

Prologue - Hunting In Pairs

Saturday, August 13th, 2011 - Sugar Land, Texas

Moon Phase – Full

11:03 p.m.

Angela relaxed her tense posture after a moment of nothing but cricket chirps. If not for how clean the evening breeze was of strong human scents, the startled animal snorting she'd just heard would've prompted a retreat; a rethinking of her decision to follow Shane out here was already several minutes old.

He continued moving before she did, drawing her attention as he passed. When he came to a stop near the edge of the brush patch, everything went quiet again.

“Ready?”

Shane's growl-laced, rumbling voice didn't catch Angela off-guard. “Which one? That doe?”

“The calf.”

“That much meat...seems like a waste.”

“Between us, it won't be.” Shane resumed closing in on the stable after another stretch of silence, Angela tailing him. With every few steps, a handful of the crickets in the brush around them stop chirping, as though they were tiny alarms hidden in the grass.

A pair of animal cries came again as they reached the edge of the brush patch, this time from the mare and the doe. After glancing at Shane, whose expression and attention hadn't changed, the sound got Angela to hurry ahead of him. Within two seconds, she was diving from the steel bars into the calf's enclosure like a wrestler.

The calf sprung to life when she landed, her claws snagging its ribs and shoulders as it tried to stand and flee. The fearful cries it made as Angela wrestled with it left her ears ringing, and her attention distracted from the calf's thrashing hooves. She could hear them hitting and scraping concrete, the clacks not masking Shane's entry behind her, and then one of her legs

was shoved. For half a second of adrenaline-fueled tension, Angela felt nothing besides the shove.

Then the pain hit, with needle-like stings from pulled fur, building heat around the impact spot, and the feeling that her femur had been bashed through her muscles. Angela rolled aside, her claws slipping from their hold on the calf.

Shane then rushed forward, tackling the startled animal into a corner of the enclosure before wrestling it to the ground by its head. His claws dug behind its skull as he held it down and in position for Angela.

After a second of no action on her part, Shane's head tilted up. Her muzzle was hanging open, and her posture was rocky, as though her confidence was gone.

"Well?" he demanded. When Angela tried to move, a wince replaced her drained expression, and one of her paws went for her thigh. A spreading red stain in her fur was what Shane saw next, and how slowly she was gathering her composure pushed him to act first.

With a grasp of the calf's right shoulder, his claws punching into its flesh, his jaws spread and closed in on the animal's neck. His fangs went through the skin and muscle before something hard stopped them. He put more pressure into his bite. No leeway, and very little blood was meeting his tongue. He'd struck bone. With a loosening of his jaws and a twist of the calf's head, his bottom fangs hit bone again while his upper ones cut further in. The calf's blood was quick to flow over his fangs in response to the punctured vessel, and his jaws once again relaxed, his tongue lapping the fluid on his teeth.

Angela, meanwhile, was holding back the trembling in her gut brought on by Shane's mauling of the calf. How strained its cries had suddenly become made it tougher, and then the many scents that composed fresh blood reached her muzzle. The familiar sensation of something akin to a bubble expanding within her stomach emerged, in stark contrast to how tense the many animal cries, and her injury, were leaving her.

As Shane got the calf's neck in his jaws, Angela at last glanced away, toward the enclosure's door. Its top was five-feet high, at most, short enough for someone to see over it easily. The sound of rigid tissue crunching then started and stopped. It repeated once, then again, with the calf going silent after the first repetition.

When Angela's attention returned to Shane, the calf was still pinned under his paws. His front teeth and fangs were tearing at a piece of muscle on

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the bovine's shoulder. With the previously panic-stricken animals calming down, she heard nothing that could mean an immediate threat to them, but offered a suggestion as she came closer anyway. "Let's move this out of here."

"Later. We'll be fine." Shane's head didn't rise as he replied.

Although Angela wanted to be assured of that, with their catch so close, a moment to reflect was all the incentive she needed to not protest. After picking her feeding spot, her fangs dug into the muscle, making a sizeable chunk to be pulled at.

Seconds later, Shane was growling.

Certain that no one had approached them, Angela glanced over to find him glaring at her, his teeth showing, his tongue flashing, and his ears erect and stiff. The noise and his stare sent a shudder down her spine and around her chest, and she released the chunk she had.

Shane spoke when his growling relaxed. "I said we're fine."

"Not in here we're not."

"Then take the deer and go, if you're that scared of being seen."

Angela growled in response, to which Shane resumed feeding. Until she was sure his attention was fully on the calf, she didn't move closer. Her fangs found a new spot on the calf's right leg, but Shane's growls began again, making her yank on the piece she had.

A sharp snarl during her second tug snapped her attention back to Shane. She almost missed the moment he lunged at her, backpedaling in response. The pain from the gash in her leg almost forced her back down from the standing stance she'd stopped in.

Shane followed suit, standing over the calf, his attention not swaying from Angela's turned head. "You had your chance. Get your own or wait." Until he began pacing backwards, the growling that had accompanied his demand continued. Angela refused to meet his gaze until he was back on all fours.

With her heart racing from the lunge and retreat, her attention changed to the rest of the stable's interior. She saw no one else, and no other animals. Just stored feed, empty enclosures, and what looked like a locked main gate on the far-right side. A check of the other side followed, with a similar closed door on display. She couldn't bring herself to feel apologetic with the discovery, however.

And the sound of sirens in the distance enforced that feeling.

Angela tried not to worry when first hearing them, but as the siren volume rose, her sense of safety rapidly waned. It was when the sirens

sounded less than three streets away that it vanished completely, and she made for the calf's legs. Taking one in both paws, she noticed Shane stop feeding and meet her gaze, his growls starting again. "Not the time. Let's go."

Shane's lunge a second later slammed her into the enclosure's wall, rattling her already racing heart. She snapped her jaws in response, Shane backing up just enough for her to swing an arm under one of his. When her paw found his shoulder, she dug it in, now snarling herself.

Shane mimicked her jaw snap, missing the first time before gauging his next strike. His jaws closed on Angela's muzzle, cutting off her snarls.

The needle-like pain from the bite pressure and Shane's teeth on her muzzle got Angela to reach for his head. She slapped her free paw down near his eyes, sparking a growl from him as her claws raked at his face. That was when her arm was snagged and held down, with Shane's other paw pressing her left shoulder into the wall behind her. Angela tightened her grip on Shane's shoulder in the hope of getting him off. His resultant snarl and the increased pressure on her muzzle killed that hope.

When her attention shifted back to the sirens, they sounded closer than before. Remembering the closed, and likely locked, stable doors didn't help calm her fears. Her breathing quickened when the siren wail sounded within a street of them.

And then the intensity dipped. No relief came to her in turn. Only frustration and anger.

Shane wrenched Angela's paw free of his shoulder when her grip loosened, his muzzle remaining clasped over hers for some time after. "After this, what I kill is mine," he said once he'd released his jaws. Angela huffed in response, refusing eye contact in favor of nursing her muzzle.

When Shane didn't return to the carcass, she inched her way towards it, her paws balled into fists. The gesture didn't escape Shane's notice, and his attention stayed on her while they fed and hid the carcass.

Her defensive posturing and elevated pulse, both of which remained as they left the area, was evidence enough to him to be wary of her.

Chapter 1 – Of Comics and Company

Tuesday, August 23rd, 2011 – Sugar Land, Texas
Moon Phase – Last Quarter
3:05 p.m.

As his potential new boss read over his resume, the hand that Alex Stryker was stroking his chin with moved to adjust his tie. He tugged at it twice, shifting in his seat afterward. *If he asks what I can offer him, or the shop... What can I offer?*

His attention wandered to the comics tacked to the walls, the issues that didn't depict superheroes keeping his attention the longest. Gaming knowledge was the first thing he thought of; the shop had plenty of those products on offer. *How well do those sell versus comics?*

The sound of paper rustling and a thump against wood pulled his attention back to the man interviewing him.

"Alex, I've got a proposal for you."

A proposal? "What kind?"

"What say we skip the interview, and I just say, 'You're hired?'"

Alex shielded his mouth after a chuckle got away. "Just like that?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

"I wasn't expecting that."

"Very few of my employees were."

"Hmm..." As Alex pieced together the rest of his sentence, a shot of horror mixed with his elated mood. His boss's name was escaping him. *Oh, boy.* "If there's no need for an interview, then..."

"We can talk for a while. That does the job better, I think."

"Sounds good." *Gah, what's his name?*

His boss nodded, then glanced at his resume. "From what I read, I take it games are your specialty."

"PC and console games, yeah. My tabletop list is...kinda small."

“I wouldn’t say so. Most role-players I know stick with one to three games they like. Of course, there are the miniature war games, board games, card games, etc.”

“Do the gaming nights cover all of them, or just role-playing?”

“Only role-playing currently, but they’ll expand to board games soon.”

Alex nodded in response.

“Speaking of boards, I’ve noticed you always have a skateboard with you when you’re here.”

“Yeah. Been riding since I was nine.”

“Ten years?” Trevor’s surprise remained after Alex nodded again. “Impressive. You know any tricks?”

“Quite a few. Flip tricks and grinds, mostly. Truth be told though, I spend more time riding around than seriously practicing.”

“That’s better than me. The last time I rode a skateboard, I couldn’t keep my balance on it.”

“Those days I barely remember.” When he was met with silence, Alex changed the subject. “About the position though, anything I should know before my first day?”

“When your first day comes, you’ll be walking the floor and getting a feel for where everything is. Most of our regulars know their way around, but you will get the occasional question, or be asked to find something.”

“And if I’m not sure about something, ask you or one of the guys for help.”

Trevor nodded. “Exactly. That’s pretty much everything you really need to know.”

“I’m anticipating a few comic discussions on that day already.”

“There’s some big changes coming from DC soon, but don’t worry about trying to memorize everything coming out. Much as I enjoy their stuff, even I can’t keep track of every issue and plot-twist they publish. Still, it goes without saying that working with the public will be part of your job, so the more you know about what’s going on in the comic industry or in the stories you like, the better.”

At that, Alex thought over the comics he’d been reading during his store visits for the last three weeks. Only one DC series was keeping his attention versus a few more between Image, Archie, and Marvel. “Right now, Deadpool and Sonic are what I read most.”

A smile grew on his boss’s face at the latter name. “How much of it have you read?” After Alex answered, his boss began detailing some of the very

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early issues and related plots, allowing the minutes to slip by without either of them noticing.

At least until Alex's phone sounded its ringtone, cutting their discussions short.

He fumbled for the volume control, nerves chilled from embarrassment and shock. "Thought I turned that off. My apologies."

He got no comment from his boss about the interruption, but rather the time. "Three-forty already?"

"Something need doing?" Alex asked.

"No. Just surprised that much time got away from us." As his boss got up from his seat, Alex followed suit. "I'll be back in a minute, unless you need to leave right now."

"Nah, I'm in no rush."

"In that case, if you want, you can head out into the store while I get a few things for you."

"I'll wait here. Thank you for your time, Sir." Alex held out his hand for his boss, hoping, as it was gripped and shaken, that 'sir' was a professional enough stand-in for not knowing his name. Once he was alone however, his hands went to work, digging around in his pockets for the shop's business card. He located it in his back-right pocket. *Trevor Young. Damn it. How did I forget that?*

The still-present tightening of his flesh and chill around his back lingered until he was out on the sales floor with the stuff Trevor gave him: two company T-shirts, a sheet of paper with company policies and rules, and a lanyard with his nametag.

As he approached the front counter, Marcus, one of his longtime friends, turned to face him, setting aside the trade he was reading in turn.

"So, how'd it go?" he asked.

Alex held the T-shirts as though they were victory flags. "Looks like you and I are co-workers now."

"See? Told ya," Marcus replied, his expression barely budging.

"Yeah, it wasn't all flying colors. I completely forgot Trevor's name in there."

"Don't sweat it. He doesn't care that much, and there's worse things to forget during an interview."

Alex shrugged. "I guess. Anyway, thanks for recommending me to him."

Marcus nodded once in response. “You’re welcome, man.” He glanced around the store once before continuing. “So, you heading home, or sticking around?”

With the time still fresh in his mind, Alex answered with the latter, then headed for the role-playing section of the shop. Bailey had been sleeping soundly when he left the house hours ago, and his folks would be home by six.

After recovering the rulebook he’d been reading before the interview, he leaned into the shelving and thumbed to where he’d left off: a pair of pages with columns of rules sandwiched between two opposing pieces of magic-themed art.

Every so often as he read, Alex checked his phone for updates. Another IM beep drew his attention as 5:15 came around.

Catherine W: 6:30. Don’t forget.

“That from Catherine?” Marcus asked from the register.

“Yeah,” Alex said as he put the book back and pocketed his phone. She and Marcus had pitched the idea of a get-together several days prior, to plan some activities for their last college-obligation-free week. “Man, am I gonna be sad when summer’s over.”

“Not me. I’m ready to get back to class.”

“Because you graduate in a year. I’ve got three of those left.”

“Enjoy the easy years while they last, man,” Marcus said as he stepped out from behind the counter to get another trade.

“Yeah.” After fingering though the trade-in box he stood next to, Alex headed for the counter, asking for his backpack and helmet as he came close. “I’m going on ahead, so I’ll see you guys there,” he said as he stuffed his backpack with what Trevor had given him.

“I can’t interest you in a comic or two before you leave?”

Alex noticed the smirk on Marcus’s face when he looked up. “Nice try.”

“Alright then. Later.”

With a wave to his friend, Alex headed for the entrance, the glare of the setting sun forcing him to squint once outside. The sounds of vehicles driving on the nearby highway, and the lone, blaring horn drew his attention as he walked toward his motorcycle.

Except for the days when it was raining profusely, or the wind was cold enough to bite through his choice of jacket, the bike had seen use throughout

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and since his final two years of high school. It wasn't until his first year of college that his folks began suggesting a move to a sedan, for safety and insurance reasons. Alex resisted the idea; he'd owned the bike for years, and riding it was more enjoyable than driving a bulky four-wheeled vehicle. Plus, it already did the job of getting him from A to B.

After checking his backpack for anything left unzipped and buttoning up his jacket, he turned the ignition key, cranking the bike's engine with a sharp revving. He was the first to arrive to the restaurant, and picked out a table before ordering a soda and some water.

The next several minutes passed with his attention drifting between the darkening view outside and the subtitles on the restaurant's lone TV before he pulled his phone out. As the browser was opened, the first tab to load was a week-old news article detailing the discovery of a mauled and gutted calf carcass near his old high school.

Alex skimmed it before switching to another tab. The event had come to his attention thanks to his father, but how gruesome and unusual it was kept the article among his open tabs.

As 6:00 drew closer, Alex was feeling the urge to skate around outside. No cars had come or gone from the lot in the last fifteen minutes, but after detaching the board from his backpack and standing up, he spotted Nathan's sedan entering the lot.

"Hey," Nathan said as he came close and laid his jacket over one of the chairs. "Did the interview take that long?"

Alex shook his head. "Nah, just didn't feel like going home and getting changed."

"Alright. I'm getting an appetizer. You?"

"Nothing yet. Just got a refill."

Nathan nodded in response, returning soon after with a glass of soda and a receipt. "So, how'd the interview go?"

Alex's response was delayed thanks to the grin creeping over his face. "That's the thing. There wasn't one."

Nathan raised both eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yep. My boss read my resume, then hired me on the spot. Everything else was him and me chatting."

"Huh. Interesting."

"Yep. Suited me just fine, though."

Nathan smiled back, then pulled his own phone out, remaining silent until his order was ready. “Oh, question,” he began as he returned. “Any updates from your dad about that calf from last week?”

“I haven’t asked him about it since last time, and he hasn’t said anything else about it.”

“So, the official story is still wolves?” Nathan asked after chugging a bit of his soda.

“Yeah, unless something comes up that changes things. By this point though, that’s probably the story.”

A brief silence followed Alex’s response. “Kinda hard to believe wolves would come around here.”

“There is that park across the highway from our high school, don’t forget.”

“True, but that park isn’t that big.”

“It’s big enough to hide a few wolves. As for them living around there, yeah, that’s hard to believe.”

“I keep thinking coyotes did it. Those I have seen around here.”

Alex shook his head after recalling the day he and Bailey encountered one. “Makes sense, but coyotes tend to feed on bugs and rodents more than livestock.”

“Still possible though.”

“Yeah, it is.”

An IM beep interrupted them a second later. It was Marcus, saying he and Catherine were on their way.

As he and Nathan waited for them, their attentions back on their phones, Alex couldn’t shake the calf from his thoughts. His father’s rank of lieutenant in the Sugar Land Police Department meant numerous stories and happenings had come to his attention over the years, the more unusual or gruesome ones never failing to pique his friends’ curiosity.

Once Marcus and Catherine arrived, the event was pushed out of Alex’s thoughts in favor of small talk and planning. No local events were coming up, allowing Nathan to suggest some LAN gaming.

Alex grinned in excitement as Catherine responded, “With what?”

“There’s always DOOM.” Marcus chimed in. “Wouldn’t be hard for me to set up four systems for LAN play.”

“I don’t think so. You three would massacre me.”

“Aw, c’mon, be a sport,” Alex said, his growing smile seeming to bleed into Catherine’s lacking one.

“Some other time.”

“Alright, fine. Your idea?”

“Why not something simple like chilling at the mall or something?”

When Alex glanced at Marcus, he gave a hum. “There’s that. Any other ideas?”

“Let me think…” Nathan then pulled out his smartphone. “Are there any good movies out this week?”

“None that I can think of,” Marcus said.

“Then… Yeah, there’s a few we could see… Not that one, though.”

Alex leaned over to check the title. “Yeah, I wouldn’t watch that one either.”

The silence afterward lasted a few awkward seconds. “I’ve got nothing,” Marcus said. “The mall and a movie are plenty for me, though.”

“Same here.” Alex admitted.

“Hopefully I won’t get a last-minute fill-in call that day,” Nathan said.

“You and me both,” Catherine replied.

“Speaking of fill-ins, that reminds me.” Alex glanced toward Marcus. “Does Trevor call in new hires mid-week, for training and all that?”

Marcus shook his head. “If someone calls in, which is rare, he may, but otherwise, no.”

Alex let out a reassured breath, and his friends continued chatting as he let his thoughts drift to his soon-to-be-former vet tech job. At first, Dr. Galliard and some of the staff were the only things he’d miss. The longer he let his memories of the place, both good and bad, stew however, the worse the twinge of discomfort in his chest grew.

Chapter 2 – “We have a 10-67.”

Tuesday, August 23rd, 2011
Moon Phase – Last Quarter

Despite the good company, the discomfort lingered and kept Alex more reserved until it weakened, by which time half of everyone’s meals were gone, and the conversations had started petering off.

When he felt Nathan tap his shoulder, he glanced aside at him.

“How late are you planning on staying at the park?” he asked.

“Uh...not sure. Why?”

“My camcorder battery was almost dead, so I’ll have to pick it up on the way over.”

“Ah, okay,” Alex replied before returning to his meal. The skatepark he and Nathan had planned to film in was open until ten every day, and with a glance at his phone’s lock screen, he could tell they’d have plenty of time to spare.

As the get-together began to wind down, Alex’s attention moved to his ideas for tricks and camera positions. It was as Marcus and Catherine departed that something else struck him: an urge to visit his old high school. The calf was gone by now, but with Nathan saying he needed a quick detour...

He was several streets away from the restaurant when he decided to wait until after they were done.

* * *

Alex arrived at the park to find no other vehicles in the parking lot, the dead street lamps allowing the moonlight to illuminate the lot. As he removed his helmet and gripped his motorcycle’s ignition key, a noise louder than his bike’s rumbling engine reached him. It was brief, and unclear, but it drew his attention regardless.

After killing the engine, Alex sat quietly and listened. Was the noise from someone screwing around in the neighborhood further west? After

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several seconds of nothing, he shrugged and got off his bike, figuring that was the case.

Then the noise came to him again, as brief as before, but much clearer. It was a scream. How close it now sounded chilled his flesh and glued his feet to the ground, his pulse building by the second. The only movement he made before the sound of car approaching from behind stole his attention was the inching of his hand into his pocket for his phone.

“Hey, what’s up?” Nathan asked as he pulled up close, his window down.

“Thought I heard a scream...” Alex pointed towards the end of the street. “Over there, somewhere.”

Nathan replied after a few seconds of glancing around. “Think we should get the police?” Before Alex answered, he continued. “Actually, I’ve got an idea.”

As his friend put his car into a new gear, Alex’s attention jumped between the supposed location of the scream and Nathan backing up and turning to the right. Another gear shift sounded, and the car began moving forward.

Good thinking, man. Alex trailed the car on foot, relaxing a bit with each step. His attention remained on the spot he thought the scream had come from, until his second glance inside Nathan’s car showed his hand resting on the horn.

His friend then leaned into his horn for almost three seconds, after which Alex felt numerous invisible eyes looking their way. Nathan honked once again before pressing the accelerator, Alex jogging to keep up. They both stopped at the end of the street’s cul-de-sac, with Nathan keeping his car in drive.

“Around here, you think?” Nathan asked, keeping his voice low.

“Could be... I’ll check that field behind the pool.” Alex stepped away after adding that he’d wave if he saw anything, his initial walking speed slow and cautious. Hearing only his footsteps against the concrete eased his nervousness.

When the field was fully in view, Alex’s attention locked on a girl lying in the grass. Her legs and arms barely moved, but her position was enough of a hint that she’d been crawling away from something. He signaled to Nathan, and then went in closer.

As he did, the foot-long blood trails in the grass caught his eye, and then the extent of the injuries on who he’d found. The girl’s chest and abdomen were bleeding under the tears in her clothing. The arm she was wrapping her

wounds with was lined with gashes, puncture wounds dotting her left shoulder and face. Her expression was hopeful, though hiding a lot of pain.

Nathan's phone was in his hands two seconds after he stopped next to his friend. "Keep her company."

"Yeah," Alex replied, though in his head he didn't think that was enough. He lowered himself into a crouch, the trembling in his legs making staying balanced tricky. All the while his attention stayed on the girl's wounds, and how much they were bleeding. The lacerations on her arm were the most obvious, though the oozing there was minimal. *How bad did her chest get hurt?* Unable to tell beyond the existing red stains, Alex checked her shoulder.

Despite minor bleeding there as well, the pattern of damage—punctures and multiple tears on a sharp curve—got his attention. *How the hell'd she get bitten there?* Alex glanced around the area. Had Nathan's honking scared the animal off? And if so, where had it gone?

A sudden increase in the girl's breathing pace snapped his attention back to her. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice shaking a touch.

"Noth..." The girl was cut off by pain, and her expression showed it.

Alex reached halfway out to her before stopping and pulling his arm back. "Don't strain yourself. We'll have an ambulance here soon."

"No, I'll heal. I'll be fine."

Alex didn't acknowledge the statement verbally, his mind writing it off to a phobia. Behind him, Nathan was listing off the details of her condition to the dispatcher. An ambulance wouldn't be long in coming.

The girl's breathing quickened again, this time punctuated with a bloody cough. Alex recoiled, but didn't stand up. *Fuck. Not good.*

"Anything yet?" he blurted out.

"Almost," Nathan replied. Alex heard him mention the cough in turn.

"Help'll be here soon." The girl's breathing didn't slow over the next few seconds. "If you can though, can you tell me your name?"

She struggled with a few breaths before giving her first name. "Angela..."

"If it hurts, don't force it." Alex said after a bit of silence. "You'll be fine. If anything happens, we're here." Angela soon turned her attention toward a dark area to Alex's right. He followed suit, though saw nothing of note. "I can handle that dog if it comes back."

Angela's reply came several seconds later. "He won't... He'll stay away."

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He? “Was it a dog you knew?” Alex got no response; Angela kept looking in the same direction. Grass crumpled beside him, and he looked to see her clenching her free hand before closing her eyes, forcing a pair of tears from them.

Nathan broke the silence that followed. “They’re coming.”

“Good,” Alex said. The start-up of sirens in the distance helped ease his chest tension.

Nathan then returned to talking on his phone, with a few acknowledgments to the dispatcher. “They’re saying we need to keep her from bleeding and keep her warm.”

Alex nodded, and began removing his jacket.

“The bleeding’s not bad...” Angela cut herself off.

“You don’t sound good, though,” Alex noted before he hesitated. *Wait a second. That chest injury.* “Can you pull your left arm away for a second?”

“...don’t want to.”

“Just for a second. I’ll be quick.” Angela clenched her free hand again, and didn’t respond. Alex didn’t want to force her, but his instincts were telling him that was the injury he had to focus on. When he thought of the bloody cough, and then looked over her surface wounds again, a chill ran through his skin. Was she bleeding internally, or into her lungs?

He had no chance to act on that suspicion before Angela’s shallow breathing worsened. “Nathan?” Alex’s weakened voice went unanswered. “Nathan!”

“What?”

“She’s not breathing well.” Alex tossed his jacket aside before his right hand went for Angela’s free one, taking it by the wrist. The cold feeling of her flesh, how embedded it felt, stood out immediately. Her pulse didn’t, raising Alex’s again. *Shit, what do I do?*

Stopping the bleeding became his snap priority. “Lie down, Angela.” He got no response, and she stayed in place. “Nathan, I need a hand.”

Nathan kept his phone close as he hurried in, the two of them helping Angela down onto her back. Alex then wrestled his tie and shirt off, folding the shirt until it was four layers thick. His taking of the arm that, for all he knew, was keeping blood from gushing out of Angela’s chest, put pressure on his stomach.

The newly exposed wounds, four in total, were covered as best as Alex could. What pressure he applied didn’t feel like enough; Angela’s now noticeably rapid heartbeat worsened that feeling.

“She needs her legs elevated,” Nathan suddenly said.

Alex shot his friend a glance, catching him looking towards his shoulder-couched phone. He tilted his head towards his backpack.

C’mon, Angela, stay with us, Alex thought as Nathan made for the pack. Though the sirens continued to draw closer as her legs were propped, her shallow, gasping breaths dug the fear of her giving out into Alex’s head.

“OK... She’s gasping almost... No. Uh, Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you CPR trained?”

At that question, Alex’s shuddered. How close was Angela to something worse? “For dogs, not people.”

Nathan repeated what he’d been told to the dispatcher, then kept quiet, nodding and acknowledging several times at something they were telling him. “They’re saying chest compressions only if she stops breathing,” he soon said.

With these wounds? Alex imagined Nathan having to do them before shaking his head at the thought.

A new, rapid wail sounded and stopped a second later. The ambulance had reached a highway intersection several streets away. *Not much longer. Hang in there.*

When Angela’s arms then reached up and toward his own, the unease that Alex had been holding at bay came rushing forward. The pressure he had on her stomach lapsed for a moment when she grabbed him, and the intense cold of her flesh became apparent.

He ignored Nathan saying his name in favor of glancing at Angela, then to his right. No flashing lights yet. *Fuck. Hurry.*

Several gasps later, her breathing strength weakened.

Alex heard Nathan swear out loud in response. His response lodged in his throat until he forced it out. “Start them, now.”

His friend hesitated before inching into position, the trembling of his arms remaining noticeable until he was several compresses in. By then, Alex had glanced away from the scene twice. The third time let him spot the first flashes of red.

It felt much longer than it took for the ambulance to close in, stop, and for at least two paramedics to exit. Alex called to them as they reached the grass, and within seconds, the two he’d heard and one more were nearby.

The several steps up and backwards he took as the professionals took over allowed the emotions he’d been holding back to rush into his face and

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limbs. As he massaged his throat, his eyes darted to and away from the scene. Angela was swarmed by the medics, leaving him unable to tell if she was stabilizing or getting worse, and Nathan seemed unable to reign in his trembling lungs.

When the blue and red flashing lights of a police cruiser appeared, another paramedic came close with a gurney, upon which Alex swore he saw a white sheet. He couldn't help picturing Angela's lifeless face being covered by that sheet, even after telling himself it was needed to keep her warm. More massaging of his throat followed, until he noticed an officer heading Nathan's way.

He forced a swallow and wiped his eyes at the sight before making his way closer to them, his attention drifting from the medics and Angela to the officer, and the sergeant insignia on her uniform.

The sergeant—Hill by her nametag—was quick to speak up as Alex approached. “You both okay?”

Nathan responded with a shaky, “Yeah.” Alex only nodded.

Hill continued after a few seconds, keeping her tone as calm as possible. “Would you guys follow me, please? I just need a few questions answered, and then you can leave.”

Alex nodded to Nathan before the two of them did just that. They stopped near the sergeant's cruiser, and once Hill had produced a notebook and pen from her chest pocket, and introduced herself, the questions began.

It was the usual gauntlet at first, and then came others unique to the scene.

“You found her around 9:05. That correct?”

“Yes,” Nathan said.

“Was anyone else around?”

“No. Just us. She looked like she was crawling away from something, though.”

Hill glanced up from her pad. “Any idea what?”

Alex took over after Nathan shook his head. “From what I saw, probably a canine.”

After a glance over Alex's shoulder at the ready-to-depart ambulance, Hill asked, “How could you tell?”

“Worked at a vet for a few years. She had a bite pattern on her left shoulder, from a large breed, I think.”

“Did anything else stand out?”

As the ambulance departed, sirens wailing, Alex recalled the wounds on Angela's chest. Those had been unusual, in spacing and number.

"I thought I heard her say whatever attacked her would stay away."

Nathan's jumping in drew the sergeant's attention, and redirected Alex's response. "Yeah, she did say that."

Hill stayed quiet for a few seconds, glancing once at the scene. "Are you both sure you were alone when you found her?"

"Very. I didn't see anything," Nathan replied.

Although ready to agree, Alex recalled Angela's behavior from before she'd made the claim. "Me either, but she was looking past me before and after she said that."

"In the direction the animal ran, I'd assume," Hill noted.

"Yeah, that what I was thinking."

"Anything else?"

"No, Ma'am." Alex said with a shake of his head.

"Okay." With a few more notes, and another glance at the scene, Hill continued. "One last thing. I need to get some contact information from both of you."

"What for?" Nathan asked, glancing at Alex shortly after.

"We're witnesses," Alex said. "If what happened to Angela leads into a legal case, the prosecution may need testimonies from us. Or they might have more questions."

"I haven't seen something like this go as far as the courts, but yes, this is in case it does." Hill flipped to another page in her notebook. "For now, I need your names, your addresses, and a phone number we can reach you at, and then you're welcome to head out." Alex went first, expecting the mention of his last name to draw a comment from the sergeant. When it didn't, he stepped aside and waited for Nathan to give his info, after which the sergeant thanked them. "You two stay safe."

"We'll do our best," Nathan replied as Hill got back in her cruiser and shut off the flashing lights. She was halfway down the road when, without a word between them, Alex and Nathan decided to abandon their old plans and head home.

"Think she'll be okay?" Nathan asked after they reached his car.

"I hope so, man. That bleeding was bad."

"You okay?"

"More or less," Alex said after a short delay. "You?"

"Still kind of shaky."

Werewolf Tale

Alex nodded. "Then, guess I'll see you later."

"Yeah. You too."

Alex walked off after a sturdy fist-bump, his drive home leaving him questioning what his folks would do if he told them what had happened. His throat tensed a bit as it lingered in his head, but as his motorcycle rolled into the driveway and the ignition was shut off, saying nothing about it won out.

Chapter 3 – First Day on the Job

Tuesday, August 23rd, 2011

Moon Phase – Waning Crescent

Despite a light being on in the living room, Alex heard nothing at the front door in line with his folks still being awake. Bailey, however, was keen to rush for the door when anyone was unlocking it, and within the first inches of it being swung open, Alex saw him sitting at attention, his tail sweeping the front rug.

“That’s my boy. Stay.” Bailey stopped listening and came close before the door was closed, zeroing in on one of Alex’s arms and sniffing at it. “Sorry, boy, don’t have any leftovers,” Alex said before rubbing Bailey’s head and making for the restroom. Once in front of the mirror, what his dog had really been interested in became clear: the dried bloodstains that dotted his arms and palms. Fighting back the image of Angela reaching out and at him, he washed his skin until no evidence of the event remained.

Bailey continued to tail him as his blood-stained clothing was mulled over, soaked in stain-remover, and then dumped in the wash. The first chance his dog got, he was up against the washing machine, working to get his muzzle closer to the source of the unfamiliar scent.

“Hey. Bailey, no,” Alex said as he heaved his pet’s paws off the washing machine. Although Bailey didn’t jump back up, his attention didn’t divert. “C’mon, boy. Leave it,” Alex said as he stepped away, stopping only to slap his leg a few times.

When Bailey at last followed his lead, a lack of tail-wagging and an unblinking stare came with him. *Nothing gets by you, does it?* Alex scratched his dog’s ears and head until he was ready to retire to his room.

Wednesday, August 24th, 2011

Moon Phase – Waning Crescent

6:43 a.m.

Werewolf Tale

The next morning, Alex slipped into the bathroom for a shower while at least one of his parents was busy in the kitchen. What he could say if the bloodstains were brought up had survived the night, though the tone of his mother's first sentences didn't hint that she'd noticed them.

"Did the interview go well?" she asked as Alex guzzled a glass of milk.

"Mmm... Yeah. First shift should be next week."

"Did you get any uniforms or clothes that need washing?"

"Yeah. Just a sec."

As Alex approached the hallway, the door to his parent's bedroom swung open to reveal his father, dressed in his dark blue SLPD uniform. "Morning, Son," he said as he slid his smartphone into his shirt pocket.

"Hey, Dad," Alex replied as he slipped by him and into his room. The hint of surprise in his father's tone hadn't escaped his notice.

After recovering the tees from his backpack, he turned around to see his father standing in the doorway.

"You have a minute?" he asked.

"Yeah," Alex said as his backpack was set aside.

"One of my sergeants told me about the call-in you were involved in last night." Despite the concern in his father's tone, Alex hesitated too long on a response. "You didn't do anything wrong, Son."

A slight shake of his head was the first half of Alex's response as the emotions from that night leaked back into his head and face. "I know..." When his mother chimed in with a 'What call-in?' response, how close she sounded urged him to not show any emotion.

"Alex and one of his friends called dispatch last night, reported someone who'd been mauled. One of the sergeants I work with left me a message about it."

"Well..." Alex glanced to his left during the pause in his mother's sentence; she didn't continue until she could see him. "Do you want to talk to us about it?"

Alex shook his head again, letting out a sigh instead of talking.

"You sure?"

"...Yeah."

"Later, maybe?"

His father then chimed in. "He'll be okay, hun."

"But..."

"I know, but he'll be okay."

Alex waited to be left alone before making any moves to wipe his eyes or move from the spot where he'd been standing. Bailey had stood nearby the entire time, doing little beyond stare. As Angela's well-being returned to his thoughts, Alex crouched down to rub his dog's head and ears. He couldn't see his folks letting the incident go unquestioned for long, even if his father explained what he could to his mother, and in turn he sighed quietly.

* * *

It was nearing 7:30 when his father came to his door again; Alex heard his footsteps and turned from his desktop screen to find him leaning against the doorframe. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asked.

"Yeah," Alex replied, staying in his chair as his father made his way to his bed and sat on the head of it.

"About yesterday..." His father paused, as if to watch for a sign of discomfort. Alex didn't allow any beyond a glance away. "Before Sergeant Hill arrived, did you get any sort of feeling that you were in danger, or being watched?"

Alex took a second to consider it before shaking his head. "No, but we found her right after Nathan had tried to scare off whatever was there, so..."

"How so?"

"He drove his car towards where we thought something was happening and kept honking his horn and revving his engine when we came close."

"Makes sense."

"We didn't see anything, though."

His father nodded. "Hill told me the same. Probably for the best."

"Yeah," Alex said before his head filled with thoughts of a botched rescue, and of the animal returning.

"Are you okay otherwise?" his father asked after a bit of silence.

Alex gave a quick nod. "Wish I knew how Angela's doing right now."

"I figured. Chances are she's recovering in intensive care at wherever she was taken."

"Hope so."

"If Hill or one of my other officers update me, I'll let you know. For now though, try not to let it weigh on you too much. You both did what you could while you were there, and that's most important."

Alex nodded. "I know."

Werewolf Tale

After another bit of silence, and a check of the clock on his phone, his father stood up from the bed. “I have to get going. Congratulations on your new job.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Alex said as he got up and hugged him. Not long after his father left the room, Bailey came and sat next to him, once again doing little beyond stare. “I know, boy. Let’s go for a walk.” Bailey’s tail immediately started wagging.

As their second lap of his block started, Alex’s phone rang. Seeing Blue Moon on the caller ID, he answered to find Trevor on the line.

“Our two to seven guy just called me,” Trevor said after a bit of small talk. “Said he got food poisoning last night. If you want his shift, it’s yours.”

Guess he does call new hires in. “Sure. I’ll be there.”

“Great. See you then.”

* * *

That afternoon, Alex arrived to find the shop more crowded than he thought. Of the customers there, most looked to be in their early to mid-twenties, many of them reading or fingering through shelved trades. A sole child of four or so running around near the RPG boxes then pulled his attention.

Oh, great. As the kid kept jogging about, one of the less than encouraging stories he’d heard from Catherine of children being let loose in the bookstore where she worked came to mind. *Hope no one’s expecting us to watch him.*

At the front counter, an employee he’d never seen before set down the comic he was reading, exposing the name badge hidden behind it—Daniel was his name. “Hey. Are you Alex?”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Daniel then offered his hand and Alex shook it as his coworker introduced himself. “Pleasure. Kinda busy in here today, isn’t it?”

“Not really. This is the day new comics go out for sale.”

“Oh, right. Marcus did tell me that before.”

“Did he also tell you about the secret room we have?”

Alex smiled as he heard that, even though he knew it was a setup for a joke. “No, he didn’t.”

“You’ll find out about it soon enough, I’m sure.”

“Probably by leaning against a switch on the wall.”

Daniel's face didn't budge. "Yeah, we've lost a few employees to the lasers that way. Anyway, Trevor's in his office, but I can show you some of the basic stuff if you need."

Alex agreed to the suggestion, and Daniel was quick to start showing him where everything was that he would need for the day: the employee time-clock at the rear of the store, the storage room for the boxes of new inventory, the gaming room for the daily RPG sessions, and the restroom, which Daniel was quick to remind him was for employees only.

"It being that close to the storage room, we can't risk people sneaking in and making off with our inventory."

"Makes sense, but why would anyone try and steal from storage if the front counter is, like, twenty-feet away?" Alex asked, even though he already knew the general reason for the first part.

"All sorts of reasons," Daniel replied. "Anyway, Trevor usually clocks new hires in on day one. He should be in his office."

"Thanks," Alex said before making his way there. After two knocks, the door was opened, and Trevor greeted him before letting him in, with a word that he needed to file some papers before anything else.

The comics along the walls drew Alex's attention again as his boss continued working. At the same time, he tried to recall some of his employee duties. *Help customers, keep things in order...what else?* Without the paper he was given, he was left guessing at the rest until Trevor told him he was done.

"You ready to start your shift?"

"Yeah, I am. Do you want me working the floor or the register first?"

"For today, I just want you walking the floor and getting a feel of the store's layout. You read over the paper I gave you, right?"

"Yeah, I did. Keep the displays tidy, help the customers when necessary, and...uh, replace any comics or books that don't belong somewhere," Alex replied, counting with his fingers each duty he listed.

Trevor was pleased. "You got it, except for one thing. You're also responsible for getting backstock if we need it. Once you've gotten a few days with us, we'll train you on the register."

Alex nodded before being led back to the time-clock, where he was punched in. Over the next half-hour, the shop filled up with mostly window shoppers, a crowd of around six people in various locations. Only one person by that point had asked him for any assistance, leaving him little else to do.

Werewolf Tale

While he made another check of the RPG and board game sections, his hand went for his phone before he pulled it away. Once Daniel was in speaking range, Alex got his attention. "I know it's my first day, but does Trevor mind if we use our phones on the clock?"

"Sometimes." Daniel looked around the store. "Right now's not a good time; it looks bad. When we've got, maybe, two people in the store, then it's fine."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Alex found the temptation to pull his phone out anyway, if only to quickly text one of his friends, hard to resist. Once his break came at the halfway point of his shift, he wasted no time texting Marcus.

Alex S.: Hey, man.
Trevor called me in for a shift already.

Marcus's response came a few seconds later.

Marcus A.: That was quick. How are you liking the place so far?

Alex S.: It's nice, but there's not much to do.

Marcus A.: Unlike your old job?

Alex S.: Yeah.

Marcus A.: That'll happen a lot.

My advice: read some of the new inventory and get familiar with what the store sells.

Alex S.: Will do. Thanks.

As his break came to an end around five, his phone vibrated with an incoming call tone. Seeing Nathan's name in the caller ID, he hesitated on putting the phone away for a few seconds; chances were his friend was calling to find out if anything had come to light with Angela. Figuring his friend

would also text him if that was the case, Alex pocketed his phone and got back to work.

His phone remained silent, even in that aspect, for the rest of his shift.

* * *

Back home, Bailey was quick to rush him as he opened the front door, his nose hovering around his clothing before attempting to leap up at him. “Hey, boy. Missed me, didn’t you?” Alex said as he rubbed his dog’s head and ears.

Once Bailey relaxed, Alex coaxed him inside and made for his room. His folks were already eating, but didn’t say much until he returned for a plate for himself.

His father was the first to ask how his shift went, to which Alex responded with muted enthusiasm. “You miss your old job?”

“Some, yeah,” Alex replied.

When he was pressed about why, he chocked it up to an uneasy gut feeling. The differing interpretations put forward by his parents took over the table talk until he was ready for a second helping.

“Are you still upset about yesterday?”

“No,” Alex said after a light sigh. To his relief, his mother didn’t push the topic.

As dinner wound down however, the event bore its way back into his thoughts, especially Angela’s condition. His father’s silence on the subject felt less worrying the longer he thought on it, but the nagging feeling of her not making it refused to go away.

The calf also returned to his thoughts as he cleaned his plate in the sink, but as he began to imagine Angela as a victim of the same animals, doubt rushed in to sweep at the idea.

Wonder if Nathan was calling about that... Alex felt for his phone, but remembering the lack of follow-up correspondence, left it in his pocket.

Friday, August 26th, 2011

Moon Phase – Waning Crescent

It wasn’t until Friday afternoon, during an extended ride around the neighborhood, that Nathan called again and brought the subject up with him.

“Dad hasn’t said a thing about it since Wednesday,” Alex said after taking a sip of water.

“Hopefully that’s a good thing.”

“I’m pretty sure it is.” Hearing his friend hum in response, Alex broke the silence that followed with a suggestion to hang out at the comic shop.

They arrived to find Marcus on shift reading another trade, and the rest of the afternoon, plus some of the early evening, blew past as their time was split between chatting with him and browsing the shelves. What happened with Angela stayed off-topic for several hours, and until there were few customers around.

When it did come up, as he and Nathan went back and forth detailing the event, what remained of Alex’s bottled emotions never surfaced to his face.

“And then she said, ‘He won’t. He’ll stay away.’”

“What was she describing anyway?” Marcus asked.

“She didn’t say, but it had to be a canine,” Alex replied. “Probably one she knew, too; she had a full bite mark on her shoulder.”

“Damn.” Marcus’s low tone vanished as soon as he spoke again. “Wonder if she told the police.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Nathan said. “Last we saw, she was bleeding pretty bad and going into shock.”

Alex waited for a pause following Marcus’s brief response to speak up. “I’ll ask Dad about it on Monday, if he doesn’t update me before then.”

“Fingers crossed for good news, then,” Marcus said.

Chapter 4 – The Beast of Sugar Land

Friday, August 26th, 2011

Moon Phase – Waning Crescent

As 8:00 approached, Alex closed and replaced the role-playing book in his hands. His urge to get back to skating had overtaken the reading binge he'd been lost in for the last half-hour. After some small talk with Trevor and Marcus, he departed the store, finding several cars maneuvering around the better spots of the parking lot.

Though Alex gave them a minute to find spots and park or move on, the lost density was taken up by other cars nearly as quickly, and he soon abandoned the idea of skating the lot. The skatepark he and Nathan had planned to visit days ago then came to mind, and he made his way there, arriving to find just one skater inside—a low turnout for what he knew to be a normally busy night and hour.

After sparing a glance towards where Angela had been found, Alex passed the park's turnstile and his board was back under his feet. His first few minutes were spent riding around versus attempting any tricks, and once the other skater departed, the crickets in the grass around the park were all that competed with the noise his board and wheels made.

The empty park also got him thinking about getting some filming in. While setting up his phone to capture the shot angle he wanted, Alex picked a few tricks to try off the nearby incline. The foot and a half worth of height at the ramp's middle was enough to allow the extension of a few.

Once atop the quarterpipe opposite the incline, Alex set his board in place on the lip before shifting his weight over the edge and dropping in, holding a crouch until the incline's edge was close. The ollie off the ramp left his lead foot open to sweep the side of his board and force a center axis spin. He gave the board more time to spin than normal, before thrusting his legs and catching it a foot from the ground.

Werewolf Tale

As he landed, the sound of wood snapping and cracking overpowered the clack of the board's wheels and bearings. His legs stuck to the spot and his feet forced his upper mass forward, the sudden jolt to his system leaving his hands and arms no time to do anything beyond try to slow his fall. What Alex could muster was enough to stop his head from hitting the concrete, with his chest and arms taking most of the impact and leaving him sliding a few inches.

As he shook off the fall and resultant trembling with an open swear, checking himself to see if he was bleeding, his attention went to his board. It had broken not only in the center, but also at the tail near the truck bolts, the grip tape all that was holding the three segments together. *Well, shit. Time for a new one.*

Once his board was recovered and the dropped splinters swept under the nearby ramp, Alex retrieved his phone and waited for the recording to process. He'd been in frame throughout the bad landing, making where the double kickflip went wrong easily viewable. His busted board was then strapped to his backpack, and until he was out of the park, his phone didn't leave his hand.

As it slipped into his pocket, he noticed something moving near the benches in the distance. A large, furry body with a canine-shaped head and ears. His pulse crept up as it stood, and his pace quickened, one hand going for his keys.

With his second glance towards the animal, he couldn't help but focus on how large it was, even on all fours. The sound of steady growling that then reached his ears made him turn to keep it in sight.

As it closed in, everything else wrong about the animal began to stand out. Its posture was off, as though its legs were too long. Its body looked too long. Its front paws were huge, and they motioned more like hands.

Torn between wondering what the hell he was looking at and the urge to run, the animal took two more steps before the lights of the park reached it. Its pelt was pitch black, tan in rare spots, its eyes a dark amber, and its front paws were more like clawed hands.

Its growling then snapped to a snarl and Alex recoiled backwards. His left shoulder hit the park's fence, causing a rocketing of his pulse. As though the creature saw his attempt to retreat as a challenge, it charged.

Alex's first instinct of a side-step didn't work. The creature shifted its direction and lunged at him, the immense weight of its body knocking him backward into the grass.

An open jaw hovered over his head for but a second before trying to bite at him. Alex got an arm under the beast's throat to hold it away, the quaking of his arms making grabbing at its jaw difficult.

The grip he did get didn't last a second. The beast grabbed his arm with one of its clawed hands and yanked it away, holding it down in turn. Its other clawed hand went over his face and mouth, almost keeping him from breathing.

As he grappled with the arm over his face, trying to get it off, he felt his right arm get taken in the beast's grip. Its hot breath blew over the flesh of his forearm barely a second before its fangs punctured his skin.

The searing pain that ran like wildfire down his arm and into his chest drew a scream that was muffled by the fur and pads of the beast's paw. Jerking his head around to try and free himself, Alex grabbed the paw over his face again and wrenched open his own mouth. His teeth went into the rough pads, the pain from the bite and the bitter taste of the beast's skin and fur both giving him incentive to bite harder.

He heard it squeal in pain, and his head was released. Alex slammed his left fist into the muzzle that had just let his arm go, feeling it impact and push away the beast's head. With his punctured forearm withdrawn, his body trembling in shock and fear, he struggled to get back to his feet and keep his eyes on his attacker.

The beast recovered in seconds, but instead of charging him again, stood up on its hind legs, its snarl still going. Alex's eyes widened at what he saw. It stood taller than him in that stance, even with a hunch and canine-like legs. His blood was coloring its fangs and muzzle, and it was bracing for another strike.

The terror Alex felt from the first attack intensified as the werewolf swung to try and grab him. He didn't think about which direction he went. He just went, ducking to avoid the massive paw as he did.

He got barely two steps before the werewolf got ahold of him, its paw snagging the neck of his T-shirt. The claws tore into the fabric as his collar jerked him to a stop. Feeling himself being pulled back, before he could scream again, the werewolf had wrapped its other paw around his neck, the claws pushed against his throat, above his jugular.

Breathing rapidly with tears running from his eyes, Alex tried to keep it together as his head was jerked to the side. When the werewolf sunk its massive fangs into his shoulder, he could feel them pass through his muscles but stop at his clavicle, his shoulder and head burning from the pain.

Werewolf Tale

Suppressing his screams to fight the pain, Alex wanted more than anything now to have some kind of lucky break. To get away from this thing. Despite his hands jerking in reaction to the pain, he reached behind himself and grabbed two tufts of fur, from what felt like around the werewolf's hips. He couldn't tell how strong his grip was, but he twisted his hands nonetheless. He could feel the werewolf's skin moving as he pulled, making it produce a growl. The pain in his shoulder intensified. He was doing something right.

Lifting his foot, he swung it backwards and it hit nothing. The second time, he felt it hit something furry. Pushing down as hard as he could, he felt his shoe grab more fur, and then smash what felt like the werewolf's hind paw. It released him again, and his still-clenched hands yanked at two handfuls of fur. Alex barely saw it rubbing the affected areas before he started to run.

With every muscle in his body shaking, he made for his bike, only to stumble upon reaching it. Swearing out loud several times, he heard the clicking of claws behind him and then the werewolf was on top of him, pinning him down against the seat of his bike, one paw on his head and the other on his back, both with their claws digging into his skin.

Gasping in pain, Alex expected this to be the end. He'd fought back and lost. He'd only pissed it off instead of managing to get away. Hearing the beast breathing next to his ear, how Angela must have felt against this thing became clear, and he let his emotions rule his words, regardless of whether it could hear him or not.

"I knew you were a fucking coward." The claws in his back moved like the paw was clenching, and his words halted for a moment. "Yeah, fuck you too." After a sharp snarl by his ear and feeling the hot breath of the werewolf against his neck, Alex shut his eyes and stopped talking.

Then the seconds passed, and nothing seemed to change. Quick breaths ran over his shoulder wounds, and then the claws that were sunk in his back and head were pulled out. He again heard claws clicking on concrete, this time moving backwards.

Turning himself around with his motorcycle as a temporary crutch, he saw the werewolf backing up. It did so until it was about five feet away, and then stopped. It produced light growls and glared at him, but didn't move, as if it was taunting him. Sniffing once, Alex didn't try and anger it further, even though he wanted to. If it was just going to stand there, he had a chance to run for it.

He swung a leg over the seat of his bike, then reached for his keys with his bloodstained, quivering fingers. As the engine started up, he nearly forgot to pull up the kickstand before punching the throttle. He glanced back twice as he sped down the park's access road, both times seeing the werewolf not trying to follow him.

The evening wind whipped his uncovered face, and his muscles continued to twitch as he flew down the road, trying to maintain his composure and keep himself upright. His nerves were slowly cooling, but every little jostle made him fearful of overcorrecting and crashing.

As the first street into his neighborhood came up, Alex turned wide into it and pulled over near Nathan's place. He held the shoulder of his shredded arm until his breathing lost its shakiness, then wrestled his phone from his pocket. Though at first spurred to call his dad, as he found his number in the address book, he couldn't bring himself to start the call.

What was he supposed to say about his attacker? He knew what the thing was. He'd seen it clear as anything, but even on his best day, his father would never believe the use of 'werewolf' for an animal attack report. The idea of lying to make it something more believable came to mind, but if he made up a story and others died as a result...

With his heart sinking at the feeling of being wedged between two bad outcomes, Alex pocketed his phone and made for his house. For now, this was his problem to fix. If someone found out, then he'd consider what to do.

As he pulled into the driveway and shut off the engine, he heard his phone beep with a new text, but ignored it and went straight for the front door. Inside, Bailey was quick to run up to and greet him, but when the scent of blood stole his attention, he gave a weak whine.

"Quiet, Bailey," Alex whispered, hoping he wasn't dripping blood on the rugs and carpet. He then darted to the bathroom, locking his dog out behind him. Once there, even before he removed his torn and blood-stained T-shirt, the mirror made it clear how much damage the werewolf had caused.

On his left shoulder were two large piercings from the werewolf's fangs, with shallower punctures in the skin near his clavicle bone. His right forearm was lined with torn flesh and punctures in the shape of a massive canine jawline. Running down the length of both of his arms were drying trails of blood. The puncture wounds on his back didn't look as bad, though his spine and ribs still stung when he moved them too much.

When Alex found the store of medical supplies under the sink, he ripped a square of gauze free of its packaging and dabbed the area around his

Werewolf Tale

forearm as lightly as he could. His arm still seared at the slightest touch, but as he cleaned the spot, something caught his attention: few, if any, of the wounds were still bleeding.

His heart rate, which had begun to slow down, rose again; he knew deep animal bites didn't clot that quickly.

With a new gauze square in hand, he pressed it down over the deepest of the punctures on his shoulder, despite the searing pain. When it was pulled away, the once-clean square was stained with blood, but none that came from the exposed muscle. His pulse rose again, enough that he could feel it in his neck, yet still no blood leaked from his wounds.

What followed was a slow constricting of his throat, the building of a sick to the stomach feeling in his chest and lungs, and a closing of his eyes, tears dripping long before he could no longer see. As the image of the werewolf, its snarling face and massive frame, dominated Alex's mind between flashes of the attack, the first of his fear-laced questions surfaced: if he was already healing this fast, what else was going to happen to him?

Then more came.

Would he start acting like an animal in public? Drive his friends and family away? If they found out what he was, what was to stop them from turning him away?

Every possibility and every thought made him more upset and nauseous, though the silver chain necklace he had on confirmed, at least, one thing: he wasn't suddenly allergic to the presence of the metal.

Chapter 5 - Uncertainty

Friday, August 26th, 2011

Moon Phase – Waning Crescent

The torrent of emotion and physical tension brought on by the discovery and questioning was slow to lax, with Alex fighting the urge to sob every second it all lingered. Even by the time he'd relaxed enough to resume cleaning up, the quivering of his arms made cleaning off the blood and dressing the wounds he could reach difficult.

For what felt like hours he stayed locked in the bathroom, ignoring Bailey's sniffing of the gap under the door and only opening it after the lights were off and he was certain his mother was still asleep. Though his pet went straight for him at first, his attention quickly diverted to the overflowing pile of bloody medical supplies nearby. Instead of telling Bailey off, Alex snuck into the kitchen and dumped the pile, shoving it as far down the kitchen trash bin as it would go. His shredded, blood-stained T-shirt went in next, with a thick layer of already discarded trash covering the last of the evidence.

Once he was back in his room with a fresh T-shirt on, Alex sat against his bedside drawers in complete darkness, trying in what felt like vain to relax even a bit. Bailey was right behind him and went to lick his face when he came close, something that Alex allowed only because he didn't feel like pushing him away; some love from his pet was a welcome contrast to the last few hours, and how drained and heavy his mind and body had become.

It was when Bailey started sniffing near the dressings and sparked a shot of pain though his arm that Alex climbed into bed. His pet followed suit, staying focused on the injuries and strange scents above everything else.

Ow. Stop it, Bailey. Alex nudged him back, but he closed the distance right after, and almost got a lick to connect. *No, boy.*

It took Alex forcing Bailey to lay down to make him stop. As he did the same, the spread of damage to his torso and arms made resting comfortably, or in a way that would keep Bailey from being nosy and exposing the dressings, difficult. When he at last settled into a marginally comfortable position, Alex eased himself to sleep between strokes of Bailey's fur.

Saturday, August 27th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waning Crescent
7:22 a.m.

When he awoke the next morning and began to sit up, the sight of his helmet and backpack, the shattered deck still attached to it, laying near his closet gave him pause. The first thought he had was his father had found it, or been informed of it, followed immediately by worry that he'd seen the dressings, or something else related to his injuries, and what sort of questions he was in for.

With the coffee maker grinding in the kitchen, and footsteps coming from the same location, Alex slid out of bed and crept back to the bathroom. His injuries resumed stinging when he moved his limbs again, while the audible crinkling of the dressings sounded louder than he knew they should've. He faked a shower with just his head being washed, and his denim jacket hid the lumps the dressings created underneath his T-shirt.

The pressure in his chest grew as he approached the kitchen, more so when he found both of his parents up and giving him suspicious looks from minute one. As soon as he sat down, the questions started coming, his father going first.

“Why did you leave your things at the park last night?”

Alex's struggle to answer let his mother take over. “Were you doing something there last night?”

“Just skating...until my board broke.”

His father resumed the questions. “Why did you leave your stuff there, though?”

Taking a breath and making a fist under the table, Alex's pulse picked up. The seconds kept rushing by with him saying nothing. He knew the longer he stalled, the worse it looked, but he didn't want to tell them the truth. Any of it.

“Alex, what happened last night?” When his father asked that question, the implications of it shot panic into Alex's head, and his gaze broke from his parents. As he tried to think of something, anything to say, he gripped his arms to stop them reaching for his injuries.

What felt like an eternity went by. *Is that all he knows?* That question sat in Alex's thoughts, and then something clicked. He didn't have to tell the whole truth.

“Someone tried to jump me,” Alex blurted out shortly after that point crossed his mind.

The look on his mother’s face snapped to panic-stricken at those words. “What? Who?”

“I don’t know. Someone trying to get my wallet, or something.”

The exasperated, possibly disappointed look that came onto his father’s face was reflected in his tone. “And you didn’t think to call me and report it?”

“I should have, I know.” Alex held off on saying any more, and things went quiet for a time again.

“Do you remember what this person looked like at least?”

“No,” Alex said with a shake of his head. The silence that followed pushed him to add more. “I ran back to the park entrance and then looked back, but they were gone.”

“Any idea why?”

Alex shook his head again. “I guess they didn’t want me seeing them.”

“And then what happened?”

“I waited a minute, then got out of there.”

“Then, I still don’t understand why you left your stuff there, much less never called me. You had all night.”

It took little time for Alex to answer, though the fear that his fib would fall apart at any minute continued building under his skin. “I didn’t mean to. I panicked and wasn’t thinking about it. The first chance I thought I had, I ran for it. In case they were nearby.” His father’s silence after his answer, and the suspicion and inquiry throughout his face, only made the feeling worse.

“Look, Son,” his father began after what felt a full, tense minute. “Don’t keep things like that to yourself.”

Despite the tone and expression of his father hinting that he wasn’t fully convinced by what he’d been told, a mix of relief and sadness hung in Alex’s head as he replied. “I know, I know.”

After another stretch of silence, his mother spoke up. “Was that park where you found that girl?”

Alex pulled his gaze up in response. “Yeah, it was.” As what he thought his mother was implying with that question crossed his mind, his father spoke up.

“It was an animal that did that, hun. Not a person.”

“Still, that’s twice in five days he’s been involved in something dangerous.”

Werewolf Tale

“Yeah...” Alex’s father looked in his direction before lapsing into thought for a few seconds. “If he was older, I’d say a concealed handgun license would be worth his time to get.”

As the thought of what he could’ve done with such a weapon crossed his mind, Alex faked a lean on his hand to feel the dressings on his left shoulder. The absence of the more severe stinging he’d felt the night before and as he’d woken up was obvious, even with an increase of pressure on his skin. A fact that caused a chill along his spine.

Even after breakfast was over and his folks had moved on to other things—his father typing away at something in the study and his mother getting ready to meet a friend—the tension that chill had brought on hadn’t fully faded. When he saw his chance, Alex made for the restroom, locking the door behind him before stripping his jacket and tee off.

What he saw with the continued removal of the dressings made his previously relaxing pulse give way to the same fearful pace of the night before.

The most severe tearing and puncture wounds were at least a quarter smaller versus what they had been, with the smaller wounds already scarred over or nearing such a state, a pace of healing in line with months of time versus barely twelve hours.

Then something else about his wounds caught his attention: the absence of redness, bruising, and scabbing, all things that he knew followed animal bites and similar skin-breaking injuries. The sight stiffened his body and delayed his redressing of the worst of the wounds, but once his tee and jacket were back on, his handiwork was as good as invisible.

Bailey, however, wasn’t fooled. As soon as Alex opened the bathroom door, his pet closed in and got to sniffing at his jacket pockets. He paid it no mind until after he’d gotten rid of the used dressings and retreated to his room, at which point his pet closed in and continued to sniff around where his wounds were.

“Hey, Bailey, stop,” Alex said as he pushed his dog’s massive head away. Even after getting him to sit, it was clear Bailey didn’t want to give up on the idea. “I’m okay, boy. Thanks, though.”

Monday, August 29th, 2011
Moon Phase – New

After the rest of Saturday went by, with Alex doing his best to focus on the time with his friends versus everything from that morning and Friday night, he allowed Sunday to pass with little activity besides playing with Bailey and breaking in his new board.

By Monday morning, only the deepest of his wounds was still healing, though the scarring the bites had left would be a constant reminder of what caused them. Throughout his quick breakfast that morning, Bailey sat quietly by his side, and Alex soon spared a hand to stroke his head.

When he arrived at campus, the parking lot was partially filled, and a mass of students were heading for their classes. Helmet and backpack in hand, Alex came in behind a group of them heading toward the main entrance. He followed them for barely two seconds before a twinge of nervousness ran through him, slowing his pace. A glance both to his left and right gave him no clue as to what caused it, but as he came closer to the main entrance, the twinge intensified.

It was when a pack of five students left through the door he was heading for that Alex near backpedaled and made for the path on his left. The tightening of his flesh and jumpstart to his pulse didn't relax until he was fully around the corner, where far fewer students were coming and going. He slipped inside with his head turned down, bought a soda from one of the vending machines, and then made his way upstairs.

The nervousness continued to build as he stood outside his classroom and sized up where to sit, as though he knew he was at risk of being jumped from behind and loudly declared a monster at the slightest hint. His skin tightened as he made his move, and once he sat down, Alex balled a fist over his leg and tried to relax, barely glancing around while he held his quivering arms.

No one knew what had happened to him. He had no reason to worry, but the feelings didn't subside, even with the thought of Bailey by his side. Twice he thought to leave the room and retreat to the closest bathroom to pull himself together, but that would mean walking back into a classroom where, once the door opened and he walked in, every eye would be on him. Instead he kept frozen to his chair, moving only when he needed to.

As soon as class was over, Alex wasted no time leaving the room, his anxiety diminishing as he watched the other students leave as well. He scanned their faces for signs of increased attention, seeing nothing to confirm his fears. With an exasperated exhale, he headed downstairs to the commons area.

Werewolf Tale

His bad gut feeling came back as he found a spot to sit. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out one of the comics he'd bought the week before, though every few panels he looked up and around. None of the students from his previous class were nearby, but he noticed others looking at him, albeit briefly.

After a few minutes he gave up on sitting where he felt so exposed, gathered his stuff, and headed back upstairs, sitting in front of the room of his next class. With no one around besides the rare, lone person walking by, his anxiety eased at last.

What the hell's wrong with me?

Alex wracked his brain for an explanation, the werewolf's bite being the only thing that made the most sense. He'd never felt this uneasy about being on school grounds, or around other people, before he was bitten, and the area around the skate park had been empty that night.

He soon returned to reading his comics and finished one just in time for the professor to arrive. While sitting in class with only her around, Alex still felt normal, but as the class filled up, the cycle of building tension repeated.

"Hey." Hearing Nathan's voice, Alex looked up just in time to intercept his hand with a shake. "We're sharing a class again this semester, it seems."

"Nice," Alex replied. His friend took the seat next to him, getting his laptop out and resuming typing something on it. With him nearby, the unease Alex had been feeling up to then weakened, and remained so throughout the hour-long class.

His focus however returned to what he had feared the night he was bitten, that more than just his body had been affected. How long would it be until someone noticed it? His friends and family were around him the most. They were the most likely to notice something.

After class, out in the parking lot, Alex sat on his motorcycle for several minutes, doing nothing but thinking. Had any of his other mannerisms changed? If they had, when would he find out? In class again? At work? He shook his head and tried to push those thoughts aside. He knew Trevor and Daniel a bit already, and his shift was only four hours long. After that, he was free to go home.

He arrived to find just three customers browsing around, his boss greeting him from the register.

"Should I keep working the shelves, or..." Alex began as he shook his hand.

“You’ll be working the floor for the most part today, but I’ll let Daniel know to show you how to work the register.”

“Sounds good.” Alex didn’t feel the unease returning as he began his shift, much to his relief.

* * *

After some time straightening the shelves, Daniel called him over to the register counter. A single customer about Alex’s age was waiting there with a stack of single issues, the words ‘Tampa Skateshop’ printed on his tee.

“New guy?” the customer asked, his tone making it clear that Daniel was to answer.

“Yeah,” Daniel replied. “Started last week.”

When the customer nodded, but didn’t speak, Alex jumped in. “I’ve used a register before. I won’t screw up.”

“One like this one?”

“Sort of.”

“That’s a start.”

As Daniel stepped him through some basics, Alex waited for a chance to ask the customer about the skateshop. Before he could, the question of where he’d worked before came up.

His answer got both the customer and Daniel to express surprise. “Why’d you leave a vet job for a comic store?” the customer asked.

“I got tired of treating so many injured pets, and hearing owners getting upset at bad news,” Alex replied.

“Yeah... That would do it.”

“It was generally nice, don’t get me wrong, but... Yeah, some time away from that was what I wanted. And if this job doesn’t work out and nothing else comes around, I can get my old position back pretty easy.”

“I highly doubt you’ll get fired from a job like this,” Daniel said. “Unless you try to, or you find that switch I mentioned.”

Seeing Daniel and the customer smirk, Alex quipped back. “I’ll have a mirror handy for that, man. Trust me.” He finished the transaction shortly after he finished talking, handing the customer his receipt and sending him on his way.

It was when the doors began to close behind the customer that he remembered the question he wanted to ask, and kicked himself for not doing

Werewolf Tale

it. Noting the name for later, he burned through the rest of his shift and was quick to return home.

Neither of his parents' cars were in the driveway, leaving Bailey the only one to greet him.

"Hey, boy. You miss me today?" Alex asked as he crouched down to pet him. His dog attempted to lick his face in response.

As he tried to keep from laughing at Bailey's tongue repeatedly missing, he didn't immediately notice his pet's attention moving to his arm. Seeing no reason to hold him back, Alex stayed kneeling as his Bailey's nostril breaths swept over his skin.

Then his pet let out a whine.

"Bailey, what is it?" Instead of a vocal response, his dog looked him in the eyes, then turned back toward his scarred arm, nudging it with his muzzle before licking his skin—something he'd done for years in response to hints of injury.

"A werewolf did that to me, boy." After so many hours of unease and tension, Alex felt no shame at letting that sentence get away from him, or at allowing a bit of emotion into his face afterward.

Chapter 6 – New Scents

Monday, August 29th, 2011

Moon Phase – New

Later that night, as dinner came to an end, Alex filled a bottle with fresh water for a ride around the block.

“Alex, before you leave,” his father said as he came close to the dining table, “can I talk to you in private for a minute?”

At first curious why, when Alex thought of the blood-stained dressings he’d been throwing out, his pulse jumped. “What for?”

“It’s about that girl you and your friend found.”

The slight bit of relief Alex felt was quickly replaced with concern, and then defeat. His father’s tone wasn’t the kind that meant good news.

“She didn’t make it, did she?” As his mother looked in his direction, his father got up and nudged him towards the hallway leading to his room. He remained silent until the bedroom door was closed.

“No. She died while the ambulance was en-route.”

Alex closed his eyes and blew a lengthy exhale at hearing that. Although glad to finally know what happened, sadness and anger welled in his chest.

Then his father continued. “That’s not the whole story though, and that’s why I wanted this said in private.”

Whole story? After Alex’s first thoughts of what that meant came to mind, that enough evidence had been found to lean towards ‘werewolf’, or that Angela had tried to warn the medics of something before dying, he almost couldn’t signal his father to say what he needed to.

What he was told made his eyes widen, and halted his response for several seconds. “Her body was stolen, before any exams were done.”

“Stolen? But...how the hell did that happen?”

“From the reports I have, someone set off the fire alarm at the hospital she was taken to and got away with her body and personal effects while the staff was distracted.” As Alex held his drooping head up with one hand, his father placed a hand on his shoulder. “We’re looking into who may have done it, but I thought you deserved to know.”

“Thanks, Dad.” His father gave him a minute, likely to let it all sink in, before he left his room. For the remainder of the night, Alex didn’t leave the house. The news had made going outside and skating around lose too much of its appeal.

Tuesday, August 30th, 2011 **Moon Phase – Waxing Crescent**

As his classes drew closer the next day, despite his wounds being fully healed, his unease from before began to take root. Writing off the three hours he needed to stay as not that long didn’t suppress it, nor did reminding himself that he’d done this once already. It was still three hours, and he’d be around strangers for almost all of it.

When he arrived, Alex took a few minutes to sit outside the side entrance before walking in. The unease continued to build, and then peaked when the professor closed the classroom door. He did his best to listen and ignore the feelings throughout the seventy-five minutes of class, but once that time was up, he bolted out of the room and split off from the other students.

He found a spot away from the packed hallways and sat down, leaning against the wall. Was this how he was going to go through his remaining years of college, or the rest of his life? Constantly in fear of people who barely knew anything about him? He covered his face with both hands, breathing a heavy sigh. He had to be able to control or relax these feelings somehow.

As his next class went by, he tried to think positive, imagining Bailey, his friends, anything uplifting, by his side. He ended up watching the time until class was over, barely noticing what the professor was saying. Upon leaving the building, and feeling his unease weakening, he began to wonder if something else was helping drive his anxiety. The idea of being caught in class, around so many people, if something more noticeable happened to him was what came to mind first, the coming full moon shortly after.

Wait a second... I wasn't bitten on the full moon. As he dug out his phone and found a lunar calendar app to load onto it, Alex was quick to doubt that was a factor. The reveal of the next full moon as the 12th of September, a Monday almost two weeks away, clenched it. That date he could prepare for; unexpected changes to his body in inconvenient places he couldn't.

The fact that the date fell on a Monday sparked some other worries, however. When would he transform? At night? At noon? Being anywhere

near campus on a day like that... *I'll just skip that day. It's early in the semester anyway.*

Along the way home, and while stopping to buy some fast food, the number of police SUVs he was seeing versus the week before tugged at his thoughts. Were there more on patrol, or was he just running into their patrols more often? Being careful not to go over the speed limits around them, as soon as he was home, he checked what sites he could for information. None of the usual ones gave a reason, and his father hadn't left any messages about it either.

* * *

That same night, as he sat with his parents at the dinner table, Alex felt his chest grow heavy. Thirteen days until the full moon. That was all the time he had to tell them the truth, before he'd have no choice. Or maybe worse.

"Something wrong, Son?" his father suddenly asked after a period of silence.

Alex looked up at him, his mother looking at him for a second in turn. "No. Just thinking."

"You've been really quiet since last Friday," his mother said.

"Eh..." The first excuse Alex could think of never left his mouth. He felt a push toward breaking the news now, but didn't follow through. "Just wishing I'd paid more attention to that lunatic before."

"You can't change that now, Son. Don't dwell on it."

"I'm trying not to."

Friday, September 2nd, 2011 **Moon Phase – Waxing Crescent**

As the remainder of his class week grinded by, with no sign of relief outside of his class with Nathan, Alex kept trying to think of something that would help his unease. The ways he'd seen canines make themselves feel safer were mulled over along with other ideas, but none of them felt subtle enough, leaving him to continue imagining Bailey by his side and hoping things would change.

His shifts at Blue Moon after work offered a bit of relief thanks to the periods of low customer numbers and his freedom of movement, but until he was home, around his parents and Bailey, he never felt truly relaxed.

* * *

As his second class on Friday ended, Alex waited for Nathan to get up before doing so himself. After rubbing his nose, which had begun running the day before, he waited until they were out of the room to pitch the idea of a hang-out, and another attempt at filming at the skatepark.

“Can’t do it. I’ve got some errands to run in a while,” Nathan explained.

“No worries. Marcus and I are off-shift today. I’ll see if he can help.”

“Good luck.” They were halfway down a flight of stairs when Nathan spoke again. “Oh, have you noticed the increase in police patrols around here lately?”

“Yeah, I did. No idea why it’s happening, though.”

“No word on anyone else getting attacked?”

Alex shook his head.

“What about Angela? Any word?”

Alex glanced around, then guided his friend to a quieter spot. “Yeah... She didn’t make it.”

Nathan responded after some seconds went by, giving Alex enough time to lean towards leaving out the body theft details. “I had a feeling.”

“She didn’t tell anybody anything about what attacked her either.”

Nathan responded with a slow shaking of his head, and Alex held his breath. “So, we’ll never know what killed her?”

“Don’t think so. I still think it’s a dog she knew.”

“Makes the most sense, I guess. Or that wolf.”

A chill touched Alex’s nerves. “Would be a hell of a coincidence if it was.”

“Yeah... Anyway, I gotta go. Catch you later.”

“You too,” Alex said after a quick handshake. Once he lost sight of Nathan, he pulled out his phone and dialed Marcus’s number. A meeting was soon set for 3:30, and Alex set out for the skatepark after getting some lunch.

When he arrived, seven other people were filling the park, five of whom were skaters sessioning different rails and structures or just relaxing. As he waited for an opening in the roundabout of riders, Alex tried to relax his anxiety and ignore the few eyes he knew were on him. When it spiked, he pulled out of the grind he was in, anxious to return to simply riding around.

As he steered around one of the ramp structures, the familiarity of one of the skaters near the entrance caught his attention. After a second to think, Alex recognized him as the guy he’d rung up earlier in the week.

“Don't I know you from the comic shop?” he asked when he saw Alex coming.

“Yeah. I'm Alex.” He held out his hand to his past customer, who returned the shake. “You?”

“Cameron.”

“You skate here very often?”

“No, not really.”

“Let me guess, things are too cramped here?”

“Yeah,” said one from the group near Cameron. “Like that quarterpipe you were riding on a second ago.”

“And the fact that we're too cramped just standing by this thing,” Cameron added, slapping the ramp structure he stood next to.

“Looks it.” Alex glanced away as his anxiety crested, his attention now on the parking lot. The time he and Marcus had agreed upon was still half-an-hour away.

Several seconds went by before his phone began to ring, shaking him out of the fantasy of Bailey sitting by his side. It was Marcus, and Alex answered, only to be told something had come up.

“That sucks.”

“Sorry, man. Can't help it.”

“It's okay,” Alex said as he glanced around the park. “Thanks anyway.”

“No problem. Later.”

“Was he coming over here too?” Cameron asked as Alex hung up.

“Was, yeah. I was hoping he could do some filming with me, but something came up with his folks.”

“Ah. You doing a sponsor video?”

Alex shook his head. “Nothing serious right now. It would be fun to be sponsored, but I'll let that come on its own.”

Cameron nodded at that. “Believe me, that's always better.”

“How so? You ride for a company?”

“In a way, yes. You ever heard of a place called Tampa Skateshop?”

Alex jumped on the question. “No, but you were wearing a T-shirt with their logo the other day. Forgot to ask you about it back then.”

“Ah, cool. I need to meet with the owner about a video segment I'm doing for the shop in a little while. I can show you where the shop is, and I think you'll like what we have there.”

Alex accepted the offer, and once on his motorcycle, followed Cameron toward the south side of town.

* * *

They pulled into the lot of a massive storefront building, the logo leaving Alex wondering how a place like this had escaped his notice. After slipping his helmet off, he rubbed at the growing pressure around his nose, and then followed Cameron inside.

Like Blue Moon Comics, the shop was large and the stock on display varied. Both walls to his sides were lined with new decks, parts, and clothing, with a mini quarterpipe and rail near the back of the shop. While it was currently occupied, what he saw behind the black walls and chain-link fence to his right was even more grin-worthy: a skatepark.

“Dude, you weren't kidding,” Alex said, his smile not shrinking.

“Yep. We've got everything here. Have a look around.”

As Cameron headed toward someone who looked to be in his late forties, Alex did just that. The case to his right, closest to the door, was his first stop. Most of the items on display were wheels and bearings, both blank and professional designs, though the multitude of designs and brands on display drew him closer and into a crouch.

Feeling the need to wipe his nose again, seconds after he did so, it felt irritated and warm, as if something had been rubbed inside his nostrils. While massaging the skin there, he caught the scents of sweat and heated rubber from his motorcycle handles on his palm, and two other mild ones he didn't recognize. A quick inhale to try and clear his nose brought several more scents with it. Mild ones he didn't recognize, and sharper ones that he did.

The irritation didn't stop. It bore deeper, into the roof of his mouth, past his skull, toward his throat. *Oh, shit. What's happening?*

His heart began to race as he freed a hand to cover his nose. Though he tried breathing strictly through his mouth, his nose kept picking up the smells on his hand and the many others around him. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, but despite not moving or pulling his hands away, he started smelling the products from the glass cabinet: the lubricants, the waxes, the urethane of the wheels, the fresh plywood, the glass cleaner...

With each new breath, his nose pulled in more scents. Alex lost track of how many as the irritation continued to affect him and burrowed deeper into his head. He then held his breath to try and collect himself, but his racing heart didn't allow it for long.

His first recovery breath drew the same scents as before, but how, what felt to him, fractured they were snatched his attention. What had been a single wooden scent from the plywood had become one of shredded wood and two aged adhesives. The glass cleaner, once a single, sharp, sterilized scent, was now reeking of four different compounds, then five, then seven.

With another breath, more of the scents fractured, and then the irritation reached his brain, leeching into his sinuses once it did. With his focus split, Alex kept his eyes closed and turned his head away from the case. The scents coming from it didn't weaken, and the sinus irritation changed into brain pressure, the kind that felt no different from a dehydration headache.

Alex then squeezed his forehead and bit his tongue, trying to reign in his now-quivering breathing. His breaths were directed to his nostrils in turn, flooding them with what felt like over a hundred scents with the first open breath.

That was all it took for him to wrap his nose and mouth with his jacket. The foreign smells quickly weakened, replaced by the familiar ones soaked into the aged denim of his jacket, before he pinched his nose shut.

Alex then forced himself to stand, the shakiness of his limbs leaving him leaning against the counter. Once the pressure on his brain weakened, he opened his eyes to relieve them from being squeezed so tightly shut, letting tears drip from both.

After wiping them, he glanced to his left, seeing no one paying attention to him. His breathing eased and the pressure in his sinuses continued to lax until he felt better. Though his head and face remained warm, the lingering shakiness throughout his body changed into a biting chill as he thought about what had just happened to him. About how quickly it had come and gone.

As Alex released the hold on his nose, despite not breathing through it, it was flooded once again with the scent makeups from the aged denim of his jacket and aged cotton of his T-shirt, as well as everything those two pieces of clothing had absorbed since their last washing. Every scent tested his brain's focus until he pinched his nose shut again.

After another wipe of his eyes, he heard footsteps to his left. An employee was approaching from behind the counter.

It didn't take him long to notice something was wrong. "You okay?"

Alex released his nose before he replied, trying in vain not to breathe through it. "Yeah. Something made my nose run all of a sudden. Don't know what."

Werewolf Tale

“Hang on a sec.” The employee reached behind the counter and produced a box of tissues. Alex thanked him and grabbed a handful to cover his nose. The sharp scents of the chemicals in the thin, sterilized paper overpowered everything else before he blew his nose. “Nose decided to screw with you, huh?”

More than you know. “Yeah. Ugh.”

“Were you looking for anything earlier?”

“Not really. Just browsing. Really nice selection, though.”

“Thanks. If you need anything, just let me or Walter know.”

The employee departed, and Alex held his hands to stop them from quivering, pretending to look over the decks behind the counter. *Okay, calm down. He didn't suspect anything.* With a few spare tissues over his nose to block the weaker scents, he pushed himself away from the counter and moved towards the most open space that he could stand in.

He then relieved his nose and got a full breath before noticing Cameron heading his way, his board tucked under his arm. “Hey. What do you think so far?” he asked when he got close.

“Really nice place,” Alex replied as he pocketed the tissue and tried not to focus on the new scents wafting from Cameron's clothing, or his breath.

“If you want, you can go ride around the park for a minute,” Cameron said, thumbing toward it. “Just be sure to say hello to Walter, that older guy over there.” Cameron thumbed towards the man he'd been talking to. “He's the shop owner, and the guy you'll need to impress if you want to ride for this place.”

Alex nodded, glad that Cameron didn't notice what the employee had. “I'll keep that in mind. Actually, what was that video part you were talking about before?”

“It's for the store's promotional video,” Cameron said as he spun the wheels of his board. “We're considering making shorter ones for more online promotion.”

“Looking forward to seeing it once it's done.”

“Thanks. One of our guys is editing it right now, so check back in a few days. It should be done by then.”

After nodding again, Alex thanked Cameron for showing him to the store, and wrapped his jacket around his face again once he was out of his view. A few stray scents wafted up the gaps between his jacket and his chest, his exhale to blow them away taking their place. When he at last began

heading in Walter's direction, his mouth was doing all the breathing, though he kept a hand at the ready in case he had to fake a yawn and block his nose.

Despite the exchange of a handshake, Alex felt his unease coming on as he started talking to him—not only from Walter's unfamiliarity, but how easily he could draw attention to himself in the position he was.

For a time, their chat went similarly to Alex's introduction to Trevor: he gave his name, then elaborated on how long he'd been skating versus gaming and reading comics. When Walter mentioned his arrival with Cameron, Alex pointed out how he'd shown him the directions to the shop. "He didn't say how long you've been open, but I'm guessing this place is fairly new."

"A few months, in fact. Not many regulars outside of the people looking for a good skatepark."

"I see. Uh...do you mind if I ride in the park for a while?"

"Not at all, and I can keep your stuff back here if you need."

"All right. Thanks." As he pulled his backpack off, Alex recalled a ledger saying there was a five-dollar per-hour charge for the park.

Walter got his attention as he reached into his pocket for some bills. "I'll give you a few hours on the house since this is your first time here." After thanking him for the offer and handing over his things, hoping they wouldn't smell too much once he took them back, Alex headed for the entrance gate.

With his hand by his nose, ready to block it if his olfactory sense started overwhelming him, he was five feet from the gate before he had to do it. Upwards of fifty scents, from he guessed thirteen to seventeen cores, made it around his hand. Most were clothing scents, and the stains and cleaners from the fabrics. Someone had been rubbing wax on a board, and he could pick out meat and cheese.

Once past the gate, the size of the park itself slowed his pace, his attention going everywhere. It was at least eight times the size of the one in his neighborhood. To his right was a towering halfpipe, the staircase leading to its top connected to a raised area above his head which ran along the left wall. Along that wall, and the one directly opposite the entrance, were a series of quarterpipes, inclines, and rails, with a funbox built into the middle of the park.

Grinning at the sight of it all, Alex made his way to the halfpipe first, standing on the higher lip and gauging the drop for a minute. Although he picked up more scents during the climb, giving him a laundry list of things that had recently been there, as soon as he dropped into the pipe and the air began rushing past his face, the intensity of the scents weakened.

Werewolf Tale

Within minutes, he was working up a sweat from keeping up lines of ollies, grinds, and flip tricks. Though he would stop to wipe his face every so often, he was on the move again within seconds to keep his head from processing any set of smells for long.

After nearly half-an-hour, he felt like his legs needed a rest and headed for the viewing area. As he caught his breath and turned his attention to the skaters below, Alex wrapped his face with his jacket again. The slowing of his pulse helped him shift his concentration to understanding how much different his new nose felt.

With each breath, he felt the extent of his olfactory mucosa working to catch scent traces. He could feel its extent further back in his throat and nasal passages, even within his sinuses, the spots where the irritation had affected him. And unlike before, where only two or three intense smells would catch his attention while the weaker ones all meshed into a defining whole, nearly every unique scent makeup that was strong enough to linger in the air was fighting for his olfactory attention. Breathing through his mouth did offer relief, but only so far as slowing the air flow to his nose.

As he kept the fabric of his jacket over his face, some weak scent traces began leaking through. How quickly his brain processed the new scents meant that with each new breath, he'd lose track of some and find new ones.

When he heard more skaters enter the park, a chill touched his skin and a hand went over his heart. Suddenly, he didn't feel safe being in the park, in public and around strangers. Looking down and out into the park again, though he saw no one paying attention to him, the idea of going home to recuperate felt better than sticking around.

As he left, Alex bought some fresh wax and a set of blank white wheels before exchanging another handshake with Walter. Faking a yawn as the front door was opened, the late afternoon winds slipped past his hand and up his nose. Along with them came scents from cooked and fast food, the exhaust from the cars on the nearby highway, and hundreds more he couldn't identify before he lost them.

He squeezed his nose shut as his brain went to work, releasing it only once his breath was held. Once his helmet was on his head and the visor pulled down, the wildly varying urban scents around his head became overpowered by his recirculating breaths. Some leaked in from the heat vents and the cracks around his neck, but not enough to overwhelm him.

As he reached his motorcycle and sat on it, Alex shivered under his jacket. Why had his sense of smell changed so suddenly, and why now? The

full moon was ten days away. Too far away, in his mind, to make his body change like this.

But then, his body had become exponentially faster at healing within minutes of the attack a week ago, and his animal-like fear of strangers hadn't fully shown until two days later, well after the day he'd been with his friends in a heavily-populated mall.

For a moment, Alex thought there might be a pattern to the changes, but even with a minute to consider it, he couldn't identify one. Even if there was, every change was showing without warning, and he had no idea what else would next prove true about his lycanthropy.

His eyes began to mist and his throat constricted as the more upsetting scenarios ran through his head. For all he knew, he would grow a tail before the full moon came, have his canines lengthen into fangs in a few days, or go completely feral once he shifted. No one was there to tell him what was coming or how to prepare, and if something happened that exposed him or put him in danger, where was he supposed to turn for help?

He'd not seen hide nor hair of the werewolf that attacked him since that night, but doubted it would be hospitable in any way if it was attacking people outside of the full moon. And his friends? What would he tell them if they were caught in the middle of something he caused because of this?

With a labored swallow, Alex tried telling himself that things weren't as bad as he was fearing. He could take solace in the fact that no one had deeply questioned him about some of his new mannerisms yet, but even with that, he feared it was only a matter of time.

Once he was back home, the sight of his father's truck in the driveway made him hesitate with opening the front door. He'd been working the graveyard shift the night before, and would likely be awake. If a strong scent caught him off guard in front of him...

After a few more seconds of staring at the door, an idea hit him. He pulled out one of the spare tissues, covered his nose, and then looked around. No one was walking the streets, but a car was coming his way. After it drove by, Alex exhaled, removed the tissue, and leaned towards the crack, feeling his ears warm up as he did so.

The closest outdoor scents were the strongest, but after two sniffs, a familiar scent of fur reached him. Bailey was nearby. The rest of the scents he noticed faded too quickly to identify.

After replacing the tissue, he unlocked the door and let himself in. Bailey jumped up to see him from where he'd been sitting, tail wagging and tongue

Werewolf Tale

lolling. The scents within his dog's pelt and breath registered immediately in Alex's head, along with the weaker ones he'd noticed within the air. Most were mild, but all were familiar, preventing his head from spinning.

"Good boy, Bailey. I missed you too," Alex said as he rubbed his pet's head and ears.

His father got his attention as he walked through the front room, letting him know dinner was coming once his mother was home. Almost on cue, Alex's stomach grumbled.

* * *

"Whoa, Son. Leave a bit for us." Alex looked over to his father as he returned with his third dinner plate, avoiding sitting in turn.

"Oh. Sorry."

"No, no. Sit down," his mother said as he stepped back toward the kitchen. "We've got enough."

"You sure?" Alex caught the hint of humor in his father's voice. "He's eaten maybe half the lasagna in fifteen minutes."

Alex shrugged. "I was hungry."

"No kidding. You spend all afternoon skating?"

"Yeah, but not at the park this time. I met one of my customers from the comic store there, and he showed me a new skate shop south of here. Only been open a few months but wow, this place..." Alex stalled to stop himself from gushing too much. "Can't believe I never heard of it before."

"What's it called?"

"Tampa Skateshop. It's a skate store with a built-in park."

"So, you can ride there instead of at the park?"

Alex looked toward his mother after she spoke, at first wondering why she suddenly sounded so unsure.

"Yeah," he began after recalling his and Angela's maulings, "It looks like a nice place to hang out and ride, but it's a bit of a drive, and I have to pay to use the park." His folks both showed hints of confusion at that statement. "Still, it seems worth it."

"Pay to use the park, you said?"

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"Maintenance costs. There's a lot of stuff in that place that could wear down and break."

When his third plate was finished, even though he could've gone for dessert, Alex passed on eating any more before holding back a few burps. Unsure of whether it was another of his wolf-like mannerisms surfacing or just hunger that had gotten away from him, he let the appetite spike stay confined to his father's brief comment.

Chapter 7 - Reasonings

Friday, September 2nd, 2011

Moon Phase – Waxing Crescent

With the end of dinner, Alex's attention was picked away from the scents of his mother's cooking back to the sensory changes. He'd already noticed several scents from his parents that detailed something about their days—a trace of reefer from his father's uniform, and hints of a toner spill from his mother's shirt and jacket—but his first step inside the walk-in pantry for some plastic wrap slapped him in the nose with several dozen new, and wildly contrasting scents. Until he pinched his nose shut, all of them fought for his olfactory attention, the few that stood out most leaving him questioning the source.

His room, though not as much of a kick to the senses, was quick to remind him of things he'd long forgotten about and newer things he'd been unable to smell in detail. Several old memories came jogging back as the scents reached him, and Alex found it hard to keep away from everything setting his brain off. His attempts to focus on something else didn't help, even once some time had passed, and what remained of his night was spent testing his new nose on a few of his belongings, and unwillingly on Bailey when he settled into bed with him.

You're getting a bath tomorrow, boy.

Saturday, September 3rd, 2011

Moon Phase – First Quarter

The next day, Alex tried to control his breathing when his parents were close, huffing his nose clear when something caught him by surprise. At the same time, he began to form a scent-map of the house, taking special note of what upset his senses the most. The scents that contrasted greatly from what was around him—spices, paints, cleaners, and things like them—took longer for him to stand being around, and sometimes made him reel from their source at a greater distance.

Outside, what he expected to be cleaner air was instead an invitation for more odd scents to reach his new nose. With some effort, he could smell the animals that had recently passed through the front and back yards, and the occasional bird in the trees. The lingering scent-markings from other dogs stood out as well, and were no less repulsive than before.

Unlike his new sense of smell, his appetite remained mostly the same: two or three meals between all the riding around on his skateboard. After skipping breakfast Saturday morning, he wrote off gorging himself on Friday to not eating much the entire day and having it catch up to him later.

Sunday, September 4th, 2011
Moon Phase – First Quarter

With both Blue Moon and the Tampa shop closed on Sunday, Alex stayed close to the house, getting in some time skating on his personal grindbox while throwing balls for Bailey.

As the afternoon came, so did a text from Catherine.

Catherine W: I haven't heard from you in a while. Something up?

Alex held his phone for a moment before texting her back.

Alex S: No. Just not a lot is going on.

Catherine W: Okay.

Her next text came after a short pause.

Catherine W: I'm thinking of getting us all together for a hangout next weekend. Are you off Saturday?

Skateboard in hand, Alex considered his response. Saturday was two days from the full moon, six from the current day. Any of those six could be a day that something more obvious than a sensory change could happen to him.

Werewolf Tale

The closer to the full moon, the more drastic, he feared, such a change would be.

Alex S: I think so, but I'll get back to you on that.

Catherine W: Okay. Later, then.

Alex then pocketed his phone, only to remember that such a drastic change could just as easily happen around his parents, and his old fears of what they would do, or say to him, if it did come back. The idea of telling them the truth weighed on his mind, but as he came inside and walked past them, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

* * *

When he kept his head down throughout his first plate of food that night, his mother took notice and spoke up. "You're awful quiet tonight."

Just get it over with. Alex shook his head after staying silent for almost too long. "Just thinking about stuff."

"You haven't said much about your first week of class."

"Nothing special about it so far."

"So, everything interesting is coming around November?" his father asked.

"Looks like it."

The benign topics from his parents eased Alex's drive to tell them the truth, though the lump in his chest didn't go away.

Not today. Tomorrow. *I still have time.*

Monday, September 5th, 2011

Moon Phase – First Quarter

Days until the Full Moon - 7

As Alex arrived at campus and made his way towards the main building, the same onset of anxiety crept through his chest and head. Inside, the swirling mass of new and familiar scent makeups rushed his nose, their wild variations making his head spin until he covered and then pinched nose shut.

Being on the second floor weakened many of them, and his classroom being empty gave his head the space to clear.

Then the other students began arriving.

With each body that strayed close to his seat, the collections of scents grew. His jacket once again served as a quick shield at the first hints of sharp or nasty ones. Then the air conditioner started up, sending a wave through the scents in the room, disturbing ones that had pooled on the floor and adding more from the network of vents.

Alex's urge to move to another seat lost to how unwilling he was to give anyone in the room a reason to pay attention to him. Until the professor arrived and asked for the homework he'd assigned, he didn't move beyond adjusting his jacket.

It was as his papers were removed from his backpack that some of the air from the pocket followed, reaching his nose before he sat back up. Among the collection of scents were some he recognized from Bailey's fur, and his anxiety laxed within seconds of noticing it.

Alex wasted no time pulling his backpack up onto the desk after that realization. With each fake search for stuff, the scents wafted by his face, keeping him calm for the rest of the class. Now with an idea of how his heightened senses could help him, Alex repeated the process with Nathan nearby, keeping his backpack close in case he needed it.

His friend's jacket was laced with paper and ink scents common to role-playing manuals and trade paperbacks, plus fresh plastic and shipping supplies in line with console game cases. The familiar scents helped for a time, but then a mild one he couldn't identify sent a chill through his nerves.

The hell was that?

Nathan didn't notice him shudder or wrap his arms around his gut. Whatever that scent had been, the feeling it gave him, a feeling as if he'd been publicly shamed, stuck with him until he left for work.

* * *

Alex arrived home after his shift to find his folks relaxing in the living room, and Bailey running for him.

"Hey, boy. I missed you too," he said as his pet circled him, his wagging tail bumping his legs. After coaxing him back to his room, Alex dropped his stuff onto the bed and sat down against the foot of it. Bailey then came in close, licking his face until he suddenly seemed to lose enthusiasm.

Werewolf Tale

“Something wrong, boy?” Alex asked as he reached for his pet’s furry neck. His fingers ran through Bailey’s fur until he heard a soft growl that urged his hand away. Unsure of what had caused his pet to do that, Alex locked eyes with him as he lowered himself to the floor and rested his head on his paws. *Wish you could just talk to me...Wait. Is something about to happen to me?*

As he turned that thought over, Alex recalled something he’d read just before leaving the vet, about dogs being able to predict seizures and smell cancer cells. He kept still and waited, wondering if the same idea applied to physical alterations in werewolves.

All he felt was his pulse slowing down over the course of the next minute, and then when he brought his hand close to Bailey’s muzzle, his dog lazily sniffed it but did nothing else. Even when he resumed stroking his head and neck.

Despite the inaction, Alex couldn’t help thinking he’d noticed something. It had to be subdermal if nothing about his outside appearance was changing, but what? That was when he imagined his skin ripping and falling off when the transformation happened to make way for a possibly blood-caked pelt underneath.

He swallowed hard and squeezed an arm as the thought faded. As much as he wanted to forget the very idea, for all he knew, that was what he was in for. And then he imagined his parents catching him just before something like that. His eyes closed and he let out a sigh as a biting, terrified chill ran through him.

When he heard Bailey stand back up and take a step toward him, his eyes barely reopened before his dog’s warm tongue contacted his face. How suddenly it came left Alex chuckling under his breath as he scratched Bailey’s neck and ears. By the time his pet stopped, the things he’d pictured had lost much of their original impact. What remained tore him between telling his parents what happened and hoping for another option.

If he did tell them, the scars would be easy to point to, but if that wasn’t enough... His olfactory sense alone wouldn’t do it. *Am I any stronger?*

Alex got up and faced his bed. The individual wooden parts were heavy enough, but once he’d hooked his hands underneath the front of the frame and attempted to lift it, it was clear nothing about his strength had been affected. *Okay. What else could I try?*

The next idea he had was his speed. With one of Bailey’s tennis balls in hand, he coaxed him outside, pitching it as soon as he stepped onto the porch.

It rebounded off the young oak tree in the front yard, straight into his dog's jaws.

"Bailey, bring it." Alex said after a few seconds. Once the ball was back in his hands, he led Bailey into the front yard, and then faced south. "Ready?" Alex asked, prompting a bark from Bailey. With that, he hurled the ball down the yard's length as hard as he could. As his pet took off after it, Alex followed with as heavy a sprint as he could manage. It was no use; Bailey was still faster than him, and retrieved the ball before he ran past the impact spot.

As he slid to a stop in the grass, feeling assured that at least those two things about him hadn't changed, he waited for Bailey to bring him the tennis ball again. No further ideas of what to test came to him while he continued tossing the ball around the yard, but the sight of a shadow on the bay window curtains got his chest to tighten.

He'd let it slide yesterday. Only seven days were left. The more time they had to process things...but what if they stayed nearby and he went feral during the shift?

When the front door opened, his father stepped out onto the front entry, his hair messy from the cushions of his recliner.

"Hey, Dad." Alex said as he came close, Bailey close behind.

"Hey, Son. How did your shift go?"

"Alright."

"You staying up a while?"

Alex nodded before glancing past his father toward his mother. Maybe his folks wouldn't be as upset or scared with sleep so close. Maybe he could convince them to leave the house when it happened.

"You look bothered. Did something happen?"

"Eh...some guy was short with Marcus," Alex said after looking back. "Got me angry."

"Yeah, you'll see people like that no matter where you work."

"Yeah."

"That reminds me, are you working next Sunday?"

"No, the store's closed on Sundays. Why?"

"I need you to watch the house for us that day."

"Okay. Something going on?"

"Officer Baker just got promoted, so your mother and I are going to a celebration for him."

"This an all-day thing?"

“Yeah. We’ll be leaving in the morning and coming back Monday afternoon.”

Oh, no. Alex’s heart began to race. If he didn’t tell them and went feral... “You working second shift Tuesday? I can watch the house Monday too.”

“I don’t think you’ll need to.” As Alex tried to think of something, anything, to add to that statement, his father continued. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow. Goodnight.”

“You too.” As his father closed the door, the news redirected Alex’s thoughts. If his parents would be gone for at least one day, how could he convince them to stay away for another?

They weren’t party animals, but if they were staying somewhere overnight, that likely meant a long drive and alcohol. Likely no shifts to hurry home to either. Did they both have those two days off? *Mom usually works weekdays...*

Eventually, the fear that his transformation wouldn’t come until early evening on Monday became too great to ignore. The full day was the outcome he needed, with no risk of them coming back at a bad time, or at least enough time for him to find a place to shift and get away.

As sleep drew closer, Alex began to form his pitch. Casual, but insistent. That was the goal.

Dad, I insist. I’ll watch the house Monday. If you guys have that day off, go have fun.

Tuesday, September 6th, 2011 **Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous** **Days until Full Moon – 6**

When he awoke Tuesday morning however, it was 6:53 and his dad was already off to work, his mother close behind. After waving her off, Alex slammed a fist into the wooden framework of the threshold once she was out of sight. He had to work after class, meaning little casual time with his folks tonight.

Returning to his room with one set of fingers running through his hair, he looked around for something thick with Bailey’s scent to bring to class. After settling on the tennis ball, he brought it into the kitchen and set it down on the tabletop. It took a few seconds for him to notice the scents leaking from it, but bringing his head closer to the tabletop intensified them. *Perfect. A quick wave of air should do the trick.*

When he then glanced at Bailey, who was watching him like he was planning to go outside, Alex obliged him until he had to leave.

* * *

The tennis ball proved useful as a counter to his anxiety, and Alex grinded through his classes and his shift at Blue Moon. The customers he had to help provided only brief distractions from rehearsing his pitch, which he almost said out loud twice.

It was walking into the house that night that truly made his chest tighten. He had his words in mind. but if he couldn't convince his folks...

"Did you already eat?" his mother asked when Alex entered the kitchen.

"No, but I'll get something." While shuffling by his father, Alex found the scent collection of burnt gunpowder hanging around his uniform. "What rank is Baker at with his promotion?"

"Sergeant," his father replied.

Okay, good. Keep it up. "He enjoying the position?"

"Hard to say. He's got more work to do, but he hasn't complained to me yet."

"Sounds like he'll be celebrating as much as he can Sunday." Alex said.

"I wouldn't doubt it," his mother replied.

Bingo. Alex kept his smile reserved, but his pulse rose at the tone of excitement in his mother's voice. "If you guys want, I'll watch the house Monday as well. I don't mind."

"Uh...I don't think we'll be gone that long," his father said.

Damn it. "You both have that day off, right?"

"We do, yes, but we don't need to stay out all day."

Alex held off immediately responding. *Don't push it yet.* As he avoided eye contact with his folks and headed for the microwave, his mother spoke up. "Did you make plans for that day?"

"Sort of." He stalled for a moment to think of an excuse. "Might have Marcus or Nathan over."

"How's he doing, by the way?" his father asked.

"What... Oh, Nathan? He's doing fine."

"That's good to hear."

As Alex waited for the microwave to go off, he struggled to find something to continue the route of persuasion. "We'll likely be here, so I don't mind watching the house for a second day." His parents didn't respond to that.

Werewolf Tale

During the silence that followed, whether it was his gut or his heart telling him not to say more, Alex did just that.

Chapter 8 – The Company of Friends

Wednesday, September 7th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until Full Moon – 5

The next day, with his mind set on enjoying a few more hours at the skateshop after class, Alex rushed out the door ahead of most of the students. Though their scents were becoming more familiar, it did nothing to his desire to get away from all of them at first chance. Nathan was close behind, and Alex only had to veer left to direct him out of the student crowd.

“What was that you were saying before class?” Nathan asked once he’d caught up.

“One of my customers from last week showed me to a new skatepark. Damn nice place.”

“Sounds like it. How’s the comic store treating you, by the way?”

“It’s fun. Already seen my first angry customer though, which was not.”

Nathan laughed. “When people ask you about their sick pets and how they’re doing, they’re usually a lot nicer, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.” As Alex followed his friend to the first floor before splitting off to leave, he was reminded of the get-together, but didn’t say anything about it. Phone in hand and IM app open, he couldn’t bring himself to begin typing as he walked to his motorcycle. He didn’t want to say he couldn’t come, but was it worth the risk otherwise? *Nobody’s seen the scars yet... I wouldn’t have to hide them for very long.* He labored on that thought before giving it over to how close the full moon would be that day. That he couldn’t look past.

* * *

When Alex arrived at the skateshop, he kept his helmet on with the visor cracked for a few seconds to let his nose and head adjust. At least two skaters were in the park versus the three window-shoppers on the sales floor, the lack

Werewolf Tale

of familiarity in the scents near the door leaving him assuming Cameron wasn't around.

Though Walter acknowledged him as soon as he took his helmet off, Alex kept his distance, pretending to look through the nearby rack of T-shirts and parts in the cabinet, until he would be the only one standing near him. It didn't take long, but even once he got to talking, keeping from glancing at others when they moved or paying attention to the scents that kept wafting up his nose proved difficult.

"Sorry," Alex said as he pulled a tissue from his jacket pocket. He pretended to wipe his nose to give it relief from the sudden discovery of a customer's rank scent. "Of all the weeks to get a runny nose."

Walter chuckled at that. "At least it doesn't keep you from skating."

"Uh huh." *Hope this guy doesn't track that smell in the park.* Alex shot a glance at the customer who'd left the scent trail before he put forward a question to Walter. "On that though, when did you start skating? The seventies, or..."

Walter cut him off with a negative-sounding hum. "Around eighty-six, actually."

"The decade when Rodney Mullen was making waves."

"Yep, and thankfully long after the kids your age were taking apart roller skates to make skateboards."

"Whatever works, I guess."

"It was clever back then. Would still be, I think."

"Yeah... Something like that would've been better than the 'Wal-Mart board' I had at first."

"Oh," Walter replied as though he had heard that story many times before. "I take it you noticed it was bad pretty quickly."

Before Alex answered, he heard a customer come in. Seeing a mother and her son, a board tucked under his arm, Alex spotted the straight contour of the deck in seconds. After Walter acknowledged her, and the mother said she was just looking around, he continued.

"Sort of. An older kid noticed me riding it and showed me how cheap it was. And it looks like this kid has one of those boards."

Walter took a second look. "Yep. Good eye."

"Hope he hasn't had it long." Alex then watched the kid and his mother walk over to the parts counter, the trucks on display seeming to be their focus. *He's a newbie, alright. Probably got that thing as a toy somewhere.*

Alex then pushed away from the counter and followed the trail the two had walked, stopping when the kid's mother asked if he worked for the store.

Though Alex shook his head, he spent the next fifteen minutes detailing to them the poor quality of the board. The kid's reactions to what he said was a near parallel to when he'd been in his position: interest, then disappointment as he was told, however indirectly, that what he had was a waste of money. The mother's was what he expected: confusion at first, then shock and surprise.

The result was the two leaving the store, saying they would be back once they'd gotten a refund for the junk board. The smile Alex gained was shared by Walter when he looked back at him.

Once inside the skatepark, and past the patch of repulsive scents he'd found before, Alex followed the same routine from the day his olfactory sense changed. He kept on the move to make it harder to focus on aerial scents, and stayed high up, either in the viewing area or atop a ramp or quarterpipe structure, when he wanted to relax.

When his thoughts returned to the meet on Saturday, the idea of skipping it continued to build until something occurred to him. His parents had begun to show suspicion about his behavior. Would his friends do the same if he skipped the meet after so long a time of not saying yes or no to it? He and Marcus were both off that day, and no believable excuses otherwise came to mind.

Where's she thinking of holding it? Alex pulled his phone out, got his IM app up, and pulled up the old texts between him and her. If it was at the mall, a theater, or anywhere else that was usually crowded, he'd skip.

Alex S: Catherine, is everyone coming
on Saturday?

Alex's pulse rose a few beats as he hit send. Catherine's reply came around a minute later.

Catherine W: So far, everyone except you.

Alex S: Where are we meeting?

Catherine W: Nathan's place.

Werewolf Tale

Seeing that response calmed Alex's nerves; Nathan lived just a few blocks from his house. *OK, good.* To be certain, he sent a follow-up text.

Alex S: You thinking of seeing a movie or something like last time?

Catherine W: Nah. Figure we'll just order a pizza and game for a few hours.

More of Alex's unease melted away. He could afford a few hours of that.

Alex S: I'll be there. What time?

Catherine W: 6:30.

Alex S: Alright. Thanks.

Catherine W: See you then.

* * *

Saturday, September 10th, 2011 **Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous** **Days until the Full Moon – 2**

As the days leading up to the get-together with his friends ticked away, Alex's focus returned to his parents. He was almost certain he'd not said enough to convince them to stay out an extra day, but when the chances he had to nudge them on the subject arose, his words would freeze in his throat and his skin would tighten, as though his confidence was being drained out of him. Or his gut was telling him to not blow what chance he already had.

Then Saturday came, and Alex awoke to crushing pressure behind his eyes. As he massaged his eye-sockets, the pressure held and then began to fade, his phone serving as the first clock he checked once his eyes opened.

4:47? His concerns about how bad the pressure had to have been to wake him up so early were soon replaced by him realizing how bright his room was becoming, despite his blinds being shut and barely any moonlight getting in.

Alex switched on his desk lamp after a moment, the bright yellow tint making him squint and shield his eyes until he shut it off again. At first, all could see were the black and dark blue outlines of his furniture and other large objects, but as the seconds ticked by, the black faded in favor of a steadily lightening blue, and the fine details of the objects he could see, including where colors began and ended, soon became clear.

Alex laid a hand over his chest as his room continued to brighten. Was this the last permanent change until Monday? That question, and the fear it revived, kept him awake and resting his eyes past the moment when he heard his parents start to stir.

What he found after the sun rose was no change to his color-vision or the color of his irises, which left the insides of his eyes as what had been affected. A point that brought on a shiver. Canine eyes shined in direct light.

Wait, will my eyes even do that? After recovering his bedside flashlight, Alex returned to the bathroom, shutting and locking both the hallway and shower room doors before taking a breath and clicking on the flashlight. The LEDs produced a crisp, white beam, which he slowly maneuvered in the mirror towards his eyes.

As the weakest parts of the beam reached them, Alex's hands started to quiver; the insides of his eyes shined a faded yellow, even with weak direct light. *Oh, shit.* He swallowed hard, and his limbs continued quivering after he tried to convince himself that not every light source would cause that.

* * *

6:00 came quicker than Alex wanted. As his skateboard propelled him down the streets, the streetlights resetting his night-vision every so often, he snuck a few glances at the rising moon, hoping nothing would happen to make him leave early.

He arrived to find only Nathan's sedan in the driveway and rang his doorbell. The sound was quickly replaced by the barking of Ginger, his yellow labrador.

"Hush, girl. Sit." Nathan's commands were followed by him opening the door. "Hey."

"Hey, man," Alex replied. With the scents of the house already swarming his nose, he was quick to find those of Ginger's pelt. Though it wasn't unfamiliar, the anxiety the scent brought out got his head to turn away and delayed the rest of his sentence. "Where's Marcus?"

Werewolf Tale

“He said he had to get something. Not sure what.”

“Oh, okay.”

“C’mon inside.”

As Alex crossed the threshold into the house, a chill gripped and tensed his skin. Ginger’s scent was even stronger inside.

“You thirsty?”

“A bit. Just water is fine.”

While Alex followed his friend into the kitchen, he noticed Ginger trailing them, but keeping her distance from him. As they set out the snacks and drinks on the living room table, he continued to keep his eye on her, just in case she reacted to him more noticeably than Bailey. Instead, Ginger made it apparent through the lowering of her head, multiple licks of Nathan’s hands, and how close she stayed to him, that she wanted her owner’s attention, and likely protection.

“Wonder why she’s being so loving all of a sudden,” Nathan said as he stroked her. Alex shrugged in response, but with Ginger’s reaction, he now had a better idea of what Bailey had seen in him before.

Marcus and Catherine’s arrival produced the same behavior with them.

“You bought it, didn’t you?” Nathan asked after the front door was opened. Alex looked towards him and then Catherine, seeing a large black device with a couple of wires in her hands, along with an XBOX game case.

“Yep,” Catherine said, smiling while holding up the game. “Figured we’d all get some fun out of it.”

“Dance Central, huh?” As Alex took the game case and looked over it, the amount of movement the game required got him to rub his right arm. An inch of slack was all he had. He shifted his T-shirt a little in response.

* * *

“Almost there, Marcus,” Catherine said as he began to finish up one of his dance routines. From the couch nearby, Alex and Nathan watched, laughing as their friend flailed his arms and legs around, trying to keep up with the moves that were coming. He missed some throughout the last chorus, but made up for it in the last few seconds.

Pumping his arms in success, Marcus stepped back from the TV and turned to Nathan, his face and short black hair wet with sweat. “You’re up, Elvis.”

Alex let out a short laugh and smiled as his friend replied. "If you think I'm shaking my hips for this thing, you're nuts."

"Fine. Do a Lady Gaga song then."

"Not much better, man," Alex said. With his friends and himself buzzed on soda and an hour of gaming, the fears he'd been harboring throughout the day had considerably weakened.

"Actually, I know just the one," Nathan said, walking in front of the TV. Picking one of his favorites, he maxed out the difficulty and got himself ready to start.

When he finished, Alex was next. He'd heard a song during the last rotation he liked, which became his choice. With a stretch of his back, and a check of Ginger's location, he set the song's difficulty to the second highest.

"Good luck, man," Nathan said. "Don't get your legs twisted."

Alex scoffed, then replied in jest, "Just watch me."

The song started off with a long set of up and down body moves, and as it went on with more and more arm-flailing, Alex grew more and more absorbed in what was in front of him. Knowing his friends were watching him as much for screw-ups as good play, his stiff movements eased.

As the song wound down, he followed the pose cards on screen as best he could, trying to stay ahead of each move that was coming. With the end in sight, he followed the last side-to-side movement, ending with his left arm flying back and his right in front of his face.

"That was fun," Alex said, straightening up and wiping the sweat from his face. "Catherine, I think you're up." Letting her take the player spot, Alex sat back down on the couch. When he reached for his soda, he felt Nathan tap his shoulder; the look of worry on his face was clear. "Something wrong?"

"No, but when did you get those scars on your arm?"

Alex's pulse jumped. *Oh, crap. When did...* He had to have seen it during his last routine. His throat locked up as he clenched a hand and the seconds went by.

"What happened? Those looked pretty bad."

Alex felt trapped. He could've kicked himself right then. No lie would help him now.

With Catherine's song nearing the halfway point, Alex reached for his tee sleeve, with as steady a hand as he could muster, and pulled it back to reveal only half the scar's whole. Nathan's wince at the healing job came before a fourth had been shown.

Werewolf Tale

“Holy shit.” His voice was barely carrying over the loud music from the game.

Alex nodded as best he could, anticipating another question to follow that statement. Instead, he heard Catherine exclaim something in shock, and his attention drifted to her as she paused the game, the house turning silent in turn.

“What?” Marcus asked.

Catherine pointed him towards Alex’s exposed arm. “When did that happen?” she asked, leaning on the table.

As he was surrounded by his friends, Alex felt his anxiety rush back, as badly as it had been during class. He wanted to back away, get out of this cornering, but his legs felt loaded with lead. *Not here. Damn it.*

“About two weeks ago,” he finally replied, dropping his sleeve in turn.

“Two weeks ago... That night you stopped in front of my driveway?” Nathan asked.

Alex nodded, and then blurted out the first thing he thought of. “I’m fine. Wasn’t too deep a bite.”

“That didn’t look like surface damage to me,” Marcus replied. “That looked pretty serious.”

Alex cursed to himself as Catherine followed up. “What did that? Did you see it?”

“The pelt, mostly. Black, maybe dark grey, and tan.”

“Was it a wolf, or you not sure?”

Alex’s answer hung in his throat at first, his heart still racing. “Had to be.”

“Oh boy.”

Marcus broke the silence that followed. “If you stopped outside here that night...”

Alex jumped in to cut him off. “I didn’t go any ER. I went home, patched it up on my own.”

“Are you serious!?”

“If I’d gotten sick, I’d have done that. I’ve patched up bites before.” With expressions of worry lingering on the faces of his friends after saying that, Alex’s throat locked up and he turned his eyes away.

The silence remained until Nathan spoke, asking what everyone wanted for pizza. Thankful to have a different topic brought up, Alex felt the weight on his chest lax. As the night wore on however, despite the pleasant company, he couldn’t help feeling that his choice to come was a huge mistake. How

often he saw his friends glancing at his arm with barely a word made the feeling worse.

Chapter 9 – The First Transformation

Sunday, September 11th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous
Days until the Full Moon – 1

The next morning, as Alex stood under the warm stream of water from the showerhead, the approaching departure of his parents kept his thoughts on what he needed to do if they came home before he transformed on Monday. He couldn't stop imagining his parents refusing to leave him alone, or freezing in fear, when the time came, or his father pulling his gun on him if he did go feral. The mental image of him with jaws agape and lunging for his father before taking a bullet and frenzying or being crippled drew a gasp and a hand over his throat.

His attempts to combat those fears by remembering that he and Nathan had been alone with Angela that night, and that the werewolf had let him go, went in vain. Restraint had been shown both times, but not until damage had been done. For a moment, Alex saw reason to think he wouldn't go feral, but then questioned why Angela had been killed and he spared but bitten.

Had the werewolf planned to kill him, but then backed off at the last moment?

Its snarling face flashed back to mind, and along with it, the worried expressions of his friends from the night before. Nathan's stuck in mind for longer, and as a realization about that moment clicked, Alex covered his face in shame. Of all the people he should've warned over the last few weeks, and yet didn't...

The patter of water disguised the few sounds that escaped him as he held his rushing emotions back. He could take solace in the fact that his friend hadn't been attacked, but he, Marcus, and Catherine were still under the impression that wolves were responsible, not something more.

Once out of the bathroom and back in his room, Alex tried to pass the time reading or gaming. The guilt that had been left by his recent train of thoughts kept him from enjoying them for long.

* * *

With the arrival of 12:47, Alex noticed his father, dressed in uniform, standing near his door.

“I thought you had the day off.”

“Your mother and I are going to a remembrance service before we meet everyone.”

“Where? In First Colony?”

His father nodded. “You want to come?”

The bad gut feeling that resulted from thinking about how many people would be there, and where such an event would take place, got Alex to shake his head. “I’ll watch it on the news.”

“Alright. We’ll see you tomorrow then, Son.”

After exchanging hugs and goodbyes with his folks, Alex closed the front door behind them, watching through the glass part of the door as they drove off. Bailey sat down next to him before he moved again, his tail wagging as soon as Alex looked at him. “Outside?” Bailey’s tail wagged faster. “Thought so. C’mon, boy.”

Despite the fun he had throwing Bailey’s tennis ball across the yard, and showing him some love between each throw, hints of his earlier thoughts continued to resurface and pull at his heartstrings, going feral chief among them. Though he didn’t believe he’d be murderously feral, he’d still be without control of himself for who knew how long.

“C’mon, let’s get inside.” Alex said as he took a breath to steady his nerves. Some good food felt in order right about then anyway.

As he opened a roll of salami, Bailey, who’d since sat down next to him, started sniffing at the air and lolling his tongue. After noticing it, Alex took part of one of the sliced circles of meat and held it near Bailey’s nose, watching him follow it without jumping to bite it from his hand. “Good boy.” Bailey then snatched the meat from him and resumed his at-attention stance after eating it.

“Okay. Lay down,” Alex said, and his pet listened, going to his chest and front paws. “Good boy. Can you speak for me?” A quick bark followed, and Alex handed the rest of the treat over before rubbing his pet’s ears. “Atta boy.”

Werewolf Tale

After he knelt to continue petting him, Alex began to wonder how Bailey would react to seeing him as a gigantic wolf. He'd been noticeably worried several times before, but would that eventually mean he would run and hide or try and fight him? The longer the idea of going feral and slaughtering his dog lingered in his head, the tighter Alex's throat got, to the point where he had to start massaging it.

As tears surfaced in his eyes, Bailey started whining as if he knew something was wrong. When Alex looked him in the eyes, he coaxed him over and then wrapped his arms around his pet's furry neck. "You'll be fine, boy. No matter what happens to me." Bailey was quick to shuffle from his grip after that, but then closed in and licked his face. "Thanks. I needed that."

With no urge to stop Bailey from licking him, Alex used the good feelings the gesture gave him to clear his head and think of a way to safeguard his dog. Locking him in the garage came to mind first. He'd whine after realizing he'd been tricked, no question, but having a sturdy door between them was far better than simply leaving him outside and hoping for the best. *Yeah, that'll work.*

Alex went back to stroking his pet after the plan was settled, and then retreated to his room. For a while, one of the fantasy novels he'd been reading held his attention, then his XBOX and the game he'd been playing before his parents left took over.

His pulse picked up a while later as he approached what he thought was a powerful enemy, and then lined up his rifle's scope for a headshot. The shot he made took off less than half the avatar's health, the sounds of suddenly alerted creatures around him making him grip the controller harder. He then switched to a machine gun and unloaded its belt of rounds at the coming swarm of mutant geckos. Less than three went down before his character went with them.

He tightened his grip on the controller in frustration, hearing something scratching the plastic, and feeling a strange tingling in his fingers. Before he could think too long about what was causing the numbness, he began tasting something slick and warm, with an aftertaste of iron. When his tongue ran across his teeth to his canines, he nearly froze stiff. The tooth he felt was longer and sharper than before. Fang-like.

"Shit." Alex dropped the controller and reached for his mouth, only to be hit by another shock when he saw his hands. Bone-white claws were sprouting from under his fingernails.

His heart-rate skyrocketed at the sight. *What the hell? The full moon's tomorrow.*

Swearing repeatedly, his breathing going ragged, Alex tried to maintain composure despite trembling like he was caught outside in bitter cold. He paced around his room, unable to look away from the horror show his hands were turning into.

The muscles throughout them were thickening by the second, the tips of his fingers reshaping for the still-forming claws. Patches of skin on his palms and fingers ballooned and thickened, the pigmentation of those spots darkening in turn. Torn between fear and sadness, Alex held his hands still as best he could, to no avail.

It was the sound of Bailey's whimpering that at last ripped his attention away; his dog was shirking back toward his bedside bookshelf. *How much longer do I have?*

"Bailey. You're going outside. Now." As Alex closed the gap, Bailey retreated further, his tail tucking and his ears and head dropping. "Bailey, I said..." Alex's speech was cut off as the muscles and organs in his chest constrained. He let out a painful groan, almost a growl. Bailey backed up again until he was pressed against the wall and his bookshelf.

With his hands over his chest, Alex could feel his muscles shifting and tightening with every breath. The same sensation moved out to his arms and legs. To him, it felt like someone was digging under his skin and manually moving his muscles around. As he fought the sickness rising in his stomach from that feeling, one paw came close to his mouth in case his stomach started to empty.

As his clothing became tighter, Alex switched his priorities to removing everything from his waist down. His tee came off afterward, with an effort bordering a complete rip-off. With just his necklace left, his claws and pads keeping him from working the clip; the thought of what might happen if he cut his skin with it kept him from tearing it off.

With his muscles continuing to move in ways he wasn't telling them to, Alex felt his head get hot, and the pressure on his sinuses and brain came back. With the taste of his blood still in his mouth, he made for the restroom, ignoring the mirror with every ounce of restraint he had, and opened the cold faucet.

Seeing his newly-formed paws in brighter light as they cupped for the water worsened the trembling around his body. His claws were pale—for all he knew, they had been made from the bones of his fingertips—and his palms

Werewolf Tale

were now dotted with blackened, tense skin, the stubs of white fur strands appearing where his pads had not formed.

When his face came close to his cupped paws, his nose bumped into his hands before he got a drink. It was softer and flush with the front of his face, rounded like a canine nose. Once he got to drinking, the water went down nearly as fast as the sink produced it, his still-growing fangs making him wary of biting himself, and the visible streams of red leaving him fearful of how much blood he'd lost through his mouth.

As his headache weakened from the continued drinking, Alex began to catch his breath, though his pulse refused to slow down. Feeling his chest with his new massive paw, he barely counted ten beats before he was struck with pain throughout his calves and thighs—the kind of pain in line with a rod being shoved through his muscles. Though he tried not to scream, Alex fell to his knees in front of the marble counter, his breaths coming erratically, and his sweat-drenched skin making the stone feel colder.

When he got back to his feet, his heart still beating hard and fast, Alex returned to his room, finding Bailey inching towards the door, his ears still folded back. His pet whined and backed away the second he saw him, into the same frightened pose. Alex got out only half of Bailey's name before he stopped talking. His voice had deepened considerably, and what little speech he'd heard was underlined with a rumbling. Something almost growl-like.

With another glance at his pet, Alex gave up on trying to coax him, hoping instead that he wouldn't pass out and wake up to find Bailey's flesh in his mouth.

As he felt his ears start to move up the side of his head, their shapes and size changing all the while, a jolt ran down the length of his spine to his tailbone. Alex reached back, feeling the bone pop out and a column of flesh grow past his fingers. When the jolt ran back up his spine, an itching akin to ants crawling out of and across his skin was right behind it, starting from his spine and going outwards, around his chest and hips, down his arms and legs and up his neck.

While he rubbed what part of him itched the most with his massive paws, he watched the growth of fur strands spread outward, down his limbs, and toward his paws and feet, white, grey, and brown making up their colors.

His breathing eased as the itching lessened, but along with the pace of his heartbeat, and the growl-laced breaths he took, his new ears were catching something else: bones cracking and popping.

The tiny movements around his face and jaw were the first he noticed, and tears ran from his eyes as his uncertainty and fear rooted him to the spot.

When he did move again, Alex remembered the look of the werewolf's legs too late.

The bones in his feet gave after one step with a loud set of crunching cracks, forcing him to his knees after he caught himself with the foot of his bed. Hot, crushing pain radiated out from his feet, running up his legs to his head. An unhindered yell of shock, a roaring growl, escaped before his breathing became rough and uneven again, the pain drawing out his memory of breaking his leg years ago.

As his eyes clamped shut, despite one a paw covering his face, his pained growls kept sounding. With his arms starting to tremble again, Alex then let himself down onto his back. How cold, frightened, and alone he felt as he lay there spiked, the thought of his parents seeing him like this making it worse. He soon pulled his injured limbs closer, fearing he'd crippled them. The lack of warmth from running blood on his skin didn't help ease that fear.

Now worried he was at risk of another broken bone shock, Alex tried to focus on the werewolf and what he knew of canine skeletal structures—the metatarsals in his feet, the sternum and ribs in his chest, and his skull and jaw. All of those canine bones were different from human shapes. With his metatarsals already broken, but his skull and jaw growing numb, he assumed one of them would change first and braced himself.

He lost track of how long it took for the first part of his skeleton to take a new shape, but he felt it first in his feet, the claws growing out before the rest shaped into a set of hind paws and pads. Though the hot, stinging feeling of the muscles around his recently broken bones wasn't as intense as he'd feared, the sensation of his flesh being stretched by a force he couldn't see ran up his spine, making his skin crawl under his fur.

His sternum and ribs came next, with his ribs snapping free of his sternum in pairs, and pushing outward behind his muscles, his chest cavity swelling in turn. His sudden fear of breathing too much for fear of further injury was tested with each second, and only when he no longer felt his ribs moving did he attempt to take a full breath.

With his eyes still closed, Alex let them open a little. The pooled tears watered his vision, and his only attempt to move an arm went nowhere, the whole of it feeling at least twice as heavy as he knew it should've been.

He hadn't blacked out yet, though he feared the moment was close.

Werewolf Tale

As the once-subtle popping sounds from his skull and jaw bones grew louder, Alex opened his mouth. Seconds later, with a final pair of snaps, he felt his jaw go slack. What followed was both that bone and the front of his skull pushing outwards and shaping into a longer muzzle. As his jawlines reformed to match, his tongue lengthened and his fangs and teeth gained more mass.

Though he felt every movement and change, Alex was too wracked to do anything but moan. He tried to ignore how animalistic his moaning sounded, and the blood he could once again taste around his fangs, hoping that this would be the last thing he'd have to suffer through. As much as he'd gone through already, he had to be approaching some kind of end.

And it wasn't long before he felt his face stop reshaping. A few final snaps from bones resetting followed, and then everything was quiet again.

As his muzzle closed and he got in a swallow, the damp-with-sweat feeling of his skin and undercoat stood out as sharply as the head-to-paw soreness around his body and joints, and how much heavier his limbs, much less the rest of him, felt.

But as he kept breathing, it became clear he'd made it. No more itching, no more breaking bones, no more puppeted muscles, no more constant, battering pain.

With a lick of his lips with his now-longer tongue, Alex took a few breaths through his nose. He smelled Bailey along with some new scents from the carpet, but when he opened his eyes and turned his head up, he couldn't see him. He had to still be cowering near his bookshelf, but thinking about his pet watching his transformation made his heart clench. He didn't want Bailey to see it any more than anyone else he cared for, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

As his head relaxed and his eyes closed again, Alex heard the links in his necklace jingle against the floor and each other. Though he couldn't see it with his new muzzle blocking his view, he could feel it around the fur of his neck. It hadn't snapped off, despite how much thicker his neck felt.

The sound of Bailey's footfalls on the carpet sometime later got him to reopen his eyes. His dog offered only a glance at him as he left the room, but his fully-tucked tail and lowered head and ears said it all. *I'm sorry, boy. You didn't deserve that.*

Alex continued to lie on his bedroom floor for a while longer, a smile to himself eventually coming on. He was still in control, even this long after the transformation was over. Breathing a great sigh of relief and feeling more

upbeat, he soon moved to get off his back and pick himself up, stopping briefly when he saw the massive hand-like paws he now had. His fingers felt a bit shorter, as if to make up for the length of his claws, but his thumbs had remained opposable.

As he moved onto his paws and knees, the wobbliness left over from the shock of the shift, his breaking bones, and how much heavier his body had become, had him spread his limbs out to help him stabilize. When he at last did, he reached for the top of his bedframe and pulled himself up. Despite his muzzle blocking most of his lower view, as he found his footing, he noticed the most dramatic changes immediately.

He wasn't standing as tall as he felt he could, but he'd gained at least a foot of height versus his human form. His steps were heavier than his human form, with all his weight concentrated in his hind paws versus his feet and ankles. The lack of feeling from his big toes, as though the other eight had taken over for them, also got his attention. *Did they turn into dew claws, or...?* He didn't want to look to find out.

As the AC turned on, the cold air from the vent in his room blew over his new pelt, ruffling every strand down to the finest ones and relieving his trapped body heat. His sore jaw was then cupped in one paw, his new teeth and fangs closing neatly around each other as he closed his muzzle. The muscles he could feel working and holding it as it opened again, and the thought of what he could do with such a muzzle, made him shudder.

When Alex at last checked the time on his desk clock, he panicked as he saw it was 3:56. With no idea how long the shift had taken, the question of why it had happened now instead of Monday stuck out most. How much noise he'd made when his bones broke left him somewhat thankful that all the windows were closed, but then his thoughts returned to his parents. If they hadn't left when they did... And what if his self-control was only temporary? Shaking his head at that thought, Alex decided to try once more to get Bailey outside.

His first real steps with his legs in their new canine shape were wobblier than he expected, forcing him to use his furniture, the walls, and then the doorframe for support as he headed for the living room.

When he emerged from the hall to find the bay window's curtains open, Alex swore to himself and dropped back to all fours, spotting the top of Bailey's pelt before he did—he'd taken to lying down near the couch. Once the windows were blocked, he turned around and approached his pet.

Werewolf Tale

Bailey went back to his feet as he came close, lowering his body and ears and tucking his tail as he had before, but also curling his lips back from his teeth and fangs. Alex froze for a moment when the first of Bailey's growls sounded, lifting and holding out a paw for him when he felt he could. The growling deepened to a rumbling snarl as it came close and Alex withdrew his paw, his heart clenching at the sound, along with his throat.

When Bailey refused to stop snarling, at a loss for how to calm him down, much less get him to go anywhere, Alex took a step back. Three of them put an end to the noise, though Bailey's defensive posture didn't relax.

Chapter 10 – What Does It Mean...

Sunday, September 11th, 2011
Moon Phase – Waxing Gibbous

With silence returned to the room, the sudden growling of his stomach pulled Alex's attention away from Bailey. The growling persisted for nearly five seconds, the movement radiating into his chest muscles, and into the paw he laid over his abdomen.

The snack cabinet was his first stop after that, the scents of everything inside prompting a lick of his lips. The first thing he grabbed, a wrapped granola bar, proved a hassle to open with his pads, forcing him to use his claws. The scents the wrapper had contained rushed his nose once it was punctured, but after his first bite, the piece fell out of his mouth. He tried again and eased the piece back towards his molars with his tongue. Too far back, and he coughed it back out.

After a moment to consider how Bailey would eat his food, Alex tilted his head and took another bite. The piece settled into what remained of his cheek and he ground it down, finally swallowing it with a lick of his teeth.

Three bars later, his stomach was no longer growling, though his hunger was still going strong. Thinking some water would help, he went for a glass and filled it from the fridge dispenser. As awkward as getting a glass of water as a werewolf felt, he quickly found that not only was his first choice of glass too small for his new muzzle—the rim of it kept bumping into his nose and fangs—but that trying to drink like a human was a prelude to the liquid going up his nose, dribbling out of his muzzle and splashing over his pelt.

As he wiped himself off, Alex noticed Bailey's half-filled water bowl on the floor behind him. A chill ran through his nerves as he thought of lapping at his drinks. *Is that how I have to drink when I'm like this?* Seeing no other way, he refilled his glass to the brim and held his muzzle close, letting his tongue slide from between his jaws. His first lap with as good a cup as he could make with his new tongue did little but splash water outside the glass

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and over his paws, his second and third attempt ending the same way, each one building the feeling that he was wasting his time.

With an open sigh, which sounded close to a rumbling growl, Alex set the glass aside to think. Something had to be able to bridge the muzzle he had. Straws eventually came to mind, and he searched out a box in the pantry. With one placed between his front teeth, he got mostly air with his first attempt. He then repositioned the straw to one side of his jawline and tried to seal his lips. The water came in a steady stream once he managed it, prompting him to add two more to increase the flow.

Two glasses later, the fridge was his next stop, his fur keeping the cold air off his body effortlessly. The leftovers of the last few days were what he found first, but what was in the meat drawer almost made him salivate: two packages each of hamburger patties and hot dogs.

Ripping the plastic from the first package of patties, he almost took a bite before he stopped himself. He couldn't eat this stuff cold and raw. Or could he? Deciding not to tempt it, he set one on a plate and in the microwave on its highest setting for three minutes, hoping that would get the slab warmed up enough. That three minutes without food made his stomach start growling again, but it turned out to be too short a time; the core of the patty was still ice-cold.

Tearing the slab into eighths before deciding on breaking them into even smaller chunks, Alex tried again with four minutes. This time it was enough, and he took the first piece in his paws, trying not to flinch at how hot it was, or wrinkle his nose at how undercooked and laced with sodium the meat smelled. After just one of them, the hot dogs were zapped in clusters of three, each one eaten in less than a minute until only half of the second package was left untouched.

The chunk of lasagna that followed gave the meat and fillers enough time to settle and relax his hunger, but with no idea how long it all would last, Alex went for some soda to finish his impromptu meal, the carbonation filling what space was left in his stomach.

After putting up what he'd not eaten, Alex was left wondering what to do next. It was still bright outside, though the time had jumped to a quarter to five. How sore and fatigued he was soon made a nap feel like the best plan, more so when he let a yawn slip by. His lingering fear of going feral resurfaced as he headed for his room, though the fact that it hadn't happened because of the shift, or the passage of time, helped reign in his unease.

At the doorframe of his bedroom, Alex found Bailey sniffing at the carpet, his heavy steps drawing his dog's attention. He lowered himself to all fours after his pet's stare held for a few seconds, and moved closer to offer a paw again. This time, Bailey pulled his lips back and growled, but didn't shirk back, fold his ears, or tuck his tail. *Better not risk it.*

After his paw was withdrawn, Alex climbed into bed and laid back with an arm over his chest. As his eyes closed, his breathing relaxed, but not his mind. His phone going off, the front door opening, or a running engine coming up the driveway—he remained alert for any of the three until his mental lights went out. The sole dream that followed, which would push him to wake, shifted to him fleeing from his parents and the sound of gunshots, to a moment where something took over him and he began stalking his father, the one who had threatened his life.

Alex felt his heart as soon as his eyes opened. It was racing from the nightmare, making his growlish breathing uneven. The soreness he'd been wracked with before, however, had weakened considerably, and a few stretches helped even more.

When he checked his desk clock and saw that two hours had gone by, the many questions he'd been asking himself before he dozed off came back to mind, the first being how the shift had been triggered in the first place. He hadn't been doing anything strenuous or abnormal. Was it because he'd been bitten outside of the full moon? Was the day prior to the full moon, and the time the shift had started, what he had to be ready for from now on?

And why was he still sentient? Was it a trait all werewolves shared? Something only he was privileged with? If so, what was granting him that? Remembering his necklace, Alex held it in his paw, his thumb pad rubbing the bullet. As insignificant as it felt at first, he couldn't recall any silver jewelry on the werewolf the night he was bitten. It seemed in control at the end, but it still behaved like a monster otherwise.

Is this thing keeping me sane? Alex gripped the bullet at that thought. It hadn't taken much force to break the necklace's hook in the past.

With no idea how long he would stay the way he was, once he was out of bed, Alex walked the house, checking for curtains and blinds he could close and thinking about what he could do to pass the time. He had his desktop PC and his XBOX, but the keyboard, mouse, and controller all felt too small for his paws. He then gave one of his skateboarding magazines a few minutes, but found himself glancing at his window every few seconds.

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After peering outside through the glass top of the front door, sneaking out once it was late and dark enough came to mind. If he stayed in the backyard or the garage, no one would see him, but as he continued to peer across the street at the vacant, tree-filled lot directly across from his house, that location became just as appealing.

That lot's not far... Streetlight's still busted too. Alex kept watch for another minute, seeing few hints of activity beyond the odd car going past or pulling into a driveway. What his father had told him about the precinct being on the lookout for large, loose canines sat in the back of his thoughts throughout. So far he'd seen no hint of any cruisers, making reaching the lot feel doable.

When he felt he'd seen enough, Alex headed for the guest room. The room's window was little more than a sliding pane of glass, but getting one of his new canine legs to fold up and rest comfortably on the windowsill proved more challenging than he thought. Some of the soreness resurfaced when his knees or hip or ankles were too sharply angled, and how much muscle mass and height he'd gained made anything less than a fully-open window look unfeasible.

For the next half hour leading up to 7:50, Alex did what he could to keep from pacing the house, his checks of the streets outside continuing to show few cars driving down them and even fewer people walking them. After hearing no one nearby at the guest room window, his claws and pads did little more than slide along the glass as he tried to slide it open. A few tries at the metal rim got the glass to inch over—with little noise to his relief—enough to where he could see his digits doing the rest of the work.

As he came close to the other side, the scents he'd let in with the cold evening air were drawn into his nose. It took less than a full breath for the wildly contrasting wave of scents to fire up his brain and olfactory senses, to get his head to swirl and drive him to block his nose.

The scents that got past as he struggled to do so, and then backpedaled from the window, didn't let his brain relax. Four scents, then eleven, then nineteen, then twenty-eight, then forty-one, and then more were processed within a second. All ones he recognized, even if the scent was weak, and for every one of them, several others went unrecognized or lost to the rest.

Alex huffed to clear his nose as he slipped out of the room, just missing smacking his shoulder and head against the guest room doorframe. Though it worked, what the event had revealed to him left him shaking. Not only was his nose even more sensitive than what it already was when he was human,

but he'd noticed refined sugar in the scent-ocean, a scent from a refinery over a mile away from the house.

As he took a few breaths to clear his head, his phone began ringing. With it out of his jeans pocket and in his paw, Alex saw 'Dad' on the display.

Why's Dad calling me?

After a second to question it, his pulse rose. Had the celebration been called off? Were his parents coming back for something, or coming home early? First Colony was barely a fifteen-minute drive, if they were still there.

When the call tone stopped, the voicemail tone that followed it didn't erase his fears. He tapped at the screen with his claws, then his pads, neither letting him bring up the security screen. He then tossed his phone onto his bed and rushed for the guest room window. The mess of outside scents flooded his nostrils again before he blocked his nose and pulled the window open a few more inches.

Once his right leg was propped up on the sill, and the soreness was looked past, Alex gave the window another push. With the height of the window track forcing his head and upper chest to curl forward, further strain was put on his folded leg until the sill was no longer beneath it. It uncoiled as the air conditioner kicked on, the whirring of the steel fan blades masking his stumble into the fence and resultant growling grunts.

As the window was pulled closed, Alex hesitated on the last few inches. Would his parents lock the window? They usually didn't, and even if they did, he knew where the spare key to the front door was, but if he walked in on them like this...

Alex tried to forget that thought. As easy as it would be to wait for his folks to fall asleep, they'd never recognize him like this. He rubbed the bullet on his necklace again, feeling how much slack he had in the chain. *Can't risk it... Shit, fifteen minutes. Where can I hide?*

After dropping to all fours, Alex went for the garage door first. Locked, and the key was inside. Hiding by the air conditioning unit was his next thought, but the possibility of his parents letting Bailey outside, where he could easily find and possibly corner him, was quick to cast doubt on that idea. Moving towards the side gate, Alex looked out past the gaps in the wood, towards the wooded lot across the street. His night-vision, and the uncovered moon above, made most of what he saw deceptively bright, but his nose and his view through the wood planks for a bit gave him a good sense of being alone.

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With his mother's sedan parked outside the garage and close to the grass, Alex made for the fence behind the garage. The edge of the lawn on the other side was lined with bushes, and the driveway wasn't far.

The top of the fence was almost level with his eyes, making a climb over it seem easy enough, but the shape of his legs once again worked against him and his attempts at finding a foothold. Wondering if he could jump it, Alex backed up a few steps and crouched, one front paw reaching the ground as his knees bent. After one step forward, the jump he attempted put his paws and shoulders in the right spot to throw himself over, but as his legs cleared the fence, he realized he'd overshot and tumbled over, landing on his back on the other side. The thump forced the air from his lungs and rattled his ribs and nerves.

Once back on all fours, Alex sniffed the air again. The scents in the grass had been disturbed by his landing, but otherwise there weren't any standout, risk-attached scents, and he heard no one walking around. After a stop near his mother's sedan, he made his move towards the porch, the sound of a car coming from his right getting him to hurry.

As he made it to the bushes lining the porch, he huddled down, ready to jump behind them as soon as the car came close enough. His pulse slowly climbed as it came closer, and the first signs of headlight reach became visible. What caused it to suddenly jump, and ice to touch his veins, was the sound of a police radio beep.

Oh, crap. If he sees me... Alex watched the light intently through the leaves, the fender grill the first thing to appear from behind them, then the tires. He shuffled sideways before he saw any hint of the officer inside, hoping, as he dropped flat to the pebbled texture of the porch, that they hadn't seen him.

When the vehicle stopped, Alex held his breath and fought the urge to cover his head.

A second passed, then another.

No doors opened. Just more radio beeps.

With the glance he managed at what was ahead of him, he saw the wooded area get lit up by what he was certain was a searchlight. The beam swept to the right, then the left, and finally turned off, the cruiser moving again afterward. The next sweep of the searchlight beam went over the bush he was hidden behind, a handful of light streams getting past and into his eyes before the cruiser drove away.

Shivering from the close call, Alex didn't move, instead fingering his necklace once again. *Maybe they'll understand...* He sighed and covered his face when his hope about that gave out.

After getting back to all fours, and feeling reasonably certain he could get to the lot without being seen, he went for it, trying to maintain more than a trot towards the street. Both his legs pushing forward at once seemed to help, and once past the sidewalk, he made for the closest tree and circled it, peeking back towards his house. Though it wasn't far away, he already felt like he was leaving the place far behind.

Finding a spot further back to lie down again, Alex watched for any sign of his parents. His heart was still beating rapidly, encouraging slow breaths through his mouth. The odd new scents leaking between his digits slowly joined the many he'd already processed, with one that he was certain belonged to decaying tissue getting him to glance around. *What's that coming from?*

Smelling it best on his right side, he inched that direction, the direction of the breeze continuing to move him towards the source. With a few glances up and around, Alex noticed an elevated patch of dirt coming up. Wondering if it was concealing the source of the scent, how weak it became after he moved his muzzle upwind of it was enough to tell him it likely was.

Seeing no obvious openings or gaps in the mound, he picked at it with his claws, eventually unearthing signs of a buried white mouse, the disturbing and popping of the pocket of decay making his paw cover his nose again.

For a moment after, Alex did little but stare at what he'd just found. This was how sensitive his olfactory sense was? If it was this precise...

He thought back to the werewolf that attacked him. Was it still in his hometown somewhere, or had it fled after biting him? If it was still here, where was it roaming, or hiding? The area near the city skatepark was his first guess, but the thought of traveling that far to check for scent traces felt like too great a risk. He'd been lucky just now with the officer, and didn't want to risk that again so soon.

* * *

As the minutes went by, Alex continued to roam the wooded area, looking back toward his house every so often. With no way to track the time,

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he breathed an easy sigh after what felt like thirty minutes went by with no sign of his parents.

Now what? When his thoughts returned to the other werewolf, where the past killings happened followed suit. Kempner's stable, the skatepark... *Is it using the creeks to move around?* At that, Alex recalled the creek two streets away that ran south through his neighborhood. The drainage ditch it connected to was just north of the skatepark, and his high school was almost directly north of the same location.

After inching forward to get in a glance down both streets, despite seeing nothing, Alex's legs grew heavy. Two streets. The creek wasn't far. He hadn't seen any police since the previous encounter, but the moon was giving off a lot of light, and one wrong move or curious pedestrian and he'd be exposed.

It was then that he wondered why he was seeing fewer people than usual outside this late. Or was he?

Was Dad calling me about a crime around here? The first thought he had was a manhunt, which would've explained the cruiser with the searchlight, but he'd heard no hint of helicopters since going outside, which he knew the police would use in such cases. A lot more cruisers would've driven down his street in such an instance too.

After another few minutes with still no sign of activity, Alex was left to assume he was overthinking things. How quiet the streets were also built a bit of hope that he could make it to the creek without being seen. If the werewolf was still around and using one of the creeks, or another off-the-road route, he'd no doubt find a hint of it by using them himself.

It was what he could, or would, do if he encountered the werewolf that kept him in place for a minute. The mass and curve of his claws left him picturing fighting the other werewolf, though his paws made it clear how much the white and grey of his fur contrasted the dirt and grass. He huffed once to calm his racing heart. He didn't have to let it get to that. An idea of where this thing might be was enough.

If I stay low, maybe...

Alex took a few slow breaths before moving back towards the roads, watching for any headlights or people. One car pulled into a cul-de-sac halfway down the road going south, but the eastbound road, the one he needed to use, stayed silent. Once his confidence built up enough, his first step eastward, away from the tree-line, was taken. Almost immediately, his skin tightened and he felt the urge to lower his stance, as though the moon was a spotlight focused solely on him.

Every few steps, he glanced up to check the road, weaving from trees, to bushes, to behind cars, to the closest shadowy patches in his path as he went, speeding up as best he could when there was a massive gap between spots he could duck into. The extended walk on all fours also helped him find the best method of moving his new legs, the scents near the ground helping him quell the thought of getting back to his hind paws and running like he felt he could.

As the four-way intersection drew closer, relief started to well. *One more street. Doing good so far.* He then took a few more steps, past the driveway of the last house on the corner, only to notice something bright coming his way from the north. The white shine was all the hint he needed that it was a headlight and his pace quickened, his body dropping and ceasing to move once behind a thick holly bush.

As the headlight came closer, the rumbling of the engine it was attached to sounded in line with that of a truck. Only after he heard it turn east, and drive down the street directly ahead of him, did Alex pick himself up. He kept watch of the intersection for a bit, and after hearing no more cars coming, made for the creek.

Another two streetlamps beamed light down on the sidewalks, getting him to start running again. He didn't stop after he passed them. The quicker he was out of sight, the better.

Within a few yards of the creek, the raw scent of stagnant water rushed his nostrils, making him slow down and cover his nose again before he slipped over the edge and down the creek's bank enough to duck under the bridge. After finding his upright footing on the grassy incline, he began his trek south, crouching every few yards to see if any scents stood out to him.

On approach of his neighborhood park, Alex dropped to all fours and inched towards the top of the bank to peek over it. With a few seconds glance, he spotted two people and one dog—a husky, by the build and fur color—walking the trails among the trees. The sight of the dog made him step back and move further down into the creek, with one free paw over his nose. He was upwind of it, but with Ginger and Bailey's reactions to him fresh in mind, the last thing he wanted was to do was spook it. Hoping the creek would contain enough of his scent, he continued his trek south, listening for a hint of barking.

* * *

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Eventually, the creek started to give way to a deeper mouth, and Alex climbed out and stood near the corner of a fence. The bridge leading over the drainage basin was brightly lit by the moon, along with the soccer, tennis, and baseball fields of his old middle school on the other side.

With no hint of a large, black mass anywhere in his field of view, Alex took to identifying the ways he thought the werewolf would've traveled in the relative darkness. The drainage ditch had sidewalks along both sides, which ran east behind rows of houses. Their lengths were unlit and ran alongside fences at least seven-feet high. The other ways he could think of—the parking lot of his old middle school, the rear exits near the tennis courts, and the areas around the pool and skatepark—were all lit up in some way, but if the traffic was as barren around here as it was near his home...

He soon settled on a few areas that he couldn't see the werewolf avoiding, and after lowering himself to all fours, started across the moonlit bridge, the nagging feeling of being watched digging into his skin again. Once on the other side, Alex put his nose down and sniffed at the concrete. The breezes had since shifted eastwards, bringing out scents lodged in the pavement from, he guessed, twenty feet away, none familiar. With an eastward sweep of concrete and grass, which ended at a fence corner, he found nothing that stood out.

Maybe it hasn't come around here yet. Alex then hugged the fence and traveled along its length going south, for a few feet. Several rank canine scents got him to backpedal and shake his head in disgust. After moving aside until he could no longer smell them, the east length of the field produced nothing also, and he changed directions, this time going west.

It was as he approached the corner of the wall of his old middle school that a pair of scents—one skin, one fur—slowed his pace. Within half a breath, they sparked the terror he remembered from the night he was attacked.

As his pulse jumped from the discovery, Alex zeroed in on the spot where the scents were coming from, then swept his nose left and right. The second spot was to the west, and the trail the spots began to form led him behind his middle school and, to his concern, towards a lit rear parking lot. Despite no cars parked there he kept his distance, now wondering where the werewolf could have gone and how far behind it he was.

When a clank of metal sounded in the distance, he was reminded of the skatepark. Had it passed near there? After a second to think on it, Alex made his way there, his muzzle keeping close to the ground in case another scent trail presented itself.

As the area where he and Nathan had found Angela drew closer, another one did, this time going north and south—south towards a tiny but unlit park, and north around a spot-lit section of grass. Alex followed it as it wound a path towards the baseball park nearest the skatepark, but when the scent pooled and then went cold just before the entrance to the field, he was left looking behind him and wondering what it was even doing here.

The question turned over for a few seconds before the sounds of skating, and his relief at not finding the werewolf, pulled his attention towards the park again. With nothing else to do, he slipped inside the baseball field and found what he thought was the darkest spot before laying down on his chest. Though the three skaters inside the park were mostly riding around, whenever one of them attempted a trick, the urge Alex felt to skate, even for a minute, grew stronger. The mental image of standing on his board with his new legs and paws, doing a few, simple pushes to gain some speed, brought on a slight grin.

He later winced when one of the trio attempted and failed a transition into a Frontside Tailslide, his body flinging forward after the board slipped from under him. Alex almost inched forward in response to the others asking if he was alright.

Sometime later, the sight of headlights coming down the access road to the park got his attention. Thinking it was another skater, as the headlights turned away from facing his direction, the police lights on the hood and lettering on the doors became visible. The eastbound breeze also brought with it a new scent of fur.

Alex made for the open gate as soon as he realized, dropping low and stopping only when he heard the cruiser door open. Why the police were showing up here was answered as soon as the lone officer passed the turnstile.

“Hey, guys. This park is under curfew. You need to leave.”

Was that what Dad was trying to tell me?

At first, the skaters asked if they were in trouble, to which the officer assured them they weren't so long as they left. When the curfew was questioned, the response the officer gave made Alex's head run wild with questions.

“Because we've had several animal attacks around this area over the last month.”

Several? Since when? Angela was the only one before me, and that calf was just one kill. Alex swallowed hard. He'd been keeping an eye on the news

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since the day Angela was attacked, but now was unable to shake the feeling he'd overlooked something.

"You haven't seen any odd animals around here, have you?" the officer soon asked, making Alex grumble about the completely wrong use of 'odd'.

"No. Nothing's come around here," said one of the skaters.

"I see. Even so, you boys need to head home."

With crickets chirping around him, Alex stayed still until he heard the door of the cruiser once again open and close, making his move towards the creek bank as fast as he could go after that. The news of the park under curfew, and the thought of more places like it under the same rules, sat in his thoughts until he was halfway home. If he hadn't come that Friday night. . .

Ignoring the tightening of his throat, he continued towards the bridge and where he'd exited from the creek. This was enough exploration for one night. He'd seen pretty much everything he wanted to, and hunger pangs were starting to surface.

* * *

Back at home, as he worked to reopen the window, the start-up of the air conditioner pushed the inside scents out past his nose, a new collection of them drawing an old mix of concern and disgust. *Oh, man. Bailey.* With his dog nowhere in sight, Alex climbed inside. The spot his dog had marked was the wall below the windowsill, and even with the window open, the musts within the room were being overpowered by it.

Hoping his room had been spared, when Alex approached the doorway, he spotted Bailey resting atop his bed. The sight of his werewolf body made his dog's head shoot up, as though he'd been startled.

Relax, boy. It's still me. Alex inched closer while trying not to stare after the reaction, but within two steps, his dog began growling. Alex then backed off just as slowly and headed for the kitchen.

Does he really not recognize me like this? As he made a meal for himself and figured out how far Bailey's marking scents had drifted, he couldn't bring himself to believe that was the case. His werewolf scent overpowering what remained of his human one made the most sense. How he could get Bailey off his bed, and if possible outside, with that in mind became his next question.

After another glass of water and plate of warmed up hot dogs, an idea came to him: trick him with a doorbell ring, then a knock on the glass door in

his parent's room to lead him there and outside. Alex couldn't help grinning as the plan went into motion, and once his pet had dashed outside, he slipped back in and shut the door behind him. *Sorry, boy. Not having that happen again.*

Once the spot had been cleaned, enough that the scents were drastically weakened according to his senses, and he felt enough time had passed, Alex let Bailey back in. His pet was quick to settle down on the futon in the guest room, leaving him an opening to get into his own room and reclaim his bed.

His parents stayed in mind the most as sleep approached, along with the hope that he would wake to see his human skin again.