descendant of a different lycanthrope bloodline, Rebecca Lovegrove, had forced her way into the emergency room where Javier worked and demanded drugs only to be stopped by the nefarious efforts of Paul, the ER doctor who had recruited Javier to work the overnight shift with him.

I still don't know why Paul insisted Javier work the overnight shift with him, or why he pushed the override button which prevented Javier from getting into the restricted medicine cabinet. I had assumed he admired Javier and wanted him to be by his side for the challenging cases they find in the emergency room, but I'm not so sure.

I mean, in terms of Rebecca's appearance and his wicked actions, I can guess that Rebecca had been told to come in and make a scene. Which kind of makes sense considering she was aligned to Chago and The Righteous Group (TRG).

But I made a lot of assumptions with that. It was a side effect of my newly discovered lycanthrope condition to have an overactive mind racing for explanations, conclusions, and, simultaneously, assumptions. So, I assumed that Chago already knew who Javier was and that we lived together and that he knew who I was. Just the thought of that gives me chills.

And, if putting a scare into me and shaking my confidence was Rebecca's goal, then she definitely achieved it. She would actually be considered an overachiever. But Paul's actions, I still don't know why he thought that was appropriate. And the paranoid part of my brain has some scenarios, but I just cannot entertain them.

Anyway, on our way home, Javier placed his hand on my leg, and that simple act - that touch - was something I truly needed. I needed the feel of *us* after the events of the last several weeks, even if the touch was something as small and simple as his hand on my thigh. I smiled at this gesture, eager to get him home and I daydreamed about simply snuggling with my fiance and doing all that I could to help him heal. That's when I noticed his hand was lightly shaking. Not dramatically, but the kind of shake someone would normally experience after muscles have been overexerted after hours of exercise.

He had been looking out the window, checking out the neighborhood as we drove through, and at first he didn't notice it. Then, as if in an afterthought, he looked down, quizzically, and then looked at me.

"Must be the medication," he said and then gave a small smile.

I placed my hand on top of his and lightly squeezed, just

enough to demonstrate an acknowledgement of his comment and returned my hand to the steering wheel of our gray Mazda as we neared our apartment complex, a four-story modern building with a tan exterior and underground parking lot. It had been built the year before we moved in. Originally the parking lot for a next door elementary school, East Camden Elementary, it had been built to address a perceived lack of housing in the area. Believe me, we were happy to move into such a modern place for such a great rental price so soon out of college for Javier and pastry school for me.

At the time, I didn't believe this shaking could be the result of my sharing my own blood and performing the transformation ritual on him. Mind you, I didn't elect to make him into a werewolf haphazardly. I did it to save his life. If my guess had been correct at the time, then he wouldn't have begun his own transformation until years from then.

Hell, I hadn't begun my own shaking, one of the initial signs of the change, until my late twenties so it didn't make sense for him to begin so soon after the ritual had been performed.

At least that's what I thought.

I spent the next few weeks of homebound bliss caring for Javier. We had a daily routine rooted in me making sure he healed from his wounds.

During the day, I worked as the head specialty baker at *Bizcocheria*, which had been my second home even before I had graduated from school. I simply reveled in sifting the flour, folding the eggs, measuring the vanilla extract, cinnamon, cardamom and other spices so they were just so. The scent of the rising dough was ecstasy supplemented by the feel of the raw pastry dough between my fingers as I kneaded it in preparation to be formed, rolled, and cut. The flavored frostings, lavenders and chocolates and coconuts and lemons were

specialties spread on top of specialties. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have such an amazing role and to work for Margarite. She owned the business, and had welcomed me into her kitchen, treating me as a member of her family.

But I had family concerns of my own, so at noon, I would hand the production over to Alfina, Margarite's cousin, grab my car keys, and run home to check on Javier. I'd tiptoe into our small two bedroom apartment in the Eastern part of Camden that we had shared since graduating from school. We had moved into that apartment to be close enough to our respective sets of parents. We were both very close to our families and wanted to be able to see and visit them whenever we wanted while still maintaining our own private relationship and intimacy to feel like we were on our own.

I entered our bedroom. Javier miraculously had his favorite throw blanket with his favorite comic book character, Grim-Jack, across the foot of our bed was a true giveaway that she had visited.

At home, I would quietly enter our bedroom where Javier, usually wrapped up in his favorite throw blanket and his latest copy of the GrimJack comic (his favorite) close by, would greet me. I didn't think about it then, but I could never catch him asleep. He was always alert when he greeted me, impossible to sneak up on or ever be quiet enough to catch him napping. He shifted his way up in bed, as he readied for me to give him a kiss and his medication.

Then I curled into bed with him, enthralled by the feel of him, his warmth, and his natural musky, sweet smell. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and asked how my day had been so far as I nestled my head on his chest.

I lay on my side, cupping his cheek in my hand, pulling his face towards mine so we could gaze deeply into each other as a sense of really seeing each other tightened our

embrace. I always got lost in those moments. We gently kissed and then I ran my hands through his hair, before sitting up and maneuvering his body to massage his back and leg muscles.

Once I knew he would be okay, at least until I returned from work, I gave him another kiss and I made my way back to finish out the day.

That had become our midday ritual since he had been released from the hospital.

Then, after returning back to the cafe, as always, Alfina would wipe her hands on her apron and give me a high five as she headed out the door. She typically brought her lunch and ate it at nearby Whitman Park.

She and I were constantly enmeshed in special orders we needed to finish for an evening gathering in Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia. Catering gigs we were offered as a result of our treats from the United Nations affair we had catered.

Yes, that's right. Although it had resulted in a bloody battle with the leader of a werewolf faction who tried to take over humankind getting his head chopped off, our little family bakery had been pummeled with catering requests from those who had reveled in the undoctored treats - the ones without the "special" ingredients meant to wage a battle against werewolves.

Alfina was a private person, and I didn't ever feel a need to fill her in on the more dramatic events of my day. I was just glad she was happy and let me care for my fiance while we knocked out orders. Heck, whatever worked, ya know?

And it was an absolutely wonderful set up. I figured that as soon as Javier was ready to return to work, and Margarite had plenty of catering orders to last several months, then we would be all set. Thankfully she had forgotten about the work I had missed earlier in the year. I knew from my conversations with

Birger that I needed to return to Sweden to finish or rather start my training.

Heck, after I'd found out about my lineage, I had heard about the importance of training with Birger so many times, I figured I should make it a priority. Even though part of me - that overactive mind again - questioned if this was truly a priority, considering Chago was no longer around.

And that's when the real shit hit the fan.

About ten days after Javier had been released, I headed home from the bakery around 5:30. I wanted to be sure to get home in time to make us dinner and ensure that Javier had everything he needed. I made a pit stop at my mom's and left some special treats for her and Papa. And, of course, I wanted to check on them to make sure they were okay. I knew that the loss of my brother Daniel was hard on them, especially on Papa, even though he never said anything, so that made my visits, even if only for five minutes, much more important.

I hugged them both and asked if they were okay; I knew they wouldn't tell me the full truth. I could see in Mama Olivia's eyes that she didn't believe me when I said I was fine. I saw her note my bruises.

"Luna," she said, "your smile. It's not the same as before."

I shrugged and politely changed the subject. "Javier is well enough now, so we will come over on Sunday. After church, okay? I'll bring treats, ok?"

She nodded and Papa smiled.

Before the assault, Javier and I would go over for brunch after my parents finished church - it was a nod to when Daniel and I were kids and the events had the equivalent of a banquet meal after giving thanks. In those days, neighborhood families would stop by and bring their own familial specialities to share.

Those moments were ones that really made us and our neighbors, a community - a family.

With that promise, I headed home, cognizant of the day's sun as it retreated and the moon encroached upon the day.

Once home, I always tiptoed into our bedroom, not wanting to disturb Javier if he was asleep. Admittedly, as the days passed, he was more often up in bed and reading or watching television when I arrived. His face brightened the moment he saw me.

He joked, "When do I get my engagement ring?"

I laughed. "Soon, soon," I waved away his comment as if it was in the air before me and a simple swipe would take care of it.

He patted the space next to him in the bed, inviting me to join him. He asked about my day at work. I placed my hand in his and told him about my day and brought him up to date on my parents and the latest with Margarite and some of our regulars who were old friends from the 'hood. He told me how his mama had stopped by and how she invited us to visit as soon as he was ready. He gave me a side glance as if to say that he wasn't quite there yet, but soon.

We kissed during breaks in the conversation. I reminded him about his medication. I got up and made sure he had what he needed before I made us a quick dinner of leftovers. This time, crockpot chicken stew made with a whole boneless chicken, carrots, potatoes, and celery. I always made dumplings with Bisquick, a tradition from when we were kids and his mama had made chicken stew with Bisquick dumplings as a special treat on Fridays.

Only after he had been fed, and I knew he was not in pain and asleep, did I go into the living room, hit the Zoom button on my laptop, and reach out to Birger.

We had planned out my eventual return trip to Sweden,

and I wanted to be sure I got as much done as I could in as little time as I could. It felt like much of our conversations were actually negotiations for me to do whatever I could remotely so I didn't need to leave Javier. It seemed like just about every request that varied from the standard way of doing things required permission from The Lycanthropic Society's board of directors.

Kind of nutso if you asked me. Total overkill, but whatever.

I stayed on with him until I could barely keep my eyes open and then snuggled into bed alongside Javier. I woke up from a deep sleep by the sound of quacking ducks, my iphone's alarm. The sound of ducks made me laugh. I hopped up, kissed him on the forehead and lips, got his meds, made a quick breakfast of toast with peanut butter and bananas, then hopped in the shower and drove to the bakery. Thankfully, Margarite was still in the habit of stopping off and picking us up cafe con leches so that helped to perk me up and get through the day.

At least that's what typically went down. I had the same, basic routine every day, same bliss at the bakery, same snuggling at lunchtime, same high five upon my return, same quick side trip but this time to check on his parents, same return home, same convo with Birger, same euphoric exhaustion as I crawled into bed.

And then, I woke up in a corner of the parking lot of our apartment building. A far corner in a darkened section farthest from the exit. My clothes torn to shreds. My body was covered in dirt and grime and other fluids I couldn't and honestly didn't want to identify. With care, I moved my arms and legs to check how damaged I was. I had the definite tell-tale signs of a wicked fight. I slowly stood up. I swear every muscle ached. And then I noticed the slashes across my forearms like I had shielded myself from a blow. What the hell had happened? Had I been in a fight and if so, with whom?

The moonlight shone through the entry to the underground parking area, telling me that we had not gotten to the morning yet. As fast as I could hobble, I made my way back to our apartment. Thank god we were only on the second floor so I didn't have too many flights to go and thank goodness we kept a spare key in a hidden lockbox otherwise I would have had to wake Javier to get my ass back inside. The last thing I wanted to do was explain why I was covered in shit, with slashes across my forearms (I hadn't checked the rest of me yet), bruised, and out in the middle of the night. Questions I couldn't answer. Well, at least not fully. And the answers I could give him, I knew he wouldn't like or wouldn't believe.

I made sure to clean up as best I could and cover up the injuries. I didn't want him to question me while I prepped for the day. That said he looked at me really oddly as I ran around to get him what he needed. Then, before I could make it out the door he asked, "Are you okay? What's going on?" He didn't look accusatory or upset, but rather perplexed like this was a mystery he wanted to solve.

I smiled. "I'm fine. Just running late. I'll call you later." I hurriedly kissed him on the forehead, fully knowing that he leaned in for a smooch on the lips. I knew that I wouldn't be able to fake like everything was okay if we kissed more intimately, so I stuck to something less incriminating and rushed out the door. Thankfully my car was in the normal parking spot, so at least that didn't get impacted. I texted Birger to warn him that we had to talk. I didn't go into details since I didn't have a chance to check our apartment for more listening devices like what I had found before. And I definitely didn't want to risk someone overhearing that convo. Shit. If someone had been listening, what the hell had they heard?

I made it to the bakery in record time, eager to get back into

the swing of things. Definitely distracted from all that the events of the last few hours implied.

I was able to hide the scrapes, cuts, and bruises which thankfully had already healed quite a bit, a benefit of being a direct descendant of Freya and Ulf. So, Margarite didn't notice it. Plus I think she had lots of other business-related things on her mind. Alfina didn't say anything though I honestly think she did notice. We work so closely together that I would be surprised if she didn't, but I digress.

I thought about skipping my typical visit home at lunch hour but didn't want to chance it. Plus I figured I could send Birger a more detailed message through our secure chat via my laptop which would at least give him time to prep something, anything, for our call that night.

I grabbed some of Javier's favorite treats and let Margarite know that I would be back after lunch. I totally didn't expect to find in our apartment what waited for me. As I unlocked the door and called out my standard greeting, I peeked around the corner of the hall to find Javier as he kneeled in front of the bed, in his hands a ring box.

Holy shit.

I rushed over to him, doing my best to keep from crying in joy and surprise, covering my mouth with my hands until I kneeled in front of him and captured him in an embrace.

"I love you, Luna. I've loved you since the first time I saw you in third grade. Will you marry me?" he whispered in my ear. His voice soft, his tone pure.

I leaned in and kissed him deeply on the lips. He needed to know, so, with all of my body, I said yes. I pulled back and looked him in his eyes and cupped my hands around his to where we were both holding the ring box.

"I love you with all of my heart and soul, Javier Josef Rodriguez. I'd be honored to be your wife."

He moved my hands from his and opened the ring box. He removed a small plain gold band with a round cut diamond in its center and placed it on my ring finger.

He looked up at me and smiled with a snarky look. “I decided to stop waiting for you to get me my ring, so I bought you one instead.”

I laughed out loud. I could see the twinkle in his eyes as he playfully said these words.

“Damn good thing. Otherwise, I could have forgotten,” I laughed.

We kissed again. This time a joyful embrace that filled my soul and replenished my spirit.

I looked up at the clock and realized the time. “Oh shit. I have to go.” I pecked him on the cheek and apologized. “I can’t chance pissing Margarite off,” I said.

He nodded in acknowledgement. He knew I had truly risked a lot to take so much time off and that I was worried that Margarite would fire me. We had talked about it several times. I helped him back up from the floor and as I guided him to our bed. He waved me off.

“I’m good. Go on back to work. I’ll see you tonight.”

Surprisingly, he didn’t need a cane to get back up. Instead of our bedroom, he drifted to our living room and picked up one of his favorite editions of *Scalped*. I brought over his meds and a glass of water. He dutifully took them, glanced at my newest bit of jewelry then as he pronounced our unity, he kissed me on the hand.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ll see you tonight.”

With his acknowledgement, I made him a quick tuna sandwich with eggs, relish, mustard, and Miracle Whip with a side of Doritos and returned to the bakery.

. . .

That night, I waited until I was absolutely sure that Javier was asleep before I checked on whether or not our place was bugged. And of course, goddamnit, I found two listening devices. This time, I nearly crushed them, too pissed off to care whether whomever was spying on us actually knew that I had found the devices.

I felt my other-self wanting to come forward out of my anger. The passion that came with the fury caused my animalistic self to surface. I realized I simply couldn't allow my bestial-self to come out. I needed to calm down and take control of my emotions. I took deep breaths and practiced yoga breathing to help me re-center. Within my mind's eye, I saw my other-self calm back down and return to its place of safety.

In that moment of calm, I knew I simply couldn't allow it out until I had retained as much control over my bestial self and all of its various forms at all times as possible. If I didn't know that I had full and complete power over it then everything—every move, every countermove, every thought—would be too much of a risk.

I looked towards our bedroom and sadness came over me. I could not hurt Javier. I couldn't harm our families.

I gazed upon my engagement ring for a few moments and wondered what I should do next. I absolutely needed answers, even more than before.

Then, emotionally re-centered, I used some techniques that Birger had taught me to keep the listening devices intact while I disabled their ability to hear our conversations. With conviction, I made my standard call to Birger.

Before he had the chance to say hey, I blurted out, "I thought Freya's spell meant I could control my changing. All the time. Not just when I'm awake."

"Hello to you, too," he said in an atypical sarcastic tone. He must have been around me too long.

“I can’t keep ... you know.” I made hand motions to represent the changing. “I can’t have people here seeing me in the ... ya KNOW.” I emphasized the “KNOW” part in case he didn’t truly follow my references. “Plus I don’t know what’s happening.” I paused. “I can’t risk hurting anyone,” I whispered. The passion in my voice gave away my deep concerns.

He looked at me quizzically. That’s when I realized I hadn’t actually explained what had happened the night before. I had assumed he somehow knew. I took a deep breath and walked him through what I could recall from the last 24 hours - dirt, grime, injuries, and all. When I finished, he sat for a moment and then asked, “Why do you think you are changing?” He said this completely straight faced. I nearly fell over.

“If I knew that, don’t you think I would have told you already?” I huffed. I tried hard not to be frustrated, but the more I thought about what I woke up to that morning, the greater the fear and the increased hesitancy to sleep since I had no idea what I would wake up to tomorrow morning.

My expression must have given me away because he immediately replied. “I’ll need to do some research.” This time with greater seriousness. “The only time I’ve heard of this happening was when there was a break in a tight bond between two lycanthropes. The closest would have been Daniel, and since Daniel was never trained and had never gone through the full ceremony, it’s doubtful. Plus you’re from the same blood, but not of the same blood, meaning Daniel didn’t make you a Lycanthrope.”

“What you’re saying is that if the person who made me a lycanthrope had died then it’s more likely that I’d be experiencing this, right?”

“I’ve never heard of a full blood who has gone through Freya’s ceremony having these difficulties. That said,” he paused for a second and collected his thoughts. “I’ve never had

someone go through the ceremony and not immediately be trained.”

“You’re saying my eagerness to get home to my family caused this?” I probably said this with a little too much annoyance and sarcasm but ... oh well.

“It’s possible,” he shrugged. “Let me look into it. This may take me a few days. I’ll message you as soon as I have something to share.”

“Great,” I said flatly.

“In the meantime, may I suggest you figure out how to get back here? Since the only known way I can think of to correct this is to go through the full ceremony, but have it conducted by a full blood. And not leave in a hurry before it is completed. You’ll need to return.”

“I thought I was some rarity. One of the last ones? Who the hell could perform the ritual?”

“Me.”