

Chapter 1 - Father and Son

Friday, October 7th, 2011 – Sugar Land, Texas
Moon Phase - Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon - 5

Alex Stryker sighed into his helmet as he continued to watch his father direct and assist the other police officers. Several minutes had passed since they'd reunited, and judging by the returning canine units, the search of the area was wrapping up. With the breezes still going west, Alex kept a close eye on them in case they turned their attention towards him.

After a minute, his concerns about them relaxed, allowing the image of Shane's snarl-twisted muzzle to return to his thoughts. Twinges of the fear he'd felt towards the end of the encounter with him came with it, and before he could brush them aside, he noticed his father glance back at him. A thumbing towards him followed, and once the two officers nodded, the distance between them began to close.

"I need to get back to overseeing things, so I can't talk for long," he said once he was close. Alex nodded. "They didn't find him though, so just tell me what happened between you two. We'll talk more at home if need be."

Alex took a breath and exhaled to relieve what pressure remained in his chest. He'd seen few hints of Shane until very recently. He had to be lying about the last claim he made.

"When I found him, I tried to get him to leave, but he just scoffed at the idea. Then I started questioning him, about why he bit me, his reasoning for it."

"Was that why you were upset before?" his father asked after a second.

Alex nodded. "I didn't realize until a few hours ago how flawed his reasoning was."

"I see," his father replied with a quieter voice. It went back to its normal pitch before he continued. "What was his reasoning?"

"Remember that girl Nathan and I tried to help?" Alex's father nodded. "He told me she was a werewolf too, and because she got her blood on me when I was helping her, he thought I was already infected."

The expression on his father's face flipped between concern and suspicion as he spoke, before settling on something similar to what Nathan had displayed before. "That makes no sense to me," he eventually replied, "but keep that in mind until tonight. Did anything else happen?"

"Yeah. I asked him if he'd even considered leaving me alone in case he was wrong about that. He wasn't having any of it, and started taking things personally."

"How personally?"

Alex sighed quietly. "Enough to start snarling and staring me down."

His father hummed. "You weren't confrontational in any way?"

Alex stalled and looked down. "I was angry. Who wouldn't be?"

"I know, Son, but that was why I was more worried about you than him."

After a moment of silence, Alex's father continued. "You didn't change, though. That's most important."

"I guess."

"Anything else?"

Alex shook his head, despite what had followed his own emotional statements during the encounter. "He took off when the canines came close. Said he'd defend himself if they found him, but if they didn't..."

"By this point, they won't. The animals are what we're after."

"That's good."

"Which way did he go, though?"

Alex glanced to his right for a second. "North, I think."

"Toward the warehouse and office buildings?"

"Yeah, but there's a creek that way too." His father's gaze inched to his left. "Who knows where he went after that."

"I'll venture a few guesses, if he's stuck like that."

Alex then imagined Shane hiding under the bridge to the west. The basin was well-concealed, and he could easily hide there until the sun went down.

As another potential spot came to mind, his father continued. "I don't want you going looking for him, though."

"Even to--"

"No, Son. I said don't push your luck before, and you almost did. The last thing we need right now is you changing in broad daylight."

Alex's drive to argue died when he glanced past his father's shoulder, at the officers and canine units. He sighed quietly. "I know."

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“If you’re still angry, then do me a favor: go home and relax. I’ll be finished here soon.”

“Alright,” Alex soon said, to which his father patted his shoulder. “I’ll see you later then, Dad.”

“You too, Son.”

Alex waited for his father to turn around and walk away before starting his motorcycle’s engine. Once he’d turned around himself, he drove toward the street where his father had “pulled him over”, slowing down and stopping as the bridge he’d imagined Shane hiding under came into view.

There was no sign of him, and the currently west-bound breezes were of no help.

Chapter 2 - A Respite

Friday, October 7th, 2011

Moon Phase - Waxing Gibbous

Days until the Full Moon - 5

Where Shane had gone was next on Alex's mind. It wasn't long before he was picturing the wooded lot near his house, with Shane's still-snarling face peeking from behind one of the trees. The image made him draw a sigh yet kept him and his motorcycle still for a while after.

Once he'd resumed driving, Alex continued straight ahead instead of taking the right turn that would lead him toward his neighborhood. After a few minutes, he was in the parking lot of his workplace and making his way inside.

Daniel was quick to greet him after setting down the trade in his hands. "Hey, man."

Alex gave him a brief glance before replying. "Hey, Daniel."

"You change your mind about the RPG session?"

Alex shook his head. "Just wanted to hang out for a while."

"Fair enough." As Daniel went back to reading, Alex headed for the single-issues section and flipped through the stock until he found one that looked pleasing.

He was several pages in before his mind started to drift, back to the encounter with Shane. Back to the scent of blood on his breath, his vicious snarling, and the things he claimed he would do. As the memories put pressure on Alex's throat, he did his best to not look like something was bothering him, despite the lack of nearby bodies.

A while later, the sounds of dice rolling began to travel from the back of the shop and Alex turned his head towards the source. *Some gaming would be fun right about now...* After replacing the comic, a look outside revealed a nearly set sun-half-an-hour, at best, was what remained of the evening. No one had called him or sent any texts, but his father had to be done with work by now.

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What Alex found in the gaming room was his boss acting once again as the dungeon master, and three players. Fresh tension grew in his chest as their attention focused on him, and as he remained silent.

“Hey, Alex.” Trevor said.

Alex returned half of his boss’ greeting.

“We’ve got a few characters open if you’re interested.”

Alex instead glanced around the table. “What game is this?”

“GURPS,” said one of the older-looking players. “Ever heard of it?”

“Only in relation to the Fallout games,” Alex replied.

“That works,” Trevor said. “Grab a seat. We’ll walk you through the basics.”

After a nod to his boss, Alex slipped into the chair closest to the doors. The image of Shane hiding near his house returned as he did so. Going home and potentially finding him there felt less nerve-wracking in comparison; if his father was home, all he’d have to do was say something.

Alex thought better of that idea, and of texting his father, after a few moments. If Shane was serious about his claim, yet hadn’t changed back, making him wait made more sense. He would have to give up at some point.

His decision made, Alex refocused on the game and the rules and systems his boss laid out. When the other players chimed in or asked questions, the tension in his chest flared, delaying some of his answers and making him worry that someone would notice, even once the game began in earnest and he was no longer the center of attention.

He wasted little time leaving the store once the game was over and everyone had exchanged pleasantries. Outside, the winds were still blowing west. None of the roads he could take to his house would put him directly east of where Shane could be.

After he reached his neighborhood, Alex altered his route to follow the road running north alongside his house, keeping his attention on the wooded lot as he approached. The sole glance to his side revealed his father’s truck in the driveway. When he felt he was close enough, he turned his bike to face the wooded lot and swept the headlight across it. No reflections, nor any moving masses of black or tan, were revealed.

He was less than a full step inside the house before Bailey rushed him, his tail wagging eagerly. Alex didn’t bother trying to stop him from jumping to greet him. After the last few hours, his company and attention was too pleasant and welcoming.

Then Bailey noticed something, and his enthusiasm waned. When his muzzle was thrust into the gap between his tee and jacket, Alex let him down and rubbed his head, certain he was noticing and concerned about Shane's fur scent. *I know, boy. I'm okay.*

Saturday, October 8th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon – 4

Catching Bailey's scent when he awoke the next morning, Alex rolled over to find his dog was sleeping nearly back to back with him. His dog awoke and lifted his head from the quilt before Alex rubbed his neck. "Good boy."

With another day off work, after what had happened the day before, Alex was hoping one of his friends would be free for the day. Some time with them felt like the best way to spend a few hours.

Once he'd had a shower, he headed to the kitchen. His father was making another pot of coffee while his mother was making breakfast. "Morning, Son."

"Hey, Dad." His reply came out softer than usual.

"You still tired?"

"No. Just thinking about what to do today."

"How did your skating event go yesterday?" his mother asked.

Hearing that, Alex looked towards his father. He didn't make any gestures to the effect of urging him to speak.

"What's wrong?" his mother asked after no answer was given.

Alex's father responded in turn, and what he said was exactly what he didn't want him to. "He didn't take part."

"Why not?"

"Because I told him another animal killing had happened, and then he left and came to the scene."

The confusion on his mother's face held as she turned his attention towards him. "Why would you do that?"

Alex broke eye contact. *Not now.*

"What happened?" His mother's tone now held more worry than before.

Alex pushed the image of Shane holding him down out of his head. His mother didn't need to know that, and his father knew enough already.

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“The werewolf that attacked me was there,” he eventually said. His mother’s expression went horror-stricken upon hearing that, and he couldn’t bring himself to say more.

“Alex said he ran away when he heard me and the other officers coming,” his father said after a moment, to which his mother placed a hand over her heart, and he placed one on her shoulder. Only the skillet and coffeemaker made any noise for a while after.

When the further questioning Alex was anticipating never came--his guess was because he and his father had come home safe--he made his way to the fridge. When he was close to his mother, he swore he could feel the tension and concern radiating from her. The presence of her fear scent only helped the impression.

He was finishing pouring a glass of milk when she spoke up again. “No one saw anything?”

“No,” his father said. “The officers would’ve radioed me otherwise.”

“So, that’s it?”

Alex could tell the question was directed at him; despite the innocence of it, he was reminded of Shane’s threat. “Until I run into him again,” he eventually said.

“You didn’t have to run into him last time, Son.” his father replied.

“No, but I told you he’s been showing up where my friends and I work. I can’t control that.”

“Regardless, Alex, don’t go putting yourself at risk.”

Alex looked away and sighed, eventually answering with, “I’ll try.” Promising anything in relation to Shane would feel hollow, given how free he was to do as he pleased.

When the following silence held for another long period, he set his glass aside and offered his mother a hug. Her fear scent was still present, leaving him hoping it would dissipate before breakfast was over.

Chapter 3 - There's Something...

Saturday, October 8th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon – 4

As that time neared, it became more obvious that Bailey was waiting for something. “I know, boy,” Alex said as he walked past him, toward the kitchen. He made for his pet’s leash once his plate was in the sink, which drew excited wagging and panting from Bailey.

Outside, the morning fog was thinning out, though enough remained to obscure part of the lot across the street. Alex focused on it for a bit before leading Bailey toward it.

He heard no footsteps outside of his own as he drew closer, but eventually a pungent scent slowed him down. Bailey noticed it too, only to shy away from the source—a single tree—once he found it.

By then, Alex’s distaste for the scent had taken on a worrying edge. The scent was new, but once Shane’s threat flashed back to mind, he could see no other explanation for the feelings. He had been here, either last night or within the last eight hours.

Though unsure of which, Alex soon felt an urge to cover up Shane’s scent with his own, even if all it signaled to him was he’d noticed it. He spent a few minutes counting the frequency of passing cars, and only when he was certain he wouldn’t be spotted did he make his move.

Back at home, Alex kept the discovery to himself, and spent the time until he left the house again reading in his room. Bailey spent much of that time resting near his legs, much to his appreciation.

Alex’s first stops were at Blue Moon and Half-Price Books. Neither had any hints of Shane’s scent, which left Nathan’s place of work. When he arrived, he found his sedan parked near the entrance, but no sign of him inside. Just a new employee and a pair of customers.

“Welcome to Gamestop,” the employee said as Alex walked in. “Looking for anything?”

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“No, just coming in for a bit,” Alex replied. The employee--Josh by his name badge--nodded. “Is Nathan here, or did he go on break?”

“Yeah. He’s on break.”

Alex nodded this time. “I’ll look around until he comes back, then.” A moment later he began his walk of the store, trying to avoid where the other customers had been. He didn’t find Shane’s scent. An all-clear once again.

When Nathan returned, he lifted his lunch’s styrofoam cup to serve as a wave. “Hey, man. What’s going on?”

“Not much. Just figured I’d stop by.”

Once his friend had clocked back in, Josh asked for his break. “Sure. We’re not gonna be busy until later.” The two customers left shortly after Josh did. “Checking for what’s-his-face again?” Nathan asked.

Alex nodded. “No hint of him, so we’re good.”

“I didn’t see him either, but thanks for confirming it.”

“No problem.” Alex continued after a moment. “I don’t think he’s spending every waking moment just watching us, but...” Alex couldn’t find the words to complete his sentence for a time. “I don’t know. He could be.”

“You have run into him a lot lately.”

“Yeah.”

“You sound a bit down,” Nathan said after a bit. “Something happen?”

Alex looked behind himself. “Yesterday, yeah.”

“Let me guess. He showed up at the skatepark?”

“No,” Alex replied with a shake of his head. “I skipped the event.”

“What for?”

“Dad was supposed to be there, but he got a call at the last minute.”

“Ouch. Still though, why didn’t you take part? He could’ve come later.”

“Yeah, he could’ve...”

Alex paused long enough to tip Nathan off that that wasn’t the whole story. “Did he get called to another animal killing?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“Aw, geez.” Nathan’s voice then lowered, as if someone could emerge from the storage room at any minute. “What happened?”

“Shane was there.”

Nathan looked over to the door, then back at his friend. “Human or...”

“Werewolf.”

“Oh, shit.”

Alex looked behind himself again. “Yeah. No one saw him though, I think.”

“Can’t imagine what would’ve happened if they did.”

“Me either,” Alex said, his thoughts refilling with his fears of being exposed. “And when I found him, he just scoffed off my suggestion to shift back.”

“That’s not good.”

“No kidding, but when the police started coming close, he bolted and told me to as well.”

“Really? Huh.” Nathan’s expression began to show a bit of relief.

“He talks a big game, but he still has some common sense.”

“At least. Was that all he did?”

“No.” Alex took a quiet breath. “He and I got to talking after I found him.” He expected Nathan to remark on that, but when he didn’t, Alex continued. “If I’d known how he was going to react, I would’ve left.”

“Why? What happened?”

Alex exhaled, trying not to allow his bubbling emotions to surface. “I told him what you said about the bite, asked why he didn’t wait and see. Then he got angry, started snarling, got in my face and got me to cower.” Nathan then exhaled noticeably, and in a prolonged way. “I didn’t say your name.”

“OK. Scared me for a minute.”

“Sorry.” Alex took a deep breath before continuing. “I tried not to let him get to me, but then I found out what Marcus told me is truer than I thought.”

“What was that?”

“That I seem to shy away from this guy when he acts threatening.”

“Can’t blame you. I’d be worried about someone like that too.”

“No. Not just that.” Alex said. “I mean shying away from him like a submissive animal would.”

Nathan looked away as if to consider what he was told. “I don’t know, man. That sounds like a stretch.”

“It’s not. I felt like I had to curl up and look weaker to make him stop threatening me.” Alex licked his lips and sighed.

“Did it?”

“No, it didn’t.” The quivering in Alex’s breathing was becoming more noticeable. “And it made me sick. Him holding me down and threatening to maul me.”

Nathan didn’t speak for a minute, and made only small movements while leaning against the counter. “At least he didn’t hurt you.”

“He would’ve.” Alex’s next inhale was wracked with trembles. “He snapped his jaws behind my neck, and then kept them by my ear...”

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Nathan glanced at the door again before saying, "Calm down, man. Take it easy."

Alex dropped the rest of his reply at that. He could feel his blood pumping in his ears by then, and how fast his pulse had become. As he then worked to correct his shaky breaths, he kept his back to the store's entrance, and his eyes off his friend.

When he heard the door open a minute later, Alex pivoted to keep the customer from seeing his face and pretended to browse the cases on the nearby wall. One snuffle escaped him as he waited for the store to empty, though he quickly faked it as a running nose, to which Nathan passed him a paper towel.

Once the customer was gone, he and Nathan continued. "You alright?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah," Alex said before circling the counter and tossing the paper towel. "Anyway, aside from that, when do you get off work?"

"About two hours. Why? Did you have something in mind?"

"Yeah. I was curious if you were interested in hanging out for a while."

"Sure. Where at?"

"My place."

"That works. I'll let you know when I'm on my way."

Chapter 4 – ...I Think You Should Know

Saturday, October 8th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon – 4

After a nod to his friend, Alex left the store. The drive home gave him more time to relax, but within an hour, something began to bug him. What had mentioning the incident accomplished? He'd no doubt made his friend more curious, and despite what Shane had threatened, he didn't want to freak him, much less Catherine or Marcus, out more if he could help it. Even if the only things that truly seemed to disturb them were him shifting and the sight of his werewolf form.

Once Nathan arrived and had a glass of water in his hands, the two of them got to talking, and eventually decided on some gaming. Bailey stayed near Nathan initially, earning several pets and belly rubs for his choice.

"Hey, question," Nathan said as they reached a new level. "You have your schedule worked out for when the full moon comes?"

"Yeah," Alex said after pausing the game. "I've got that day off work, and the one before, and I'm skipping my classes too."

"Probably for the best."

"Yeah. I'd rather not take any risks and be around anyone."

They completed another level before Nathan spoke up again. "Actually, I've been meaning to ask..."

Alex paused the game.

"Is this guy trying to drag you into what he's doing?"

Alex glanced aside, confused as to what that meant.

"These animal killings," Nathan clarified. "Is he trying to get you involved?"

His friend had yet to finish speaking before Alex felt a jolt through his nerves. His thoughts immediately centered on Marcus, the only one of his friends that, up to now, had raised any suspicion about the animal deaths.

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As the seconds got away from him, Alex could feel his stomach close up. “No,” he replied with a shake of his head.

“That’s good to hear, but you don’t have a choice otherwise, do you?”

The feeling of a closing stomach intensified to a torso-wide organ punch. *Damn it. When...shit.* As shakiness leeches into his breathing, Alex couldn’t stop thinking about when Nathan had figured things out, and how. About what had gone through Catherine and Marcus’s heads if they had been informed.

“It’s okay, man. I understand, and I don’t blame you.” Nathan said after a time.

Alex only exhaled in reply.

As if sensing the drop in his mood, Bailey got up and moved closer, settling back down near his legs. Alex wasted no time petting him, his warm fur and curious stare giving him something else to focus on. As he did so, he tried to draw some morale from how calm his friend was, how patient he was being. He had to have figured things out the night he shifted in front of everyone. It was the only date that made sense.

“Thanks,” Alex eventually said.

“No problem.” Another stretch of silence went by. “Was that something you had to figure out?”

Alex nodded.

His friend sighed. “And that was why you snuck out that night, right?”

Alex took a breath. “Yeah.”

“I thought so. Made any plans for next time?”

Alex hesitated. “No.”

Nathan didn’t reply.

“I mean I know my options; I just don’t have anything set.”

“Trying not to think about it too much?”

“Yeah, or what I have to do.”

“Can’t blame you.”

Alex exhaled and things went quiet again.

“So you know,” Nathan said after a while, “I brought this up with Catherine and Marcus too.”

Alex felt his chest tensing up again at that, his throat seeming to take some of it as well.

“It did scare them a little when I told them, and I won’t lie, I was nervous too when I realized it.”

Alex lightly shook his head after a few seconds. Even though his friend had said he understood, the now-emerging presence of his fear scent was enough of a sign that his fears hadn't faded, and something was drawing them out. Shane's words about his friends trying not to be afraid of him flashed back to mind, as did the mental images of the raccoon, the doe, and his blood-stained paws.

The tension in his chest turned vice-like, and his breathing started to quiver again. All he wanted at that point was to get up and walk away, put some space between him and his friend to allow time to collect himself, or anything to keep from looking upset in front of him again. The thumping of his friend's heart, how much its pace was increasing, enhanced that desire. For all he knew, his friend was more scared of him potentially shifting than anything else and staying nearby was only aggravating that fear.

Yet as much as he felt walking away would help, another part of him couldn't see the move as anything but cowardly. There was nothing he could hide anymore. His friends knew, and that was that. He'd done nothing to hurt them either; the rattled nerves would soon pass.

Those thoughts and assurance went on for a while, helping Alex get his breathing under control and eventually from sounding like he was about to break down. When he spoke again, he followed up what his friend had last said with something he'd remembered. "Not...not seeing any messages from you guys was worrying me."

"Yeah, we did get quiet for a while," Nathan said. "I didn't mean to. I don't think they did either."

Alex took in a lengthy breath and wiped his eyes.

After a bit more silence, Nathan patted his shoulder and asked, "You okay?"

"I guess." His friend gave him some time. "Thanks, for being honest with me."

"You're welcome."

It took several more minutes for Alex's insides to no longer feel stressed, after which he felt as though a boulder had been lifted off his back. Nathan was quick to suggest that they get some food, and before long, the kitchen was smelling of hot, fresh pizza.

As they carried on conversation and ate, in the back of Alex's mind, he wondered how long his friends had known about the eating living things part of his lycanthropy. Marcus had brought the subject up almost two weeks prior,

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and if Nathan was only now speaking like he'd known, it couldn't have been very many days since they'd figured it out.

Eventually, he pushed the question aside in favor of enjoying his friend's company. It felt more worthwhile anyway.

Chapter 5 - Did He Return?

Sunday, October 9th, 2011

Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

Days until the Full Moon – 3

Alex's sleep that night was wracked by nightmares, thanks to the revelations Nathan had dropped as well as his revived fears of what his friends now saw in him. He awoke barely after two-o'clock, his skin drenched in sweat and his heart racing.

Before he moved, Alex could feel Bailey sleeping behind him, as well as the outstretched limb resting atop him. *Thanks, boy. You're the best,* he thought as he reached over and petted him.

* * *

Later that morning, after a shower to truly wake himself up, Alex considered messaging Catherine and Marcus, at least to let them know Nathan had spoken to him. Once he started typing, he took it slow, making sure he worded it exactly as he wanted.

Alex S.: Hey, guys. Nathan mentioned he spoke to you about something that happens to me.

I didn't mean to hide that, but the thought of mentioning it worried me too much. You guys mean a lot to me, and I didn't want to scare you off.

Pausing to read over the message, Alex swore to himself and tried to smile as his eyes watered a bit. After blinking them clear, he read over the message, then decided to add more.

Alex S: If it helps, that is the last part of this. The rest you already know.

Alex pressed “send” after a few more reads of the text. Bailey nudged his leg shortly after, earning a rubbing of his head and a question that got his tail wagging, “Outside?” After half-an-hour of throwing the ball for his dog, his curiosity about Shane’s presence had returned and he urged Bailey to his side. They then crossed the street to the wooded lot, and with a westward breeze blowing by, Alex walked the length of the lot, finding no fresh traces of Shane’s scent.

He coaxed Bailey over for some petting once he was satisfied. *Wonder if he’s only watching the house now.* Alex couldn’t see the point at first, but then started wondering if Shane was sneaking into the backyard. A moment later, he headed towards the road, making a beeline for the backyard; he’d left his blinds open overnight.

Despite that, Alex found no hints of Shane’s scent upon the wood that formed the outside windowsill. *Eh. Better check again tonight.*

* * *

“Alex?”

Alex looked up from his dinner when his mother said his name. “Yeah?”

“Are you ready for Wednesday?”

“Um...” Alex glanced at his father, finding his attention on him as well. “Yeah. I should be fine.”

“When did you change last time?” his father asked.

“About three-thirty in the afternoon...and that was the day before the full moon, so actually Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday.”

“Are you certain that’s when it will happen?”

“Pretty certain.” His parents didn’t reply. “It’s all I have to go on, so for all I know, that’s when.”

“And this lasts for thirty-six hours?” his mother asked.

“Yeah, so around three-thirty Thursday morning, I’ll change back.” He caught a glance of his mother expressing relief at that.

“You’re skipping class on Tuesday then, I hope.”

“Yeah, I am.” Despite the circumstances, hearing his father advocate for skipping school felt strange. “I’m not taking any risks, and I have those two days off work, so I’m covered.”

His father nodded. “Good to know.”

Alex dug back into his meal once he was certain the questions had ended. By the time he finished, the sun had completely set and the streetlights were lit. Hoping Shane wasn’t nearby, he retrieved Bailey’s leash, the clinking of the metal pieces summoning him from his spot by the couch.

Outside, the night sky was dominated by the gibbous moon and the clouds it was illuminating. After cutting himself off from the lights of the house, Alex’s nightvision went to work, brightening the things he could see. Eventually, from his position on the porch, his view of the wooded lot was clear.

He saw no hints of large, fuzzy bodies or reflecting eyes, but until he physically went closer, he couldn’t be sure. With Bailey growing anxious for a walk, Alex walked him up and down the length of his street, letting him follow and sniff whatever things he found interesting.

As the lot drew closer on the way back, he shielded his eyes from the nearby streetlight until it was behind him. Dozens of crickets were chirping in the grass, with handfuls stopping as he and Bailey made their way to a stretch of turf that ran behind two rows of houses. Alex saw nothing along the north or south lengths, and Shane’s scent was once again absent.

Maybe he marked that tree just to unnerve me.

Monday, October 10th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon – 2

Alex left for campus early on Monday. It had been a few days since he’d last enjoyed an uninterrupted session of just riding around on his board, and today and tomorrow were the best times to enjoy it before he changed.

As he cruised around behind the main building, his thoughts jumping between the animal hunger and what to do while stuck inside, his brain flashed an image of him skating in his were form. The resulting cringe throughout his muscles slowed him down and got him off the board.

Once in class, he casually took in the scents of the other students. A few of them had new clothes on from the starch scents, and the many scents associated with fast food provoked his stomach. Compared to Friday, the quiet

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time in class was a nice change of pace, even once the professor entered the room and his worry of having eyes on him came back.

Alex passed on heading to the student lounge after class, opting instead to wait outside the room of his next class. His phone sounded the IM tone a few minutes later as he was growing absorbed in the novel in his hands.

Marcus A.: No harm done, man.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief at the message and replied with his thanks. Though Catherine had yet to reply, he gave her some benefit of the doubt and got back to reading.

Chapter 6 – Familial Plans...

Monday, October 10th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon – 2

As soon as class was over and he and Nathan had split up, Alex headed outside and jumped back on his skateboard. The winds had picked up since that morning, sweeping scents from miles upwind into his nostrils and causing his momentum to die when he wasn't following the currents.

After several laps of the main buildings, he headed for his motorcycle and then made his way to the skateshop. The welcoming scents of wax, urethane, and plywood greeted him as the door opened, along with the sounds of several skaters inside the park. Three, he guessed.

At the counters, Walter was looking over and stocking what seemed like new product shipments until he spotted him approaching. "Hey, Alex."

Alex responded in kind.

"Was everything alright the other day?"

"Yeah," Alex said as he slipped his backpack off. "Nothing major."

"Glad to hear it."

Their conversation then trailed into the demo Alex had missed. Although Walter expressed pleasure from how much fun it was, a mention of low overall attendance followed.

"That sucks," Alex said. "Will you still have events, though?"

Walter gave a nod. "Hopefully, we can do one every month so some interest will grow."

"If so, I'm looking forward to the next one."

Once he was inside the park, Alex took note of which spots were being used by the other skaters, mostly the rails and funboxes to his left, before setting his board down and pushing off. He gave himself one lap of the area to watch for any uneasiness—twice he felt twinges of it. The same lap exposed him to several new scents, none that seemed concerning.

In the end, Alex spent much of his first half-hour cruising, only attempting tricks when he felt that the attention of the others wouldn't be on

Werewolf Tale II

him. His stomach began growling towards the end of the allotted hour, pushing him to leave and get some lunch. The place he chose was brimming with pleasant scents, and he stayed inside long enough to decide to buy a little more food for when the shift was over.

Back at home, with a sniff at the door crack, Alex could just catch Bailey's scent. Within a second of opening the door, he heard his pet's heavy paws impacting the carpet as he ran to greet him. "Good boy," Alex said before Bailey turned his attention to the bag of food in his hand. "Ah, no. Not for you."

Despite his father always sleeping with the door closed, Alex could still hear him snoring as he walked through the living room to the kitchen. In turn, he spent the time until his father awoke reading or throwing handfuls of his role-playing dice across his carpet. When he imagined himself dungeon mastering a game for his friends in his were form, the cringe he'd felt earlier in the day resurfaced, though not as deeply.

When his father did wake, it didn't take long for him to imply he wanted to talk. "I just remembered something I meant to ask you last night."

"What?"

"If you wanted the house to yourself after two or so tomorrow."

Alex replied with little hesitation. "If you and Mom want to do that."

"She has something to do after work tomorrow. It'll just be me here by then."

"Oh, okay. But yeah, sure. That's fine."

"You're putting Bailey out before it happens too, I hope."

"I know. I will." Alex then noticed his pet staring at him, and he rubbed his head. *The first time it was an accident. This one should go smoother.*

Tuesday, October 11th, 2011

Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

Time until the Shift - 10 Hours, 51 Minutes

When Alex awoke the next morning, Bailey wasn't sleeping beside him, and the backs of his eyes felt oddly irritated, like something had broken his sleep at its most relaxed moment. After sitting up to look around, he didn't see Bailey on his dog bed either. Seeing 4:39 a.m. on his phone's screen caused little concern, though why he'd woken up so early twice in a row before the full moon remained a mystery.

Forget it. Probably just nerves, Alex thought before he laid his head back down. Though he attempted to get back to sleep, to build up some more energy for what he knew was coming, something kept it from him and he soon sat back up.

After holding off a yawn and wiping his eyes, Alex sat waiting for the irritation behind his eyes to fade. A few breaths through his nose revealed no new scents, though the sight of the guest room's open door gave him an idea where Bailey could be. Once the irritation faded, he slid out of bed, the snoring from his mother providing a good mask for his movement.

He was proven right. Bailey was asleep on the futon in front of the window. He stayed asleep, or so it seemed, until Alex was within a few feet of him, at which point his eyes opened, and his head turned to face his approaching owner.

"Hey, boy," Alex whispered. He got no reaction, but still moved to pet his dog's head. Bailey's head and muzzle moved to follow his hand and arm, leaving Alex wondering what his dog was seeing in him. He then let Bailey sniff him, and while he didn't seem afraid, he didn't seem excited either.

Only once his dog licked him did Alex take the opportunity to pet his head, belly, and back. "You'll be okay, boy." he whispered before standing up and leaving him to his peace.

After getting some water, Alex peered outside from behind the living room curtains. The gibbous moon was uncovered, and its radiance gave everything in sight a slightly silver sheen. He closed them again upon noticing headlights steadily illuminating the road across from him and then returned to his room.

His father began to stir over an hour later, by which time Alex was absorbed in his comic collection and imagining what Nathan's next RPG session would involve. Within the silence of his room, he could hear every shuffle, groan, and footstep, even the sound of a kiss, and waited for his father to leave his bedroom.

When he did, looking as though he was still waking up, Alex gave him a wave as soon as his attention was on him.

"You're up early," his father said in reply after a curious-sounding, muffled hum.

Alex shrugged. "Couldn't get back to sleep."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Nothing's wrong."

His father didn't immediately reply. "Alright. Morning then, Son."

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Alex replied in kind, then slipped into the bathroom for a shower. By the time he reentered the kitchen, numerous coffee grind scents were dominating the space, but were easily pushed aside by the scents of the leftovers he warmed up.

He was halfway through his meal when his mother came into view, looking freshly awoken herself and glad to see him. After getting a cup of coffee for herself, she floated a question aimed at him. “You didn’t hurt yourself last time, did you?”

Alex pushed the resurfacing memory of breaking his metatarsals aside. “No, I was fine.”

“Then you’ll be okay without us around?”

Even though he was certain his mother knew the answer, Alex cracked a small smile and answered as calmly as he could. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“What about afterwards?”

Alex reached for and held his bullet and necklace at that. “I’ll be hungry after it’s done, but that’s it.”

“Not for animals, I hope,” his father replied.

“No. Normal food works.”

“Then what about when you will be hungry for them?”

Alex stalled. After several seconds, his father said his name in a questioning tone. He quietly sighed once before answering. “I know. I don’t know when it’ll happen, but I’ll be careful.”

His answer drew a concerned breath from his mother, pulling his attention to her. Her expression was telling of what she was feeling, so Alex got up from his chair, stepped closer to her, and wrapped his arms around her. Her fear scent was already leaking from her skin.

“I know what to do this time, but if I can’t help it, I can’t help it.” His mother didn’t respond; he swore he heard a quiver in her breaths.

“It would be nice to know if you could avoid that.” The pitch in his father’s voice was an obvious giveaway; he’d already put the same pieces together. One screw up and he would be taking the fall for Shane. Or worse. The way his mother was acting, however, with the rhythm of her breaths, she was getting close to crying.

“Honey, it’s OK.” Hearing his father get up from his chair as well, Alex separated to let them embrace. Just in time as well; his throat was tensing up. His thoughts then fell on Bailey. A quick walk with him, even in lieu of the cold outside, felt more desirable right then.

He found Bailey still resting on the futon when he reached the guest room's door. His dog raised his head to look at him within a second. "Hey, boy. Wanna go outside?" Alex asked as he approached. Bailey didn't move or react until he came within a few feet, at which point he stood up and stepped back an inch.

"Bailey, what's wrong?" Alex asked before deciding to hold out his hand for his dog. Bailey took a single glance at it before leaping from the futon and leaving the room. It was the reaction Alex didn't want to see, though he was glad to find Bailey had avoided his room. *Guess I'll leave you alone, then.*

With both his folks and his dog now wary about what was coming, Alex slipped into his room, shut the door behind him, and got back to reading. He took a break from it when he heard his mother knock on his door. By that time, she was dressed and ready to leave for work, and Alex offered her another hug. She asked nothing of him, opting instead for, "I'll see you tonight."

"You will. And I'll be okay."

They then separated, with Alex hoping she wouldn't stay emotional the entire drive. His father, meanwhile, had taken to working on something in the study, judging by the keyboard keys clicking in rapid succession. When Alex checked on him after refilling his water, he found Bailey resting on the couch behind him.

The sounds of the keyboard helped plant in his mind the decision to indulge in one of his older PC titles for a while. It wasn't long before the sounds of an amusement park and rollercoasters filled his room, the pace and appeal of the game making the minutes zip by.

A while later, Alex began to feel a noticeable increase in his pulse. Thinking it was the game and the situation he was in, he paused it and waited. Less than a minute later, not only had his pulse increased instead of decreased, but his fingertips had started going numb.

Then came the taste of fresh blood, and he moved his tongue in time to feel one of his canines lengthen.

The hell? He shot a glance at his desk clock. *8:40? What the hell's going on?* As the first sounds of his claws emerging came, Alex shot up and rushed out of his room. The keyboard in the study was no longer clicking, but he knew his father was in there.

By then, his breathing had changed its pace to match his rapid heartbeat, making him sound winded. His father noticed the instant he appeared in the doorway, and Bailey once again pulled his head up at the sight of him.

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“Alex, what--” his father began before spotting the claws on the hand Alex had pressed to his chest.

“It’s happening.”

Chapter 7 – ...Gone Awry

Tuesday, October 11th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

“Wait, how?” His father got up from his chair as he asked that.

“I don’t know. It just is.”

His father then turned around. “Bailey, c’mon. Outside.”

Bailey obeyed and rushed for the front door. Alex praised him silently and then slipped away before his father followed his dog outside. His jacket and tee were removed first in prep for the crunching up of his stomach, the rest of his clothing--sans his necklace--coming off once he was in his room and the door was shut.

For several worrying seconds, he was left staring at the clawed, shifting hands gripping the foot of his bed frame, and then the pressure hit. As his lungs compressed, several strained grunts were forced out of him, and one of his arms wrapped around his chest.

The quivering of his muscles came soon after. The feeling of it hadn’t changed since the first time, still seeming as though someone was digging under his skin and reshaping his muscles, moving him like a puppet against his will.

By the time the compression laxed, his breathing was laced with growls and his tail had begun to emerge. The water left in the nearby glass was chugged down in seconds, though the taste of his blood remained. He made for the bathroom to rinse it out. His limbs, and in effect his steps, were shakier than he expected, forcing him to lean against the walls and then the countertop.

As cold water pooled into his paws, Alex noticed the hints of his fur on them. The itching had yet to start bothering him, but what he knew was coming would.

After several drinks, he returned to his room and lowered himself to the floor. Despite his still-elevated pulse and sweat-drenched skin, he tried to take some easy breaths, only for the Charlie horse rod-through-the-muscles

Werewolf Tale II

sensations to sweep through his legs. A protracted series of snarls followed as he dug his claws into his carpet and clamped his eyes shut.

Then came the shifting of his ears, and the emergence of the first patches of fur along his spine and back. The subsequent itching ran along his skin like a wave of crawling ants, the rubbing from his paws barely able to counter it. Alex kept trying to catch his breath as it grew in, the fur catching his escaping body heat and driving up his thirst again.

And then he heard bones cracking, first from his skull and jaw, and then from his ribcage.

Resisting the urge to wrap his arms around his chest, Alex flexed his paws as the sounds continued. The first loud snaps of bone came from his ribcage, a series of well over two-dozen of them. As they grew out and then reattached to his sternum, the mental image of his chest being splayed open drew pangs of nausea.

His skull and jaw came next, the localized pain of all the forming cracks giving way to a slack feeling in both bones. His until-now short muzzle then pushed out, forming his longer canine one and allowing his fangs to complete their growth.

The bones had no time to set before the ones in his legs and feet also fractured and snapped. A pair of roaring snarls got away from him before he restrained himself, and his shaky, growl-laced breathing took over again.

Eventually he felt his legs ceasing to reshape, and his breathing began to calm with the last of the stretching. The whole of his body was sore from the shift however and he let his arms slip from his chest and his legs lay as slack as he could allow them.

Before long, his relief was tainted by concern. What had caused him to shift early? He'd been doing nothing unusual or new. He then pictured Shane's werewolf form giving him barely a glance before walking away, an ugly feeling of being slapped in the face following. Why hadn't--

No, fuck him. Alex let a sharp snarl fly before he shook his head and slammed a fist into his carpet. *What help has he been anyway?* His breathing then fully changed to growls for a few seconds, each one releasing some of his pent-up frustration. Once spent, he continued resting on the floor for a while before rolling over and getting to his knees and paws. With his bed frame as a crutch, he pulled himself fully to his feet.

Alex's thoughts returned to his father as he found his footing and let the air conditioning cool him off. He was already hungry and getting ideas about what to have, but letting his father know the shift was over could be done first.

However, he didn't see him near the front door, or within the yard or driveway.

Left to assume both Bailey and his father were in the backyard, a wave of cold soon touched his nerves. Had his father slipped back inside and heard any of the event, or heard him through the window? Or had Bailey kept his hands full the whole time?

After returning to his room and opening his blinds, Alex spotted his father sitting in a chair for the backyard's table, his back to the window. He couldn't tell if he had heard anything, but his gut feeling told him he had. With Bailey nowhere in sight, Alex unlocked the nearest window and slid it up.

His father turned his head at the noise. "Alex?"

Bailey came into view as Alex was about to answer. "Hey, Dad." His voice stopped his dog in his tracks.

"You alright?"

"Sore, but fine."

"Alright. I'm coming back inside."

His father wasted no time doing so, though Bailey was left outside after refusing to come back in. When he stopped near the door to his room and locked eyes on him, Alex gave him a nod just before his stomach started churning. He didn't want to ask and potentially confirm his worries if his father was willing to not say anything.

Once back in the kitchen, Alex pulled some food from the fridge and started with the burgers from the day before. Within minutes they were gone, along with his second choice of leftovers, leaving a glass apiece of water and soda to tide him over as more food was warmed up.

His first few drinks of the fizzing soda drew a hiccup, followed by a growl-laced cough.

"You OK, Son?" his father asked from the study.

"Yeah," Alex replied, though his nostrils were now stinging from the carbonation. His father resumed clicking keys shortly after.

As Alex continued to fill his stomach, he found himself asking what he could do to pass the time until nightfall. He had plenty to read, but could already feel an urge to go outside. The front yard was off-limits, but the backyard... *Hmm. Wouldn't take me more than a few seconds to slip into the garage... Yeah, that'll work.* He then looked towards the kitchen's door to the study. He couldn't see his father minding if he did that, though something urged him to be sure, or at least wait until he had the house to himself.

Werewolf Tale II

Nearly an hour from the moment the shift began, Alex's stomach at last felt full. Despite the numerous scents that clung to his fur and pads, he refrained from licking his paws and moved to check on his father. What sounded like PC speaker noises had been coming from the computer for the last few minutes, but he couldn't place them with any program he knew.

Alex received a few seconds' glance when he entered his father's line of sight. To his relief, his father didn't look concerned, and when he spoke, his tone was still neutral. "Something wrong?"

"No. Just finished eating."

His father took a moment before responding. "How long will that last?"

"A while. I can tide myself over with small meals if I need to."

"And what about that other hunger?"

Alex glanced away. No sense in pretending he didn't know. "It hit me a full day into this the first time."

"So, are you saying it'll start affecting you tomorrow morning?"

Alex stopped himself before responding. The shift had happened sooner than he expected. What assurance did he have that his animal hunger would wait a full day? "I don't know. It took eighteen hours the night you and Mom found me like this."

"So, between two and eight a.m., that's the timeframe we're looking at?"

"As far as I can guess."

Alex's father rested his forehead against the fingers of his right hand at that answer, a noticeable sigh following. The noise pushed Alex to close the distance between them and rest a paw on his father's shoulder. At that distance, he could start to hear his father's heartbeat. Faster than he thought, but not by much.

"I won't do anything stupid."

"I know. It's not that."

It's that this is happening at all, isn't it? Alex thought as he tried not to think of Shane. He fought off the build-up of tension in his throat as he patted his father's shoulder, trying not to scratch him.

When he glanced away from his father's face, an MS-DOS-caliber menu above a brightly colored and heavily pixelated background was what he found on the nearby monitor. Hoping the program would serve to lighten the mood, Alex asked, "What's that?"

"It's a game I used to play," his father said after a second.

"Doesn't look familiar."

His father made a slight chuckle and then didn't speak in favor of unpausing the game and getting back to playing. Alex watched as his father typed in commands and guided his avatar around what looked like a spaceship before getting gunned down after a screen change.

"Oh, right. I forgot about him," his father remarked before the game produced a snarky epitaph that made Alex smile.

"It was a good try," Alex replied.

"Think you can do better?" his father asked as he scooted his chair back and got up.

Alex noticed hints of his father's fear scent before he answered. It wasn't strong, but because it was there, his initial response was halted. "Dad, hang on."

His father stopped a few feet behind him. "What?"

Alex hesitated until he turned his head to look behind him. "I'm not making you nervous, am I?"

"I'd be lying if I said no."

Alex sighed as quietly as he could, his eye contact with his father breaking as he did. Shane's words about others trying not to be afraid of him flashed through his mind a second later, though he couldn't help wondering if in this instance, the scent was emerging for a reason other than his presence.

"I don't know what else to tell you."

"It's fine. Maybe time will help temper that." Alex got no response. His father simply waited a few seconds before resuming his walk towards the kitchen.

Chapter 8 – Away The Hours

Tuesday, October 11th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

As he waited for his father to return, Alex started a new game and quickly found himself hunting and pecking keys to type out the commands he needed. His first few discoveries came easily, until a series of incorrect commands stopped him.

“You stuck?” his father asked after circling around to his right side.

“Yeah. Don’t know why, though.”

His father hummed. “Use ‘look’ instead.”

Alex did so and was greeted with a new prompt. “Oh.”

His father chuckled. “Sometimes it’s not the word you think.”

“I’ll remember that,” Alex said before finishing his business and directing the avatar out of the room. Once the next screen appeared, the same enemy emerged and killed him.

Stuck between surprise and a fit of laughter at the outcome, his father had time to respond. “Well, good try.”

Alex then stepped aside from the chair and his father retook his seat. Immediately after, what he’d meant to ask before was back on his mind, along with Bailey. *Better let him back in.*

He found his dog resting with his back to the sliding glass door. Before disturbing him, Alex found the garage keys in the nearby table, figuring if his father trusted him enough to not do anything stupid, using the garage as an outdoor refuge wouldn’t violate that trust.

Bailey snapped to attention, and then recoiled from Alex’s form when the glass was tapped. “It’s okay, boy.” He then slid the door open, prompting Bailey to back up further, and was about to step aside for him when he heard his phone sound the IM received tone.

In his haste to return to his room and read it, Alex forgot how useless his claws and pads were for working with a touchscreen. After finding a stylus and unlocking the phone, he found that Nathan had messaged him, with Marcus and Catherine in the same chat room.

Nathan T: You doing okay, man?

Alex heard Bailey come inside and walk past his open door as he typed up his response.

Alex S: Yeah. It already happened, though.

Expecting any replies to take a while, Alex made his way back to the glass door. The hundreds of scents from outside had swept over more than half the room already, and despite the disorientation from his brain processing them so quickly, the novelty of them compared to the stuffiness of his room was an instant stress reliever. Now he wanted to be outside more than anything.

He hesitated at the door for a moment before dropping to all fours and then making a beeline for the garage door. As soon as it was opened, he slipped inside, into the pool of other familiar scents the door had kept bottled. His nearby grindbox then became an impromptu bench, first for sitting and then for resting, as the morning breezes cycled scents in and out of the garage.

The IM tone sounded a short time later. This time, Marcus responded.

Marcus A: Seriously?

Alex S: Yeah. Caught me by surprise.

After pressing “send”, Alex switched to his phone’s video player. He chuckled silently at the outburst moments from the video he chose, pausing it only to check another text.

Marcus A: Your folks weren’t there, I hope.

Alex S: Mom wasn’t. Dad and Bailey didn’t see it, thankfully.

The minutes ticked by without a response from either Nathan or Marcus, and for a moment, Catherine’s silence drew concern. *Eh, she’s probably busy.* After a few more videos, Alex sat back up and stared into the barely lit garage.

Werewolf Tale II

An urge to go beyond the backyard, to the wooded lot across the street, had been rising for the last few minutes. He was already out here, and he'd heard few cars coming or going since coming outside.

He shook his head before the thought progressed further. He wasn't about to risk being seen by a civilian or betray his father's trust. It took several minutes of reaffirming that for the urge to go away, by which time he was growing thirsty.

After looking inside to be sure his parents' bedroom was empty, Alex opened the door only to hear footsteps coming towards the room. The door was closed, and his back was turned when his father entered the room.

There was silence for a moment, and then, "Were you thinking of going outside?"

How neutral his father's tone was erased Alex's urge to lie to him. "Coming back inside, actually. Just hung out in the garage for a little while."

"Oh. Was that something you did the first time this happened?"

"Sort of. I just had a window open that time."

His father hummed in response.

"It made me a little stir-crazy, being stuck inside, but the garage seems to work fine."

His father nodded. "Good to know."

When Alex began to move, his father stepped aside, though not far enough to avoid a pat on the shoulder from one of his paws as he passed.

Before long, morning had given way to afternoon, the increased intensity of the sunlight tempering Alex's desires to go back outside. He left one of his bedroom windows open to compensate and resigned himself to reading, the size and shape of his paws making the mass-market-sized books he owned harder to hold and turn only one page of.

He changed his focus to rolling handfuls of dice after some time, smiling when the dice turned up good numbers. His imagination then trailed into having his friends around a table, himself as game master while they had books, character sheets, snacks and more spread out around themselves.

That would be perfect right about now.

Chapter 9 - The Company of Friends

Tuesday, October 11th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

As the time ticked over to 1:30 p.m. and his father awoke from the nap he was taking in his room, Alex's phone sounded its IM tone.

Nathan T: If you're bored, do you want to go a few rounds with me?

Although his friend didn't elaborate, Alex knew what he was implying. It was when he reached for his keyboard that he was reminded of how big his clawed fingers were compared to his human ones. He then tested their positions and found them striking two or three keys by default. Nothing some key rebinding couldn't fix, though his friend would still have some advantage over him.

He sat on things for a minute before answering.

Alex S: Yeah, sure. Why not?

Nathan T: Give me until 2:30 then.
Gotta do something first.

That gives me less than an hour. Alex spent most of that time getting used to how it felt mashing keys to move his avatar around. After a while, he began questioning removing the other keys and leaving just the ones he needed.

He shook his head after staring at his keyboard for a moment. It would make things far easier, but picking the thing apart for one game? The idea of a second keyboard just for that purpose quickly became more appealing and stuck in his mind longer.

Werewolf Tale II

It was nearing 2:15 p.m. when Alex heard heavy footsteps and the jingling of metal behind him. He turned and found his father dressed in his police uniform, ready to leave but looking like something was on his mind.

“Before I go, I want to know what your plans are for tonight.” There was a cautious yet direct edge to his father’s tone.

Alex broke eye contact. He hadn’t given that much thought. All that was crucial to him was the hunger, and if he was correct in his assumptions, it wouldn’t surface until well into the night.

To his relief, his father didn’t say his name as he thought of how to reply. “I guess keep doing what I have been: keep myself occupied.”

“What about where you’re planning on going?”

Alex glanced at his father. The ranch where he’d encountered Shane came to mind first, then the stable at his high school, then the animal farm near Marcus and Catherine’s neighborhood. All three of them would be easier to hit late at night, if not after midnight, but all that his high school’s stable had left were big animals.

“I think the ranch that Shane was at before.” Alex saw no hints of disagreement when he looked at his father again. Likely a good sign.

“Then whatever you do, or have to do, either tonight or tomorrow, I want you to remember to put your safety ahead of everything else.” The shift in his father’s tone was evident from his first words. Concern had overtaken the cautious angle.

“I will. I won’t forget.”

His father nodded. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Likewise, Dad.”

As his father walked away, and then left the house altogether, Alex took a moment before returning his focus to the game. He was working his way through its single-player maps when his phone rang, making him jump at the noise. It was Nathan.

“Hello?” Alex said after the speaker option was turned on.

“Hey, man.” Nathan’s voice was a welcome sound to hear. “You ready?”

“More or less. Let’s do this.”

With his phone serving as the stand in for a microphone, the two of them began the first deathmatch round. Despite the binding tweaks, Alex still found his claws scratching and getting stuck between keys, and Nathan was quick to gain several frags off him.

A short growl got away from him when he was killed within seconds of respawning. The smack talk Nathan had been throwing his way halted for a short time in response. "I'm okay," Alex said after he realized it.

"So, this..." Nathan paused to pay attention to the rocket barrage Alex was raining down on him. Several exploded near him, sapping the life from his avatar. "Damn it."

Gotcha. "What was that?" Alex asked after he finished pumping the arm controlling the mouse.

"I was asking if this is the most entertainment you've had all day."

Alex evaded Nathan's chaingun fire before he answered. "So far."

"So, what happened?" Nathan asked after he claimed another frag.

"No idea. This just happened with no warning."

"That guy didn't tell you?"

Alex growled instead of scoffing. "No. Haven't seen him since Friday, in fact."

"Well, maybe he finally got the hint that you don't want him around."

Alex decided not to let his friend know about the scent-marking. "Doubt it, but so long as he doesn't touch you guys or my folks, fine by me."

The deathmatches continued between them for several more rounds, with Nathan saying near the start of the last one, "I gotta stop after this one. Got some homework to do."

"I get you," Alex replied. He continued once the game was over and his phone was in his paw. "Thanks a lot, man. That was fun." His friend hung up one reply later, and once his computer was shut down, the house was left quiet once again.

Alex then returned to the book he'd been reading, only to notice Bailey poking his head inside the room and staring at him. "Hey, boy." His dog didn't move. "You want outside, right?" Despite further inaction from Bailey, Alex got up and started opening the doors to lead him out back. His dog hesitated to move closer to the last one until Alex stood far enough aside, at which point he zipped outside.

At first, Alex meant to close the door and check on him later. A few seconds of standing by an exit from the house changed his mind, and he followed his dog outside. The garage was still unlocked and, as before, he left it unlit and lay down on his grindbox, letting his nose take in the scents within the building. Several dozen new scents had appeared since morning, some piquing his interest as to their source. The few human scents he noticed

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were too weak to belong to anyone nearby, and no nearby noises revealed the presence of others.

After some time, he heard Bailey's claws clicking on the concrete within the garage. They stopped near the door and even without looking, Alex could tell Bailey was staring at him, despite the unlit space hiding him.

"It's me, boy. You're alright," Alex said as he sat back up. His dog backpedaled out of the garage before he took a single step and didn't follow him into the house until he was back in his own room. By then, the thought of a real nap was growing in appeal, and Alex left his door open in case Bailey wanted to try and approach him.

* * *

When he woke, two hours had gone by and the sun was starting to set, its lower angle flooding his room with bright yellow light. Little more than two hours remained before night would arrive.

Alex took his time sitting up and stretching, and noted some of the new scents swirling around his room. Someone upwind was burning charcoal, and cooking what smelled like lean ground beef. Scents that put his returning hunger back in mind.

As he slid off his bed, Alex was once again startled by the ringing of his phone. It was Marcus this time.

"Hello?"

"Hey. Did you get my text?"

Alex then ran his stylus down the screen. There was a text there, from half an hour ago.

Marcus A.: Would you mind us stopping by for a few minutes?

"Yeah. I just saw it, though. It came in while I was sleeping."

"Alright. Are you okay with that then?"

"Sure. Come by whenever you want."

"Will do."

As his friend hung up, Alex was left to wonder who Marcus was bringing along with him. Just Catherine was his best guess.

Once in the kitchen, he warmed up a whole package of hot dogs and nipped at their lengths when they cooled. In the middle of the fourth one, he

began hearing a truck's engine traveling up the driveway. His quick peek outside revealed the red truck Marcus drove, and both him and Catherine in the vehicle cabin.

He didn't keep watch to see if both of them were coming; just having them nearby was enough to perk him up.

When the knocking on the door came, Alex heard Bailey leap off whatever he was resting on and rush for the door. His enthusiasm and pace were halted upon seeing his werewolf form, at which time Alex reached for the doorknob and inched the front door open, keeping behind it as he did so.

Pleasant and familiar food scents swept inside immediately, and although he tried not to focus on the potential sources as Marcus and then Catherine entered, his few glances confirmed it was Chick-Fil-A. His friends had clear reservation in their expressions, which he expected, but nonetheless felt a twinge of concern from seeing.

Marcus spoke first as the door was closed, the deadbolt left unlocked. "Hey, man."

Alex glanced back at them. Already, Bailey was begging for attention, his tail wagging rapidly as Catherine coaxed him over to be petted. "Hey. Thanks for stopping by."

"No problem."

Alex glanced at the take-out bag again, then at Bailey and Catherine. Seeing him so happy was a nice change.

"Oh, right. This." Marcus held out the paper bag. "Thought you'd like it, even if just for a snack."

"Always do. Thanks, Marcus." Alex took the bag before speaking again. "You guys can sit in the kitchen if you want."

"It's fine. We won't be here long."

Upon hearing that, Alex briefly regretted his choice to have a nap. "Plans for tonight?"

"Somewhat."

"Then so long as it's not studying, have fun."

Marcus only nodded, then reached down to pet Bailey's head. Things stayed quiet between the three of them for a time, until Catherine broke the silence. "What about you?"

At first, Alex thought she was referring to how his day had gone. Before he replied, he caught himself and wondered if she meant what was coming, either tonight or tomorrow. "A bit concerned, to be honest."

"About that thing, right?" Marcus asked.

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“Yeah,” Alex said after letting an exhale out through his nose. “About when it’ll happen, mostly.”

“When it’ll happen?”

“Yeah. The first time it came a full day had passed, and then I had to wait until night to deal with it. I won’t have that chance this time if it happens after eight-forty in the morning.”

Alex’s reply left both his friends without words for a minute.

“Are you sure it has to be then?” Marcus eventually asked.

“It feels like it, but no, I’m not.” Shane’s face flashed through his head again. “Plus, Shane’s been AWOL since I confronted him last Friday, and he never told me anything.”

Marcus hummed. “Maybe it’s me, but when I think ‘hunger’, I think of a need that hasn’t been satisfied.”

Alex glanced at Catherine, but she provided no response. “Now that you mention it, I have only reacted to that hunger.”

“My point exactly. What if it’s like any other need? A get it over with early and you’re done kind of thing?”

Alex held his muzzle in one paw. His friend’s logic was sound, but after a few seconds, something started to worry him. What if that wasn’t possible, and he had no choice but to wait?

“Plus, like you said, you’ve been reacting to it. This time, you know it’s coming.”

Alex was too fixated on the potential lose-lose facing him to respond.

“What’s wrong?” Catherine asked.

“This feeling that it’s not that easy,” Alex replied after a slow sigh. More silence followed.

“I still think it’s your best option, man,” Marcus said. “If you try and do it tomorrow morning, you’ll be cutting things really close.”

“I know.” When his friends stayed quiet, he continued. “I’m not holding you guys up, am I?”

Catherine shook her head.

“No,” Marcus replied. “We do have to head out soon, though.”

“Alright. Before you do, thanks for the food and the willing ears.”

“No problem.”

Alex smiled in return and his friends left soon after, with some parting words to stay safe. “I will, I promise,” Alex had replied before they closed the door behind themselves. He then watched them leave through the glass of the door, glad to have spent even a few minutes with them.

Chapter 10 – Off the Familiar Path

Tuesday, October 11th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

By then, the scents from the takeout bag were starting to make him hungry. Bailey followed at a distance as he headed for the kitchen, much to his amusement. *You ignore me if I toss you treats, yet you're curious about this. Silly dog.* He emptied the contents onto a plate, then restrained himself from taking more than nibbles at a time.

As he ate, his mind stayed on what was to come. He wanted to believe Marcus was right, but if he made no plans for if it wasn't, he was just as screwed. Hunting twice would be a waste of an animal, along with putting him at risk of being seen. Could he hide his kill somewhere and recover it later? He knew that worked with actual wolves.

Alex paused his eating a moment later. As though a switch had been flipped, the answer nearly blinked into his head. If he stole his kill and brought it home, the only issues he would have would be storing the carcass until he needed it, and where to dump it afterward. A smile grew across his muzzle at the realization, and a measure of weight lifted from his chest as he returned to eating.

When he finished, his first concern was how wide of a selection the ranch had. The doe he'd eaten a considerable amount of flesh from versus the raccoon, but he'd gone hungry for longer the first time, and the raccoon couldn't have been more than seven or eight pounds. He strained his memory for the animal scents he'd noticed that day, recalling some from goats, horses, and pigs. The pigs felt like the easiest pickings, and he'd noticed at least four of their scents before.

How heavy do those things get? After some searching on his phone, he was left hoping there were some juveniles to pick from. Anything bigger would be a waste of meat, or near impossible to lift out of any enclosure, much less onto his shoulders once it was down.

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That still leaves the goats... He winced at the thought of what that animal's meat would taste like before wondering how late he should wait before leaving the house. He tossed ideas around a bit before settling on 9:30. If the walk to the ranch took as long as the walk to his high school, it would be past 10:00 when he arrived. Late enough to make his trek back that much easier.

Okay...how can I preserve that meat? Alex was quick to imagine using one of the coolers in the garage. He could get ice from the refrigerator no problem, but the carcass would have to be wrapped in something to help keep it fresh and keep the cooler from being stained with blood. *A trashbag should do the job.*

Alex returned to his room and settled back into reading as the sun set, the outside winds continuing to mix new scents into his room. A pair of fantasy novels he'd yet to touch made it into his paws for a chapter each, along with a few new comics. Eventually he made his way into the garage, picked out what he needed, and filled his chosen cooler with ice. The amount he got was barely enough for a one cube layer over the bottom. Enough, he hoped, to last until 9:00 a.m. tomorrow.

* * *

When his mother returned home, the sound of her car's engine coming up the driveway reached both him and Bailey. His dog leapt off the guest room futon within seconds and ran for the front door. Alex didn't follow in favor of moving to sit atop his bed.

When his mother appeared in his doorway, he was relieved to see her expression and body lacking tension. Her tone, however, was laced with bottled-up concern. "Did everything go okay?"

Alex was left assuming his father told her what happened. "Yeah. No problems."

"You changed early, though."

"Yeah, but it was alright. Dad and Bailey got outside."

His mother waited a few seconds. "Nothing else?"

"Not yet."

She held her response again. "Whenever it happens...stay safe."

Oh, man. Alex glanced away for a second. "I will. I have been."

"Then, I'll see you in the morning. Love you."

“You too, Mom.” After his mother walked away, Alex made for the kitchen. He was getting peckish, though didn’t completely fill his stomach. One hour remained until he planned to leave, and if he returned home to find normal food unable to satisfy his stomach, then his prey would serve its purpose.

As that hour ticked by, his attention was split between his book and the noises coming from his parent’s bedroom. His mother went to bed not long after entering the room, though it wasn’t until close to 9:00 p.m. that the light sawing sound of snoring reached his ears.

Time then seemed to slow as Alex put his book aside and attempted to focus on what was coming. He checked on Bailey once before 9:30, finding him resting on the couch in the living room. Shortly after, he grew curious if Shane was watching the house, and glanced outside through the glass on the front door. Though he did notice something moving within the wooded lot after a minute, it was quickly revealed to be a dark-furred pitbull.

Alex kept an eye on the dog as it wandered and then left the lot. It eventually took the road running south instead of east, much to his relief. After a few more minutes to be sure it wouldn’t turn around, he crept back towards his room. By then his mother’s snoring was more pronounced, and after a few second’s glance at the guest room window, he made his move.

The sliding noises the window made with each movement briefly masked the snoring, and once outside, with how quiet things around him were, Alex made his way to the backyard gate; jumping the fence would be too noisy, he felt. Once the latch was up, he inched the gate open, staying low and near his mother’s sedan as he did so. Maintaining his canine stance after the gate was closed, he began his trek down the street. Twice he was forced to hide from passing vehicles, the second one’s high beams coming close to lighting him up.

Eventually, the creek was in sight. He hustled towards it as soon as the coast was clear and slid down the bank, slipping under the bridge right after to catch his breath and relax his pulse. Once he’d reached the end of the creek, Alex took a moment to scan the area. Everything was quiet and still and lit up by the moon. Unlike last month, the skatepark was empty.

Hmm. I could dump the carcass around here. Doubt anything besides carrion birds would notice. As he looked around for a good spot, Alex recalled finding Shane’s scent in the fields near his middle school. Curious if he had already come around, once across the bridge over the drainage basin, Alex

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lowered his head and retraced his steps from his first night. This time he found no hints of Shane's scent, and resumed his trek once he was satisfied.

The sidewalk he followed eventually led to another bridge, this one just north of the local library. The steel rods set into the concrete structure's undersides were what drew his attention most, and up close, he found he could barely slip between any two of them. *Shouldn't slow me down too much. What's the traffic density around here, though?*

After settling into a position on the south crest of the bank, Alex snuck a peek over it. The trees to his right were unilluminated except when headlights passed by, and the median between the roads was also unlit thanks to a burnt-out streetlamp. Within what felt like thirty seconds however, seven vehicles had driven over the bridge. *I'll barely have four seconds at a time... No, too risky.*

He slipped back down the bank and then between the bars, the brightness of the lights on the other side, and how much of the basin they lit up, pushing him to wait. *Traffic's going north. If I stay close to the bank... A sudden squealing of tires, and then the double blip of a police siren, caused his pulse to jump and tore his attention from his planning. When the walls he could see above the bank flashed red and blue, his legs turned to lead. Oh, perfect. Where's it stopping?*

As the cruiser drove over the bridge, the flashing lights he could see moved further north, fading until little hint of them was left. His assumption that the officer had made a right-hand turn urged him down onto all fours before moving again. His still-racing heart got the old feeling of many eyes on him to resurface, and until he felt fully hidden in the darkness, it didn't subside.

The next road he came to, after avoiding the spotlights of an active baseball and football field, wasn't devoid of dedicated lights either, but after a minute of watching, he crossed it on all fours and slipped into the treeline just beyond it. The darkness the trees provided got him up and walking again, with the occasional pause to listen for strange noises not revealing anything along the way. At least nothing louder than the crickets surrounding him.

As the first hints of the ranch began to show beyond the trees, a shift in the breeze swept the animal scents past his muzzle. The place was housing at least three horses, seven pigs, and four goats. More than enough to choose from.

But along with the animal scents came others. Several belonging to car engines, and others belonging to leather, metal lubricant, and gunpowder.

Alex's pulse rose within a second of noticing the last one, and his legs almost unwillingly lowered him into a crouch, the crunching of dried leaves sounding much louder than any time before.

Although he heard no footsteps anywhere ahead of him, he didn't dare move. The animal scents were sapped of their previously hopeful edge at the same time, leaving him dreading any sudden signals of hunger or being spotted and having to flee.

His high school's stable suddenly felt much safer than here, but only for a moment. What if the police were watching that location too?

The foal should still be there... That idea was gradually tossed as he thought back over his route to get there. Unless he weakened the animal somehow, if he lost his grip on it...

Alex snapped his head to his left in shock when grassy steps sounded behind him, then bolted left, keeping on all fours and not looking back. He didn't stop until he was out of the cluster of trees. By then, his pulse was so accelerated and his stance so wobbly, any sense he had of being hidden was dashed.

And then he heard it coming his direction.

He inched back, keeping parallel to the treeline. How many were following him? Could he fool them at this point by acting like a dog?

Can't act aggress--shit, my necklace. Alex almost didn't resist reaching for it.

He inched back further and then looked down at his paws. He couldn't disguise that hand-like shape, could he? After tucking his thumbs under his palms, the abnormal length and mass were still noticeable.

Alex fought the urge to flee back the way he'd come. He was faster than whoever was following him--more mobile too, with the bulk if he needed it. His back arched, almost by itself, and his body braced for a decision to move.

It was then that he began to see a dark, animal-looking mass coming closer between the trees. When it stood up and he could see some tan fur, he eased only briefly.

Shane said nothing as he emerged from the treeline. He continued to be silent as he went down to all fours again, his expression doing all the talking once Alex made it out. "The hell was that?" summed it up.

At the same time, Alex became lost in questioning how he'd not noticed Shane before now. Or smelled him. Had he been followed? Or had Shane been hiding somewhere nearby and he'd not noticed?

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When Shane broke eye contact with him, his attention seeming to change to the trees nearby, Alex followed suit, wondering if someone was close. He heard nothing but did see Shane's left paw lift some. He then gestured for him to come closer, but Alex ignored it and didn't budge, even when Shane shot him a look seconds later.

Shane's head turned one more time towards the trees before he began closing the distance between them. A single step back was all Alex got before Shane was within breathing distance of him, his ears folding back and his head tucking some in turn.

"Guess you had the same idea I did," Shane said, keeping his voice down.

"I can't risk it," Alex replied, the calmness of Shane's voice delaying his response for a moment.

"I figured."

"Could be the police."

"It could..." Shane looked around some, then tossed his head. "Back that way. Circle around and check." Alex hesitated again, slowly turning his head to look behind him. "You want me to do it?"

"No. I'll do it."

Shane looked over him briefly. "If it is them, we can wait them out."

"Maybe."