

Epilogue - What If?

Saturday, Nov. 11th, 2011

Moon Phase - Full

Time Until Human Again - 10 Hours, 51 Minutes

Shane and Michael were first to enter the pen after Alex's successful kill. Shane kept behind his father and watched as he examined the carcass. Michael then looked back towards Alex.

"You killed it, so the first piece is yours," he said.

Alex glanced at Shane. No disappointment or similar emotions showed on his face. His father had the last word, and he knew it.

Michael took the revolver and leather sheath from Alex as he came closer, then let him get into position. At first he was unnerved at the sight, but when the smell of blood reached his muzzle, his stomach reopened.

He took his first piece from the calf's front left limb—a small piece that he finished within a few bites. By then, Michael had set the revolver aside and gone for the calf's ribs. Shane went last, continuing the work his father had begun.

Alex lost track of time as the three of them ate their fill. To his relief, Michael and Shane didn't seem willing to feed near the calf's abdomen, though at one point, Shane attempted to grab another piece before his father was finished. The deep, rumbling growls that Michael sounded toward his son, and the sight of Shane's ears folding back before his body inched back, sent a quiver through Alex's body, and he pulled his next piece before Shane did.

When Michael spoke again after who knew how long, Alex reacted like the voice was meant to jump-scare him. "You both full?"

Shane took another piece in answer. Alex eyed the carcass briefly before nodding.

“Are you sure?”

Alex nodded again, now with his attention on the blood and flesh staining Michael muzzle and teeth.

“Be certain. Take a few bites more.” Michael then looked toward Shane, who only eyed him in response. “I’ll be right back.” The pen’s door was then inched open and with the revolver held in one paw, Michael left them.

“You heard him,” Shane said.

“I know,” Alex said. The spot he had been feeding from was stripped close to the bone, as were the spots Shane and Michael had chosen. He decided to take more from further up the limb.

But after a while, something began to feel wrong. Michael was taking a very long time to drop off the revolver and possibly get the tarp.

Alex’s pulse rose a bit and Shane noticed in short order. “Now what?”

“Why’s your dad taking so long?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s telling Mom we’re done, giving her a kiss and all that.”

Alex stayed quiet. For as long as they’d been out here, an engine turning over was the main thing he expected to hear.

It never sounded, even several minutes on.

Michael stayed gone too.

Alex felt a chill wash over him. Something was unquestionably wrong.

He gave Shane a look. He wasn’t so much concerned as curious.

“Screw this. I’m checking on them,” Alex said after another minute.

Shane didn’t retort as Alex left the pen, as though he knew Alex was right. After a moment, Shane followed him, staying down on all-fours.

The first thing Alex looked for once outside of the structure was the SUV. It was still in the spot where Carol had parked, and the headlights were off, but even from a distance and with fog settling into the area, Alex could tell she was missing from the driver’s seat.

He shook off the idea that she was hiding inside; Michael had mentioned nothing of the sort on the drive. There were no signs of police cruisers either, and he'd heard no gunfire.

"Let's go check," Shane said after a moment. Alex kept pace with him, splitting from him when they came close to the vehicle. He went for the trunk, Shane for the driver's side door.

A second's glance inside was all Alex needed to see the SUV was empty. Nothing inside had been disturbed, and when he tried the latch and found the trunk locked, his worries elevated into fears. He then heard Shane trying his chosen door to no avail. Alex checked on him, and found him sniffing at the seams of the door, then the ground.

"Where'd they go?" Alex half-whispered.

Shane didn't answer. He kept sweeping his nose around the gravel for what seemed like a full minute. After which, his curious look had gained a touch of concern. Shane then circled to the passenger side. That door was locked.

The hell's going on? Alex looked around some, hoping to see some hint of Michael and his wife, of where they might have gone, but the fresh batch of fog around them was masking everything beyond half a football field away. He stepped away from the SUV and into the grass, towards a tree he remembered seeing before they went for the animals.

After a glance back at the SUV, Alex placed his paws over his eyes and sighed deeply. *Calm down... Might be a good idea to wait in the pen.* Alex then trekked back, watching for Shane.

He found him staring into the SUV through the rear windows, his arms and paws resting on the glass. His face and eyes were stuck in what Alex was certain was a look bordering on panic.

Despite all the bullshit Shane had dragged him through, his expression alone was enough to summon Alex's sympathy, and the questions he wanted to ask were caught in his throat in turn.

He took a second look which revealed nothing new. If the SUV was empty, why was Shane staring into it?

Alex then patted Shane's shoulder twice, to no effect. *Don't you even think about breaking a window. If the police see that, we're screwed.* He patted Shane's shoulder again, and got only a glance out of him. Alex threw his head in the direction of the stable in

response, only for Shane to look back inside the car, and then turn his head up.

The howl Shane sounded shattered the silence around them. It lasted several seconds, and even though Alex had never heard the noise before, the concern behind it strengthened his sympathy.

No reply howl sounded, even after Shane howled again.

“C’mon,” Alex finally said when the howling stopped.

“No.” Shane’s reply was followed by a hard stare.

Despite feeling his head dip and his ears lean back at the sight, Alex persisted. “You think you won’t be seen?”

Shane began growling.

Alex’s lips then pulled back, revealing his own teeth and fangs. He spoke again once Shane stopped growling. “Exactly what else can we do?”

Shane didn’t answer, instead returning his attention to the interior of the SUV.

“There’s nothing in there.”

“And that doesn’t worry you?”

“Of course it does.”

“Then why the fuck are you more concerned about ‘being seen?’” Shane gave Alex a disgusted looking glance as he spoke.

“Because you just howled, twice.”

“And my dad didn’t answer. Why?”

“How should I know?”

Shane then took a step back, removing one arm from resting against the SUV. His snarl-curved muzzle produced no noise, but his tone was dripping with emotions of many kinds. “Then do something useful instead of standing there.”

Alex looked behind himself. He would need the tarp and both Shane and Michael to move the carcass. The field was also huge, and none of the grass nearby looked damaged.

What else could he do?

With Shane once again staring into the SUV, he asked him, “Like what?”

“Try and find his scent, or Mom’s.”

With Shane having already sniffed around the vehicle, Alex took a second to think. How would Michael have approached the vehicle? They’d stayed close to the grass going into the stable, and

couldn't see Michael deviating from that much. It was then that Alex noticed spots where something had disturbed the gravel leading to and around the van, as if to sweep away impressions.

As he lowered himself to all fours, Alex heard the animals in the stable make some noise and pulled his head up. It lasted only a second, but his head stayed up until he was certain it was nothing.

After several yards of sweeping his nose near the gravel, Alex located Michael's scent and stopped. It was a tiny trace and fading, but at least it was there. He then looked back, noticing Shane sniffing around the SUV, and the questions came. How was there no trace of him near the car?

He shook his head before returning to Shane, who was now sniffing near the grass.

"Found your dad's scent. It's like his trail disappears a few yards from the car."

Shane slowed his sniffing, as though he wanted to say something, but no words came. He had to have noticed the same thing.

"I don't know. It's like they just vanished."

Within seconds, Shane's breathing became louder, and was laced with growling. Alex noticed his muzzle curl up as well, and looked away. Even if he was only displaying distress, the idea of giving him some space strengthened rapidly and he stepped back.

With no other ideas, Alex returned to the stable. The pen's door was open, but once he reached the pen and looked inside, he found the calf's carcass gone. Only the blood pool on the concrete remained.

The hell? Okay, calm down, Alex told himself as his pulse rose. *What the shit is going on?*

He would get his answer a second later.

Alex heard something behind him: a loud clink of something heavy and metal, striking concrete. He snapped his head and spun around to find something rolling towards him, something he recognized immediately: a flash-bang grenade.

The blast went off after he closed his eyes but before he could protect his ears, leaving them ringing all the way into his head and masking his moans of discomfort.

As he reopened his eyes, he felt something close around his neck—something thin but vice-like. His gasp of surprise was caught in his throat and his paws went right for whatever was snaring him. He felt the collar, then a pole running behind him from the collar.

Whoever was holding the collar then thrust his head against the concrete floor, snapping his gasping muzzle shut. Alex got his arms propped in response and tried to throw his weight around, only to receive more pain. Something was thrust into his back and he felt his nerves start to short out, his body jerking and quivering in ways he couldn't control.

He could barely feel the pair of arms that took and bound his legs, but did feel his left arm get pinned by something. With just his right arm free, he pulled it close to his head and tried to put some leverage into his body again.

That was when he saw a black boot stamp his paw, the crushing pain drawing a snarling roar from him. Before he could move his arm again, someone else took it and stabbed something into his upper arm. The muscles around the stabbing point grew cold within a second.

“Fuck you,” Alex roared as tears welled in his eyes. “All of you.”

None of the figures holding him spoke.

Alex repeated the insult over and over, adding and removing bits as he wanted, but as the fluids he was being injected with worked their way towards his heart and brain, the words came with ever-decreasing ferocity until his mental lights went out.

* * *

When Alex awoke, his focus fell on the stink dominating his nostrils—the kind of rot he remembered from the decaying raccoon carcass, mixed with rust, old paint, and dried blood.

A second later, a cold terror replaced the warmth of his now-furless skin.

Where am I?

He stayed still and opened his eyes while trying to keep his now-nervous breathing under control. There was no light where he was, forcing him to wait for his nightvision to strengthen, if it

could. All he could see after a time was a once-white set of cupboards that were rotting from years of neglect, the paint cracking and flaking off.

What the fuck?

Before he could question the scene further, his mind dosed him with old fears and concerns—about his parents, his friends, even Shane and his family.

How long had he been out? Who had captured him?

As his throat began to lump and tears welled in his eyes, he pulled himself up from the face-down position he'd been lying—or left in. Almost on instinct, he reached for his neck. His necklace was gone. Beyond the sheet draped over his back, he'd been left with no clothing.

Around him, many tiny details were hidden thanks to the lack of light, but the macro details he could just identify.

The walls were rotting, the paint flaking off in places. Some of the tiles from the drop-ceiling had fallen and broken on the floor, itself covered in tiles that were cracked or popped up. The only things spared the decay of age were the bed he was on—which looked and felt as pristine as a new hospital bed—and a bedside table, the dark stain of its wood making it harder to see.

As he took in the details, a flicker of anger and disgust grew in Alex's heart. He cursed the people who did this to him as viciously as he could muster at that time, slamming his fist into the bedding as he did. He imagined shifting right then and there, and tearing into the bedding as an outlet for his rising anger and fears. As the seconds ticked by, his body refused to give in to his fantasies and he remained as he was.

Once his rage weakened, Alex turned his attention to the bedside table. It had three drawers, each of which he hoped had something inside. The bottom one was empty, as was the middle one. He then grabbed the handle of the top one, the filthy, rot-covered floor driving his hopes that something was inside.

What was in there was the last thing he wanted: nothing, except for an envelope.

Alex's first move after taking it was sniffing it. He could only smell toner, and what might have been dirtied skin. That avenue

exhausted, he tore the container open, revealing a single page of printer paper.

Its first--and only--printed words stood out against the solid white of the page, and revived his rage as he read them.

Be thankful you are alive.

Alex ripped the page in half and flung the halves aside. Now he couldn't help imagining tearing out the throats of the people who did this.

How gratifying that would be.

His body once again ignored his desires.

As his rage dissolved, the void it left was filled with the invisible weights of his racing thoughts and compounding fears. They grew in strength as the seconds and minutes passed, to the point where even his breathing felt like an aid to the growing pressure.

Eventually it boiled over. He had no idea how long he stayed kneeling on the bed, the sheet draped over his back, quietly sobbing for multiple reasons, but any sense of caring was too weak to take hold.

* * *

By the time Alex felt the control over his emotions returning to him, the pressure his body had been burdened with had lessened some. No longer was his breathing aggravating the sensation, and the haze of his thoughts began to clear.

A single question then became his focus: Why wasn't he being watched?

More followed. Had he been abandoned in this place? And when?

That was when the rumbling of his stomach interrupted. It lasted several seconds, the intensity driving up his concerns again. He then swallowed, feeling his neck as he did so. The tissue lining his throat felt dry and powdered, as if he'd been skating for a day and more without a drink.

All he could suspect was the same was true of his stomach, and the thought of shifting lost its appeal.

As his focus returned to his current predicament, the lack of evidence suggesting others were near, much less observing him, left him wondering if the same was true of Shane and Michael and Carol.

Until he remembered what the letter had said. To be thankful that *he* was alive.

When Alex allowed the mental image of Shane and his family being put to death into his head, his stomach turned and his breathing took on a shivering rattle. He told himself that wasn't true, once, twice, three times. Whoever wrote the letter had to be screwing with him, trying to get him upset and distracted. *Nice try, shitheads. I'm not falling for that.*

The twinge of an ache around his heart didn't leave him. Until he knew for sure, it wouldn't.

His stomach protested again a short time later, the noise serving as much of a distraction as his scattered thoughts were. An attempt to calm down and focus eventually put Alex's attention on the door to his "room". It too was showing hints of decay, though on the other side of the room, the windows were boarded over from the inside. Breaking them off could be possible, but...

Can't take any chances, Alex thought as his attention returned to the floor. He eventually figured the sheet was thick enough to make into wraps, and began tearing strips off of it. Once both his feet were wrapped, the remaining cloth was tied around his waist and he slipped off the bed as quietly as he could.

The tiles under his feet shifted easily, and the cracked grout gave off the sound of grinding stone as he made a step towards the cabinets. Despite not expecting anything to be in them, he checked them anyway, to no avail. Next was the room's door which, alongside looking rotten, was hosting a loose handle unaccompanied by any extra lock.

He barely questioned why. He just wanted out of this place.

As soon as he felt the parts move enough, Alex inched the door open. The hinges didn't squeal or grind much, but to him, it was still too loud. No footsteps, cocking of guns, or voices sounded in response however, so he resumed opening the door.

What he saw beyond the door was a lengthy hallway running in two directions. The once-white walls were decaying like the rest of

the place was, and many more ceiling tiles had fallen thanks to age. More rotting doors lined the walls, each of them with hints of signage that had fallen off them and the nearby walls.

It was then that Alex started forming a guess about where he'd been taken: some kind of abandoned hospital. Why he'd been taken here of all places sat in his mind while he was making his way down the hallway his "room" was connected to. He checked a few other rooms, finding no hints of Shane or his family, much less anything he could use or that told him where he could be.

After some time, he began to feel a sticky chill across his skin and a weakening of his olfactory senses, as though fog was gathering around him. It wasn't long before he realized he wasn't imagining it. There was fog building in the hallway he was walking through. He wondered "how" for only a few seconds before "where" took over. There had to be a source nearby.

As he continued down the hall toward a right turn, the fog gradually felt thicker, and soon he couldn't smell anything. He was going the right way. When he reached the corner and peeked around it, the source became clear: an open door. What looked like moonlight was also streaming into the hallway, lighting up the wisps of moisture it passed through.

Alex looked behind himself before turning the corner, and kept his eyes moving once he was around the corner. Everything had been smooth so far. What were the odds the assholes who'd captured him had laid traps to make sure he couldn't leave, or which would hurt and disable him? He kept his pace slow in turn, watching for floor traps more than anything. Nothing stood out, though the cold fog was starting to wear on his skin. He wrapped his arms around his chest as he continued towards the door, the last few feet feeling the most nerve-wracking.

When he was close, he waited and listened. Nothing made any sound. No sounds of wind, no crickets, nothing.

Alex then rounded the corner. The room's ceiling and one outside-facing wall had been destroyed. Chunks of both were scattered across the floor and the other things in the room, and after a few more steps, he could finally see the moon.

It was in its Last Quarter phase. He'd been out for at least a week.

The realization locked up Alex's throat and aggravated his cocktail of emotions again. The mental image of his parents freaking out at him going missing didn't help.

Once he'd composed himself again—a feat which took some time—his goal shifted to finding the ground floor. He'd passed a stairwell on the way to the destroyed room, and on the way down, he kept his pace slow, listening for anything outside of his footsteps.

When his stomach gurgled again, and for longer than before, the noise seemed to carry up and down the stairwell. No reactions to the noise reached his ears, and once he was certain nothing was waiting for him, he continued down the stairs.

What felt like the ground level came after two sets of stairs. They continued down half of another flight, to something that had to be a basement level. Alex took note of it before opening the doors to the newest floor.

The creaking of the doors and the attached hinge echoed through the seemingly dead building for a while. As they swung open, Alex's impression of the ground floor worsened. It was just as, if not more, dirty than the floor he had woken up on. Chunks of ceiling were everywhere, the floor tiles were cracking or had been ripped up, and some of the windows were broken and leaking fog from outside. The cold he'd felt from the moisture returned after a few more seconds, causing a shiver and prompting his arms to wrap around his chest.

As he leaned his head further out, it was clear the stairwell had ended at a lengthy hallway. The entirety of it reinforced his initial impressions of the ground floor, though far to his left, he could see what looked like airlock doors. Many windows along the route to it were broken and leaking the chilling fog, which could only get worse once he was outside the building.

Maybe there's some more cloth or something in this place. Alex again examined the stairs leading down to the basement level. His nightvision had long-since kicked in, scrubbing some of the darkness that shrouded the stairs leading down, but he couldn't bring himself to believe that was enough for the floor itself.

Once he'd descended the stairs, a similar set of doors awaited him. The latch moved easily, but to Alex's surprise, the doors

wouldn't open, even when he pressed his body against them. It didn't take him long to find the lock for the doors—a basic key lock in this one's case—but now he was torn between relieved and bothered.

For a moment, he imagined Shane and his family on the other side of the door. That he could believe, but still unsure of how alone he was, Alex held off on banging on the doors. Instead, he put his nose close to the gap between the doors and sniffed. Must and decay was all he noticed, even when he knelt down and tried again with the floor gap.

If you guys are in there, I'll get you out.

Though not yet a proven hope, that mindset shot a bit of warmth into Alex's muscles, and he re-ascended the stairs. The long hallway echoed every noise he made, from stepping on a loose tile to his stomach growling, and at the end of the shorter length of the hallway, he found himself in what looked like a reception area.

His attention was first drawn to the towering stone statue surrounded by planters with nothing in them. The statue was angelic in design and, sans a few chips in the stone, was untouched. The rest of the room mirrored what Alex saw in the hallways leading to it, though when he looked up, he noticed more broken windows in the roof, each allowing fog to leak in. Within the seconds that followed, he spotted hints of glass shards resting atop the tiles on the floor.

With nothing at hand besides the wraps around his feet and waist, Alex removed the larger sheet from his waist and folded it into a thick enough pad to sweep away any glass. Before moving again, he identified a few spots he could search. There was a reception desk in front of the statue, and along the walls opposite his position was another counter with a few doors nearby.

With the statue being closer, he made his way there first, the makeshift pad at the ready. When another tile made noise from him stepping on it, he looked behind himself as if following the path of the noise, and noticed something.

The floor was covered in a thin layer of dust, and his footwraps were leaving prints. The feeling he got at the thought of being followed thanks to those was immediately worsened when he

recalled the third floor. He'd no doubt been leaving prints up there too.

After telling himself to calm down, Alex resumed making his way to the statue. Once he was close, the nooks of the desk drew his attention first. Nothing but dust and cobwebs were in them. That left the cabinets and drawers.

The cabinets were both locked up, albeit with diminutive locks that he could break if he wanted to. He thought better of it after questioning how much noise that would make.

The drawers, however, were unlocked, and within both of them was another envelope.

Alex immediately sniffed them, but again, found no discernable scents.

How whoever was leaving these had left no scent for him to notice continued to frustrate him, but one of the envelopes was heavier than the one in his "room". With a single flick, he realized why: something small and hard was inside.

Alex opened the heavier one first, which contained a silver-coated key, one that looked like a close match to the locks he'd just been examining. The note it contained was put aside as Alex tested the locks. The part that was supposed to go into the lock was too fat.

While wondering what else the key could go into, he took and opened the note it was paired with. All that was printed on it were three numbers.

5 - 4 - 3

The hell is this supposed to mean? Unwilling to think on it for long, Alex put the note aside and went for the other envelope. Inside was another short message printed on fresh paper, one that allowed a clawing disgust and a flicker of hate to bloom in his head and heart.

**If you want your life back, you have taken the first steps.
Take enough of them and you will earn it back.**

Alex resisted the urge to rip apart or crumble the note, opting instead to hurl multiple, silent obscenities at the ones who did this to him and Shane's family. He only stopped when the cold of the room and the moisture sticking to his skin began to dominate his thinking. As he wrapped his arms around his chest, the next thing on his mind was where—and if—he could find something that would stand in for clothing.

The room he was in had nothing that would serve that function; after a minute, he figured that the utility closets, the surgery rooms, and if he could find one, the laundry room all felt like his best options.

Gotta find a map... Alex recalled seeing a standing display as he'd made his way to the desk, but it was clear from a distance anything useful was taken from it. The longer he tried to recall where else a map could be, the more the cold dug under his skin. For the moment he'd settle on anyplace that was warm, or at least less humid than where he was.

The room he'd woken up in would serve part of that function, and it would give him reason to test the key he'd found.

On his way back to the stairs, Alex diverted from his route twice, each time sweeping the floor and leaving holes in the layer of dust. One trail he left towards a broken window, and another towards what he was certain was a pair of restrooms.

The second diversion gave him pause when he completed it. If the sinks could produce water... But this place was clearly abandoned and if there was no power, no running water was just as likely. As he again began to question where exactly he was, Alex slipped past the stairwell doors, the light dimming as the door closed, which slowed his walking pace.

His skin warmed some as he ascended and as he approached the second floor, his curiosity about what the key in his hands could unlock grew. He'd been feeling it all the way up the stairs; its shape and length felt like a match for a deadbolt lock.

When the doors that would allow him access to the floor were found to be locked, he felt around the seam for a deadbolt, finding none until he crouched and his hand brushed something round near the floor. After feeling it for a second, he guided the key into

the hole and found it slid all the way in, but his attempts to turn the key were fruitless. The key's ridges were wrong.

Sighing quietly, he removed the key and resumed heading upstairs. The third floor was no more welcoming than the ground one, but it was slightly warmer. Once past the doors, Alex followed whatever direction struck him, the key at the ready to use on anything that he found locked.

The first locked door was a short distance from the stairs, the lock itself built into the handle. According to the plaque, the room was a staff room, but like the second-floor doors, it didn't unlock.

The "543" of the note from before sat in Alex's head for a few seconds. How many floors did this place have? He slipped back into the stairwell and climbed until he ran out of stairs. Five floors, three of them with locked doors at the stairwell.

Too bad for you fuckers I like scavenger hunts, Alex thought as he returned to the third floor, then made his way to his "room". The sight of the bed contrasted by the rot of the room itself pushed him to stay only as long as it took to warm up enough. He then walked the entirety of the floor, taking note of every door and place he could search.

In the end, he was looking at twenty-three doors, two of which—his "room" and the stairwell—were unlocked. The rest were a mixture of hospital and staff rooms, with one area in the center which looked like a reception/management desk. At the end, the one thing that began to stand out was this floor was much smaller than the ground floor, and he remembered seeing open doors to other areas while on the ground floor. Was this key not meant to be used here?

Brushing that idea aside, Alex started his second lap, inserting the key into every lock and seeing if it would unlock. His stomach growled again as the first half of the doors were checked, each one found locked. By the time he was nearing the end of the lap, he was pushing his body into the doors he tested. None of them gave, and no unique scents were leaking between the gaps in the frames and doors.

With the last door refusing to give, Alex took another look at the key. He was onto something with the door locks, as the key fit into most of them, but there was still much of the building

unexplored. The words of the notes then flashed through his thoughts, and following them, his memory of how cold and soggy the ground floor was. A shiver came on at the thought of walking through there again, but within a minute, it was clear it was his only option.

Before he reached the stairwell, the north area became Alex's goal. If this place was built the way he was thinking, that part of the building would house the surgery and ICU rooms, along with possibly more staff rooms or a laundry or linen room.

Back on the ground floor, he could feel the cold bleeding through the seam in the stairwell doors. As he inched them open, he remembered the basement level and turned around, descending the stairs to the doors he couldn't open before. He soon felt something bulky, with a knob and set of buttons. After feeling for a keyhole, no resistance slowed the key, but it didn't allow the knob to turn.

Five buttons... Assuming the number at the bottom was 5, Alex pressed three in the order he recalled from the note. The knob refused to turn. He pressed three at once. The knob again refused to turn. He started from the top instead. The door stayed locked. Again and again he tried, and each time the knob didn't turn. His head impacted the door with a thump when he gave up, the question of why he even believed it would be that easy lingering for several seconds.

He eventually returned to the ground floor with the key in-hand, the creeping cold wrapping around his skin as the doors opened. The sight of his old footprints put him on alert for any others, though his progress through the central room with the shattered ceiling dome revealed no others.

The office-looking doors on the west end of the room were his first goal. There was a second large counter in front of the alcove, on or within which Alex expected to find something, but found nothing. The cold began to direct his actions shortly after, and he moved on. Five doors were in the alcove, each at different stages of rot, though the metal parts, like the doors on the third floor, were holding up much better. The key didn't fit any of the locks.

By the third door, he was giving more serious thought to bashing the loose-looking doors down. One of the men in black

would have stopped him by now if he wasn't supposed to leave his "room". He tucked away the thought of finding and holding an axe or metal pipe as he wrapped his arms around his chest to regain some heat.

His next route took him into a lengthy hallway on the north side of the reception area. More shattered windows lined the left side of the hallway, each allowing fog to leak into the building, but here the crumbling tile floors of the reception area had been replaced with aged, foul-smelling carpet. Alex hugged the right wall as he continued, the radiating chill of the plaster on the wall a superior sensation to potentially stabbing glass into his feet.

After some distance, he stood near two sets of double doors. The outside that he could see on the left side of the hallway was a stone-laid courtyard, illuminated by the moonlight that had reached the ground, and the right was a set of doors that looked in line with an ICU wing.

Alex pressed his body into the levers of the doors, and got only a sharp feel of cold along his abdomen. After crouching, he found the key fit the lock, and the lock didn't keep it from turning.

The sudden metallic click of the lock echoed through the dead, silent hallway and out into the night. Torn between pleasure and concern, Alex got the key out, the doors opening with a much louder creaking.

What lay beyond the doors was another section of the hospital showing signs of age and abandonment, and like the third floor, would ensure his nightvision was near useless. It was warmer however, and warmth was front and center of Alex's thoughts then. He slipped past the doors and let them shut, making sure to lock them again in case someone had heard the noise.

By the time he was warm again, Alex didn't want to reopen the doors. Until he found more cloth or some kind of clothing, he couldn't sacrifice the pockets of warmth this place could offer. By the same time, his nightvision had scarcely improved, though what he could remember of where he was had been pushing him to make wraps for his hands as well. What remained of the sheet was enough to allow it. Only after some more thinking did he act, ripping off two more pieces from the cloth draped over his

shoulders. Already he could feel the loss of the fabric, but some safety for his hands would do him better.

He stood back up, the new wraps tight around his palms, and inched his way northeast to what he remembered was the closest door to him. He found the frame easily, and then the handle. It offered no resistance and lowered fully, the door giving off a high-pitched creak as he opened it. The room unleashed no new scents, though it wasn't long before his foot bumped into something. The brief feel of its texture, that of tightly packed plaster, told him it was a ceiling tile. For all he knew, the floor was littered with chunks of--

A sudden flash of light stopped everything Alex was doing. His pulse shot up in response and he caught his breath with his free hand over his mouth. What had that flash come from?

The light flashed again after what felt like a minute. This time, he managed to see what the light could show. The room was indeed littered with chunks of ceiling tiles, the walls were falling apart, and what things remained that looked even slightly useful were destroyed or rotting from age. With the next flash, he followed the cleanest route a few steps, and then waited. He progressed more with the next flash, enough to notice its origin. Something either set into or attached to one of the walls was giving it off.

After gauging its location with the next flash, Alex reached out to it. His fingers connected with something bulb-like, then what the bulb was attached to. It was rectangular, with several other bumps and sharp edges. With the next flash, its design was revealed: a circuit board, barely an inch square, with a disk battery.

Alex ripped the board and light free of the wall with some effort. As he felt the board, his fingers touched and moved a sliver of metal. The light flashed again when he could no longer feel it. He touched and moved the metal piece again. The bulb responded by lighting up.

Alex then pointed the bulb away from his eyes, out into the room in which he stood. The next flash lit up part of the room, enough to reaffirm what he had seen before. When he turned around, the light revealed something he'd yet to notice: a tall, slim cabinet next to the sink he stood in front of. It held nothing useful,

but with some kind of light now in his hands, Alex wanted to know what else was in this wing.

Once back in the main part of the wing, Alex repeated holding out the board and bulb. Now he could see several yards around him with every flash, the state of the area leaving him little choice but to move slowly. He wasn't far from the reception area—or what used to be that—and made his way there first. His stomach gurgled again on the way, and he licked his drying lips.

The reception area was in ruins, like most of the wing, though enough cabinets and sliding drawers remained to occupy some of his time. He found nothing of use in them, and sighed quietly. By then, the slow blinking of the light and constant resetting of his nightvision when it did flash was making him question if he could toggle the light to stay on. He'd felt nothing close to a switch on the board, but how tiny it was and how the board was designed were both factors he couldn't ignore.

Tucking the question away for now, he continued searching, finding little beyond the odd crumpled—and aged—paper thrown into a corner, or bits of junk. Some spots reeked of things he could not identify, and urged him back and away.

He soon gave up on the reception area and turned his attention to the rest of the center of the wing. The search for new doors was a short one, and to his relief, the first he found was not locked. Inside was a table and chairs, a sink, and other things in common with a break room. The thought of food slipped back into his mind for a moment, as did water at the sight of the sink. He stared at it longer than he wanted to. What did he have to lose? If nothing came out...

Nothing did come out. The handles only squeaked when he turned them, and the blinking light revealed the many hard-water and calcium stains over its surfaces.

After attempting to push his thirst out of mind, Alex turned toward the lockers on the opposite wall. Twelve in total, and five with locks. The locks were varied between key and dial, the former he knew he could not unlock. The others...

He held his ear close to one as his fingers worked the dial. If there was something to hear, the squeaking of the dials was drowning it out. The unlocked lockers were then opened one at a

time, the first five offering nothing. The sixth was different; after getting the rusted door to open, Alex found what looked like wadded bundles of cloth. The material was chilled and, with the first contact of his hand, gave off a must the age of which he didn't want to think on for long.

And yet, it was something.

Only after he pulled the bundle out did he realize the cloth was a mass of scrubs. The must intensified as the wrinkled mass was straightened, but Alex put up with it. Finally he had something to ward against the cold. The two pairs were by themselves too large, but as he layered and tightened them securely around his waist, and made a scarf from what remained of the sheet around his shoulders, he was able to keep the warmth of his skin close.

The rest of the room offered nothing as useful, and Alex left. The other reception area was also a mess, the few potential containers holding nothing beyond trash or junk. The final room of the central area was a one-user bathroom—he had yet to touch the knob before his olfactory sense made that clear—but with his face covered by the sheet scarf, he checked it to cover his bases.

The rooms were all that remained afterward, and by his count, there were nineteen more.

As Alex went in and out of each one, he kept on the lookout for an envelope or anything that seemed out of place. Several times he thought he had found such an object, but his subsequent searching proved fruitless. He was nearing the twelfth room when he began to ask himself what other doors his key would open. It would be easy to guess; the doors to this wing were locked by a floor lock.

Once his search of the wing was done, Alex retraced his steps to the locked doors, refraining from opening them in favor of bringing his ear near the cracks. He heard nothing for the length of his listen. The same was true when his key was inserted into the lock and the lock itself jimmied. He then sniffed at the cracks, finding nothing new.

Yet he could not shake the budding feeling that somewhere within this building, someone was waiting for him. Maybe the men in black. But someone had put things into this building that were new, and heavy, on the higher floors. He had to have much

less access than whoever put him here. How much more he could do if he was able to shift toyed with his emotions and made his current hunger and thirst feel more like a deliberate tactic to limit his abilities.

Alex sat near the door until he was ready to open it, the board and light covered by one of the wraps from his hands. Within seconds, the cold of the fog reached his skin and caused a shiver, the sight of glass on the carpet beyond the doors putting him further on the defensive. Once he was past the worst of it, the north side of the abandoned hospital was now open to him.

More fog was seeping in through the broken windows beyond the strip of carpet, his steps disturbing the pools of it on the floor. After the first turn left, it took until he was nearing a right corner for any other doors to enter his view. Instead of immediately checking that door, Alex kept walking, intending to stop only once he would walk directly into a door that lead outside. Whatever purpose this area once served was long in the past, and as he continued down the hall, he counted five, then seven, and at last ten doors.

The door he stopped at was an airlock, one with a glass pane broken on both the inside and outside doors. Beyond the glass was a concrete walkway and parking lot, and grass patches overrun with weeds and tall blades, some of both breaking through the cracks in the concrete. His vision went no further than the first row of parking spaces, even with the moon shining into the fog.

For a time, he looked over the broken panes in the doors. He could only see his arms and palms and chest and legs and feet getting sliced and stabbed by the shards if he tried to get out, and then Shane and his family came back to mind. Whatever that letter had said, if they were in here somewhere, he owed them a rescue.

As Alex turned back around, he focused on the left wall. Its doors were all locked, and as he found, so were the ones on the right wall. His key was also the wrong size. Beyond their glass windows was nothing that stood out to him, and even the scents he could notice from the cracks in the doors hinted at nothing beyond them.

Yet for a time, Alex humored the idea of taking an axe to the knobs and forcing his way past the doors. He doubted the ones who left him here would leave anything he could use as a weapon, but maybe there was a chance he could find something, if not improvise something.

For the moment, however, he had reached one end of the building and found only one lock his key worked on. Remembering the rest of the hallway by the stairs, he made his way back through the now-brighter main area and followed the hallway. He found four doors, another reception desk—though one much smaller than the one in the main area—and another set of airlock doors at the end. The panes on these were intact, and beyond them, he could just see a few empty parking lanes. On his way back, he found his key opened none of the doors, and the alcove for the reception held nothing he could use.

The message from the second letter was reread in his head. Why would he be given a key if it only opened one set of doors? Was the letter a fabrication to give him false hope? He felt his stomach and lungs take on weight as that possibility reached him, and as hard as it was, he tried not to let it upset him. The possibility and its emotional toll on him clung tight to Alex's heart until he forced himself to return to the third floor and his “room”, even if only to calm down and think.

He returned to find a new envelope sitting atop the bed he'd woken up on. The sight froze him in place, as many questions about the object came and went. It took him almost a minute to remember the dust on the floor. Upon checking, he found whoever left the envelope had swept away any evidence of their passing. It took longer still for him to move again. Even if the prints had been swept away, that still left gaps he could follow. What he found was the prints led to the destroyed room he had first seen the moon through, and nowhere else.

Alex's assumption leapt to a climber, and in turn, to the men in black from that night. The swept spots looked large enough to hide a boot print.

Now with his fears and anxiety coming back in force, Alex dreaded what the new envelope would say, and for several minutes, he refused to touch it. He did attempt to find a scent, and this time

he did. Whoever left this one had rough and dirty skin, in what manner he couldn't tell, but the fact that he found anything beyond cloth or sanitizing scents felt miraculous.

After some more time to calm down and watch his back, Alex at last touched the envelope. It was heavy like the second one, weighted on one side. Another key.

He hesitated on opening it, but once he did, he found the same contents as before: a note and a key. The key was similar in shape to the one he already had, but had different ridges. The note was again printed on plain paper.

You will go nowhere beyond where I allow.

Yeah, that's what you think. After crumpling up the note and throwing it aside, Alex set the board and bulb on the floor, in a position where he could look under the bed for something he could detach and use. What he found was the bed was too well-designed, and had no parts that looked possible to loosen without tools.

As he got back to his feet, Alex remembered the destroyed room he'd been to earlier. When he returned, nothing seemed out of place or moved, but he was certain he could find what he needed here.

With the floor littered with debris, Alex grabbed the sturdiest piece of ceiling tile he could find and used it to clear a path to the demolished walls. The chill of the fog was quick to bite past his musty clothing and cause him to shiver, but as he reached one of the walls, he saw what he was after.

Several broken pipes were exposed: some copper, some steel, some plastic. The walls left standing around them were in even worse shape than the ones on the ground floor, enough to appear as if a strong enough pull would cause chunks of them to fall.

Alex focused on the metal pipes first. After some time failing to loosen a wide one, he moved to another, a slimmer copper one with a shaped corner. The bend gave him the leverage he needed, though the squeaking the pipe gave off as it came loose destroyed the silence around him.

Now with something he could call a weapon at his side, Alex changed his focus to the new key. To his surprise, it unlocked the first door he used it on. The room beyond was similar in size to the ICU wing's staff room, but lacked the lockers. What did qualify as containers held nothing beyond garbage and foul scents.

Thinking back on the letter, its words dug a little deeper before Alex reminded himself that there were other doors he could check. The next door that looked like a staff room also opened, though he was greeted with a similar space. No lockers, just cabinets, all of which were empty.

He then began checking every other door on the floor. Only one more unlocked with the key: a utility closet. He didn't need long to see that space was also empty, pushing him to question if the scrubs and the blinking light had been placed in the ICU wing for him to find. The words of the recent note dug deeper still, even once he exited to the staircase.

The fifth, fourth, and second floors remained locked, and when he reached the basement level, he tried several more combinations, walking away with a sigh when none of them worked. The numbers from before had to mean something though.

Once back on the ground floor, he began using the key on the doors running along the hallway he emerged into. All of them remained locked, though with the pipe in his hands, the airlock doors and other windows keeping him inside began to look less hazardous. If he muffled the strikes with his makeshift scarf...

A thought tore through him before he finished. What if the men in black were watching him, waiting for him to do something he wasn't supposed to? Was that what the note was implying? Thinking back, Alex couldn't recall any footprints besides his own along the dusty floor, until he'd returned to the third floor and spotted the ones that had been roughly brushed away. That left cameras.

He retraced his steps to the central reception area, watching for anything along the walls that gave even a hint of camera placement. He found none, but now couldn't shake the feeling they'd always been there. After a time, he focused on the second reception area. None of those doors had unlocked before.

He started with the leftmost one, finding it locked, then moved down. It was the fourth door that the key opened, and Alex let the flashing board lead.

What he found was a filing room housing fifteen filing cabinets, each four drawers high and, going by the locks on each drawer, possibly locked as well. His key wouldn't fit any of them, but if he had gotten into this room, there had to be something here.

Once the door was closed and locked, he started with the drawers on his left. The first cabinet had all four drawers locked, as well as the second, third, and fourth. Starting from the fifth however, Alex found at least one unlocked. At first he saw nothing, but after pulling it out enough, he noticed a single hanging divider in the back.

It looked fresh, but didn't smell like it. And tucked inside was an aged sheet of paper.

A printout, with his face on it, under the headline: Missing Since November 3rd, 2011

Alex's heart was shaken at the image, and his body and eventually limbs started trembling as well. When Shane and his family came back to mind, how missed they would be added to the weight in his chest. Even when he put the paper down and shut the drawer, he couldn't wipe the image from his thoughts. The kind of age on the edges of the paper... How old was that sheet? With no other sheets to compare it to, Alex took another look at it, as much as he didn't want to.

The edges were yellowing and curled from age and use. How much of either was hard to say, but Alex could swear he saw this much aging on papers from his middle school days. That realization added to the tension in his nerves. This paper couldn't be that old. Feeling his chest welling with emotions, he took several breaths to hold them back.

Within seconds, he knew he was losing that fight. The images of his parents and friends rushed his thoughts, each of them working as invisible claws against his chest and heart. The fact that he still didn't know who had done this to him and Shane's family added anger to the mental wounds until he felt as if his chest were on fire.

He was thankful the door was closed when several whimpering cries got away from him.

When he regained control of his emotions, it felt as though an hour had passed. He still could not believe the printout was as old as he was thinking, but with nothing to compare it to... Alex felt his face. It was no different than he remembered. He held the blinking LED by his left hand. No changes in his skin or the veins he could see, or his palms.

It had to be fake. There was no way.

Someone had put him in this place, set things up for him to hunt for. Why would that paper be any different?

And yet, in the back of his mind, he could not fully accept that that was true.

When at last he felt ready to keep looking, Alex resumed checking every drawer. Another dozen with nothing inside were checked, then another.

On the final three, as he pulled the drawer out, he heard something rolling on the metal, and froze. A second later, Alex backed up.

Nothing happened.

He approached the drawer with slow steps, then pulled it out more.

The blinking LED then revealed something he had been wishing for: a flashlight.

Alex snatched the tool once he realized. It felt heavier than it looked. A good sign, but he had to be sure. He twisted different parts of the flashlight, eventually feeling the head loosen. As it came off, he felt it spring. Sure enough, there were batteries under the head's spring.

He noticed no leaking or corrosion on any of the parts after checking with the LED. This one was new in every way, and the beam it produced put the LED to shame. But as he looked back at the locked door behind him, he clicked the flashlight off. He had no idea how much battery life was left. He had to save it for any really dark places, like the ICU ward from before.

With his nightvision reset thanks to the bright beam, Alex went back to searching the drawers by way of the blinking LED. He was two from the last when he found another hanging folder, this one

holding an envelope with not only another key, but two papers inside. They had aged much less than the-- He put the image of it out of his mind with a head shake.

The first page was a notice of condemnation for the building. Alex was quick to find the reasons for it: structural problems and heavy presence of mold. Neither felt surprising, but then he remembered which floor he'd woken up on and the state it was in. The mental image of his bed and him falling through a collapsing floor, potentially impaling him on what lay below if not crushing him under debris, came shortly after and nausea rushed his stomach. How empty it was lessened the effect.

What he saw next allowed his old fears to mix with the onset of nausea. A date of writing on the second page: December 9th, 2019.

His lungs seized at the sight. There was no way he'd been abducted for that long.

When he sniffed the papers, he noticed some age in the material. He could barely remember what his high school papers smelled like, yet he was reminded of them as the paper's scent was processed.

No. That's not possible.

He worked to hold his emotions back from surging again. Only when he was certain the worst of it had passed did he make any moves toward the door he had locked before. He paused at the door to listen for any noises beyond it, but was met with the same silence that had hovered over this forsaken place since he'd woken up. In turn, the key being inserted and unlocking the door sounded much louder than it really was. He felt the flashlight in the pocket of the scrubs before opening the door. As useful as it would be, something clawed at his insides about what could happen if he used it outside of the room he was in.

Once he opened the door enough to see into the moonlit reception area, his nightvision received a boost. Pipe in-hand along with the newest key, he took his first steps out of the room, intending to check the ground floor doors again, and then looked down.

There were footprints besides his in the dust. Large ones, with spaces and patterns consistent with combat boots.

Alex felt the blood drain from his face at the sight and froze where he stood. He'd heard nothing to indicate they were close... His hand reached for the flashlight, but he couldn't touch it. All he had was the copper pipe.

With his limbs trembling, Alex attempted to gauge where the footprints had started and stopped. The heels and toes of the prints were obvious, and the trail led to his right, around the corner of the nook the filing room and the other doors were set in. They could have gone further down the hallway, or stayed in place around the corner. The latter refused to be shaken from Alex's mind. He had no doubt attracted them with the whimpering cries he had let out earlier.

Even reminding himself that he had stayed within the bounds of whoever the ringleader of this thing was did not help relax his surging fears and trembling body.

The new key, and if it could unlock the other doors near him, soon leeches into Alex's thoughts. His stomach gurgling again was what finally prompted him to move, but not before an idea came to him. He stepped back once, reached for the doorknob, and opened the door again, making sure it made some noise before closing it again.

His next steps were to his right, until he could move no further. A minute seemed to pass. No footsteps, no radio chatter, no activated flashlights.

Damnit. Alex gripped the keys tight as he tried to think of something else. He had no choice but to leave the alcove at some point, and what he could be walking into made his head swirl with bad outcomes.

It was when he made an effort to calm himself that an idea struck him. The keys were silver-coated, plenty reflective, and the first had served its purpose.

As he lowered himself into a crouch, Alex inched his way to the edge of the alcove, doing his best to keep from making noise. He hesitated for a moment until, with one more deep breath, he gathered his wits and then inched the key's head around the second corner.

He knew what was supposed to be in the corner of the room: glass windows and broken tiles.

The reflection on the key revealed nothing else.

Alex exhaled for a good few seconds, the tension in his chest going away with his breath. Once he'd gathered enough courage to lean his head out, the trail of prints became clear. There was evidence of two pairs, and they tracked toward the corner, with one of them pivoting in place before moving toward the south hallway.

Before he left the alcove to see where the tracks went, Alex tested the other doors with the newest key. None of them opened. The tracks themselves ended at one of the broken windows along the south hallway, and there were hints of crumpled grass beyond. His earlier worries about making a run for it came back in force, and he had to step away from the window to help calm himself.

Minutes later, Alex had confirmation the newest key was just as useless as the others at unlocking the doors beyond the ICU wing hallway. The pipe in his hand made getting access another way a tempting option, but he hesitated as the last message from his abductor came back to mind. If he broke the windows, tried to get around what the keys allowed, would that summon the men in black? He couldn't help imagining them capturing him again and knocking him out for who knew how long, if not outright killing him.

Better exhaust all my options first. Alex walked back to the ICU hallway and slipped inside the wing, locking the door behind him. This time he pulled out the flashlight, and with it clicked on, searched the wing again. The beam lit up swaths of the wing with ease, highlighting dozens of fallen ceiling tiles and other details he'd missed when just the blinking LED was his light source. The staff rooms had nothing new to offer, though his still-growing thirst at last pushed him to test the faucet. Both knobs turned with audible squeaks, and the head produced no water, much less any sound like an uncapped seal. The scents from the pipes however sparked an immediate feeling of disgust.

After the mental image of years-old stagnant water passed through his head, Alex stepped away from the sink and resumed searching. None of the rooms revealed anything new. The doors along the hallway he'd emerged into from the stairwell didn't unlock either.

Once back inside the stairwell, and with the door closed, Alex clicked on the flashlight. Before he could think to move, something near the basement doors had stolen his attention.

Numbers, gouged into the masonry of the walls.

7 - 5 - 2

As he inched his way down the stairs, Alex moved the beam about, looking for other things he'd been unable to see before. The other walls showed only more decay, patched over by cobwebs. At the doors, he inserted the key, and found it fit. The knob turned with ease, but the combination was still needed.

There's no seven on this thing... Hmm.

Alex's first thought was pressing the 2 and 5 at once, then the other two in order. The door stayed locked. The same happened with 3 and 4, leaving him wondering if the 7 was from addition instead. He repeated the process with new orders of numbers, until the 5252 combination allowed the doors to open.

They swung open with barely a sound at first, the noises they did make echoing through the hallways that stretched ahead of him. When the echoes quieted, Alex began to hear what sounded like splashing water. How far away it was, he couldn't tell. The scents the unlocked door had allowed near his nose also prompted him to mask his face. If this was where Shane and his parents were... But so far there was no hint of their scents.

Remembering how long it had been since he had regained consciousness, he aimed the beam at the floor. The sight of it, the shattered ceiling tiles resting atop it and the grungy look of the floor tiles, made him take longer to get to his knees and bring his nose near the floor. He barely got one sniff before the scents pooling on the ground upset his gag reflex. A biting chill then touched his spine. Was the worst of the scents that of rotting flesh?

The thought of staying within this place for an hour, much less days, made him even more anxious to find Shane and his family.

Once back on his feet, Alex covered his face again then slipped past the door. A deadbolt allowed him to lock it, and the short hallways to his left and right were checked first. Each had only one

door, neither of which would unlock, and he heard nothing beyond them make a sound, even after he tapped them.

The third, longer hallway had three doors left ajar, one producing part of the foul scent he had noticed before. He saw nothing that could produce the scent, though the sight of a morgue dissection table caused a shudder in his chest. The rest of what lay beyond the ajar doors were discarded chairs, tables, and even relatively new-looking medical equipment and machines.

The doors that were closed opened without a key, each revealing more lazily stored furniture and a single wooden closet. Inside it was another set of scrubs, ones that like the other two smelled of must and gave off no scents of the previous owner. The pants Alex tied around his waist, and the top he slipped over the two he already wore.

As he traveled the rest of the length of the hallway, Alex kept the beam moving, watching for any reflections on the walls and floor consistent with water. The sound of it running and splashing was growing louder, and at the end of the hallway, he heard it better on his right.

What he saw with the flashlight pointed down that part of the next hallway was five more doors, all closed, and the first hints of water on the floor. It was seeping from under the third one, forming a puddle several yards in width. In the middle of the puddle lay a fallen ceiling tile, its chunks swollen from the water it had absorbed.

A mental image of Shane and his parents being locked in the room with the running water lasted a few seconds before he shook it off. The puddle wasn't that large, but it also was not obvious if it was draining. Was the running water bait?

Tightening his grip on the copper pipe, Alex checked the nearest doors. The first opened to a room with an unused bed and chair, the other to a room with only fallen ceiling tiles. With the last three resting within or beyond the puddle, Alex sized up his options before removing the wraps on his feet and rolling up his pants.

The low temperature of the water bit past his skin as soon as it made contact, urging him to lean and reach for the door handle. The handle dropped easily, but the door did not open. He then

tested the three keys on the lock, finding none of them useful in opening the door.

How thirsty he was kept him from walking further down the hallway for a time after. *You will go nowhere beyond where I allow.* Was that the reason for the running water? Something to push him to disobey the message? Alex aimed the flashlight at the ceiling tiles, sweeping around in search of a camera of some kind. None were obvious to him, and he saw no reflections of the light, but the possibility of one he could not see was still there.

It was a few seconds later when something struck him. The door was locked, but he had already found several pieces of furniture. If he wanted to, he could use them to climb towards the ceiling, and if the walls did not reach far beyond that point, climb into the room via the ceiling, or see what was in there.

Over the next length of time, Alex gathered a few chairs and a table, one thankfully built of wood instead of plywood or metal, near the door. The table gave him enough height to where he could rest his elbows on the ceiling and bring the flashlight into the space. He spun around, looking for evidence of cameras or the like, but saw nothing. It did however confirm that the walls only went above the drop ceiling by a few inches, and that the ground floor was a few feet above that. If whoever his captor was did not want him to do this, there would be no furniture.

After finding a spot to lay down the flashlight, Alex made a leap into the ceiling, his weight straining the beams and sending noise throughout the halls below him. The dust and scents he disturbed by doing so rushed his nostrils, forcing him to blow them out and shake his head, but his new position let him see at least one ceiling tile had slipped from its holdings.

What he could see beyond the opening was a room with dirty white walls and potentially a sink. Two other tiles separated him from the opening, and getting the closest one out of its nook became his priority. The sharp metal edges of the holdings and lack of space between the tiles scraped the flesh of his fingers until he got some leverage. The newly released tile let him see even more of the room. It was empty of everything except what was attached to the walls, and the water was leaking from a broken pipe under the sink. The floor was an all-encompassing puddle,

under and along the edges of which signs of lasting water damage were showing. Few scents from the room were reaching him, though he had noticed a few when trying to open the door. None that would put him into a cautious mindset.

Once he was convinced he had seen everything from high up, Alex began moving into a better position to let himself down. He did his best not to grunt as he did so, but once he was hanging by only his arms, skin rubbing across the sharp metal and rough plaster of the ceiling construction, he lost that fight. He then hurried his descent to just his hands, and at last dropped into the flooded room.

His feet stayed warm for only a few seconds, the chill biting through his skin and crawling up his legs. He wasted no time unlocking the door before listening for a few seconds. The hallways and floor were silent again, sans the running water behind him.

Once he had seen enough, Alex closed the door and made for the leaking pipe. Up close, he could smell a few things running off the sink, a few of which lined up with mold and disuse, but the water itself looked clean. After cupping some in his hand, he couldn't resist drinking it. Finally, his parched throat was going away.

He took more sips, some of each lost to how fast he was shoveling water toward his mouth, the rest running down his chin and neck. He lost track of how many handfuls he drank, but each one was too soothing to bother keeping careful track of. Even when he felt he had enough, he took a few sips more to be sure, ending his drinking binge with a relieved sigh.

His good feelings would not last however, as the next thing he saw was the water slowing its running and ceasing over the next few seconds, until only drips were coming from the breach. It did not take long for him to assume someone had shut the water off.

But there were no cameras. In the hallway, the ceiling, or the room. Why was it shutting off now?

Feeling his heart begin to race, Alex made for the door, only to receive another shock before it opened all the way. The furniture he had moved to get into the room was gone. When Alex aimed

the flashlight at the floor, there were no signs of water trails or wet footprints.

Had he been so absorbed in drinking that he had failed to notice something one door separated from him?

Alex refused to believe he had, but no explanation about why the furniture was missing came to him.

After getting out of the puddle and shaking the water off his feet, Alex quickly checked the doors on the other side of the puddle. The keys allowed him no access to either, and his attention returned to the rest of the hallway.

So far, nothing had given him any hints about where Shane and his family were, but an attempt to unlock their door would no doubt get their attention.

Once his feet were wrapped again, Alex continued. The other side of the hallway had six doors, none open, and two more hallways branched off further along. The first few doors were unlocked, though only one had another closet. What he found within it was a book—a mass market paperback, the spine crinkled and the pages dog-eared and stained from age and use. The cover was familiar, but what sat among the pages sent a spark of worry through his heart and mind again.

A bookmark, one he owned, and in the same place he had left it the day before he was dropped off at Shane's home. But his copy was not this aged or damaged. This one looked...

Alex's mind snapped to his own family, and nausea flooded his chest and lungs as his head filled with images of his own family being captured. He refused to believe it, but only for a few moments as his heart refused to be calmed. What reason did he have to discount it?

Rage then began to seep into Alex's heart. What had he done to deserve this? Much less his family? His mind then fell on Angela. That was the only thing that would indicate werewolves, and that was Shane's fault.

Was that why they were in this place? Someone taking revenge for her?

His resolve to save Shane and his family slipped as the thoughts continued to eat at the fiber of his heart. Only once he had begun to calm down did he regain a touch of that mindset. His heart and

lungs still felt as though fire was claiming them as he resumed his search of the basement. The rest of the rooms were checked, each with nothing beyond their doors, and the first new hallway only lead to another empty utility room.

There was a sign near the ceiling of the second one, indicating stairs leading up. As far as he had walked down here, the only possible location he could think those stairs would lead was somewhere near the offices he had found beyond the ICU wing.

But his keys did not unlock the door, and he let out a sigh.

On his way back to the other staircase door, the sight of the puddle revived his concerns. How had he not noticed any noise from the table being moved? Almost on a whim, he checked the room the table had been pulled from. Not only was it back in place, the chairs had been arranged as though five invisible beings were awaiting his entry.

And upon the table was another envelope.

This one had no uneven weight.

You disobeyed me.

Alex threw the paper and envelope aside, his head swirling with curses toward his abductor. They would likely never hear them, but they gained him a little resolve.

Back at the stairwell, he went up two floors, readying his third key for the doors. This time, the doors unlocked. Beyond them was another floor similar to the third: fallen ceiling tiles, empty rooms behind closed and open doors, and a dust-covered wooden floor.

Alex was three steps into the floor when the space on which he stepped creaked and his movement halted. Structural problems. That reason for the closing of this building snapped back to mind as he pulled his leg away. His next thought was about Shane and his family. He had found no evidence of them in the basement. Were they being held on the top floor, or the fourth?

Whatever the case, the second floor was a risk to navigate if the floor was that noisy. It took Alex a few seconds to decide to lower himself to all fours in hopes that he could move around the second floor without issue. As it happened, even that caused parts of the flooring to creak as his weight was put onto it.

At that level, Alex also noticed dips in the floor, ones that gave the appearance of the material under the wood sagging and taking the wood with it. He did see a pattern to the dips, however, and changed his route to follow the risen parts. At times the floor would still creak, keeping his pulse high. Whatever was in here, he hoped to find it soon.

He followed the walls first, slipping into each room as he reached them. The first four were empty, but the fifth one, tucked away in a corner, had signs of what the sagging floor was a risk of: the leg of a hospital bed had punched a hole in the floor. Though only inches of the leg were below the floor level, he could not keep from imagining the whole thing breaking through the floor and crashing into the basement.

At that, he looked up at the ceiling. His own bed was not far from where he was. The ceiling below where he believed it was looked intact, but again his mind produced the image of him crashing through the floor above it.

He sighed openly, shook his head, and then got back to searching.

Once the rooms were checked, all that was left were the doors and desk in the middle of the floor. He continued his search at the reception area, opening every drawer he could. Only three were unlocked, none of which held anything beyond cobwebs and rubbish.

The first door he checked revealed another staff room, this one with multiple lockers, and a note hanging from the ceiling. When Alex focused his flashlight beam on it, a slight shimmer occurred above it. Fishing line. After making sure the floor was stable, and the string was not attached to anything suspicious, he stood up. As he took the envelope in his hand, the weight of another key was obvious.

Leave or Stay

The size of the key put his mind on the sliding doors that were separating him from the outside of the building. The heavy fog around the area would no doubt get him lost, and he had no idea

where he was. Yet a hospital this size had to mean a nearby population of considerable size.

Yet somehow he and Shane and his family had been delivered here and left inside the building for who knew how long, by heavily armed military types. How many of them were waiting out in that fog?

Rescuing Shane and his family remained his choice. At the very least, freeing them.

When Alex reached the lockers, two were clearly locked with dial locks. The others opened with no issue. Inside the last, however, was something he recoiled at finding: a pistol, resting on the top level with its barrel pointed outward, as if to shoot whoever found it.

Alex wasted no time checking for a trap once he was to the side of the pistol, but nothing came of it. Why it was left in an unlocked locker was answered when he thought to sniff at the gaps of the locked lockers. Those ones contained some ammo, if the copper and hints of gunpowder were true. The pistol itself was dry, but at least in good repair—and a .45 caliber to boot.

Over the next few minutes, Alex kept his eyes shut and kept his ear by one of the locks. Unlocking the first one was a repeating game of memorizing where he heard the first click, then resetting the dials to find the next, and so on until he could pull the metal hook free. Inside the first locker was a half-full box of .45 rounds, but also another envelope.

If you take them, you will use them.

The sentence chilled Alex's heart, and his fears of the men in black were revived. Instead of taking the rounds, he started working the other lock. It released after another few minutes, and inside he found the .44 revolver Michael had taken from him before he and Carol disappeared. It was still inside the holster, and still loaded. The scents stuck to the leather aside from itself were all too familiar, and caused a clenching of his throat as he processed them.

How he was supposed to carry both weapons escaped him for a while, the threat the letter implied keeping him from taking the

ammo box. The .44 had only five rounds left...but why would he now be given such weapons? In case he left the building?

Alex shook his head. He had to be over-thinking this.

He untied the spare pants wrapped around his waist, and with the revolver removed from its holster, he slipped one of the legs through the loop of the holster and made a new knot with the rest of the length. The revolver sagged his makeshift belt a few inches, worrying him about it slipping off before he tucked the holster inside the waist of his scrubs.

Now satisfied with the placement, all that was left was the .45. The sentence repeated over and over in Alex's head as he looked at the ammo box. Was it worth the risk?

If he already had a .44 by his side, he was already armed. The .45 was nothing more than insurance.

Once the box was taken, Alex wasted no time filling the magazine with rounds—ten of them. The pipe he put aside as he worked, taking it back only once he could figure out where to holster it. The remaining rounds he left in the box, which went into one of the pockets of his scrubs.

Though the way back to the stairwell was a slow one, Alex did everything he could to make no noise. Everything he was now weighted down with was an added risk of it, but by this point, he would take everything he could get.

Once back at the stairwell, Alex turned off the flashlight before moving past the doors. How pitch black everything got once he did made his urge to turn it back on all the more biting, and he did only once he was certain there was no one in the stairwell besides himself.

Better check the other two floors as well.

The fourth floor was still locked.

The fifth, however, unlocked with the third key he had found.

As the door inched open, a blink of red stopped Alex in his tracks and made him turn the flashlight off. It blinked again a few seconds later, and when Alex was certain nothing else was nearby, he turned the flashlight on.

The object giving off the blinking red light was what looked like a conference call speaker set atop a large table, its chairs turned as though a dozen invisible beings awaited him. As though

someone was waiting to be answered. Why it was there, in the middle of a floor that was at first glance completely empty, pushed him to sneak past the doors.

Alex circled the floor by the wall on his left, finding nothing but empty offices, all with unlocked doors and windows that were barred over as he went. He found no spaces to dig in his fingers or the pipe to crowbar the wood away from the walls. The only unique door was to another utility room, itself empty as well.

The blinking device had no wires to track, and when Alex attempted to move it, it did not budge. Up close, he noticed superglue scents coming from the device.

As he stood staring at the device, imagining all the things it could do or would lead to, the light suddenly flipped off. Figuring it had run out of battery power, Alex breathed an easy sigh and made his way back to the doors to the stairwell.

He had locked them behind him just in case, but as he pressed against them once unlocked, a voice came from the speaker.

"Stop, right there."

The voice sounded natural, but there was an unmistakable growl-like edge to it.

Was this the one who ordered their abduction?

As his heart sped up, the voice spoke again. "Disobey me again and you will never see them again. Close the doors, and leave them unlocked."

Now feeling as though a dagger of ice was being rammed into his chest, Alex obeyed and closed the doors. The one glance he got beyond them showed no hints of others.

"Walk back to the table."

Alex obeyed, though did so with his back to it, the .45 and flashlight pointed at the doors.

"Turn around, and put those guns on the table."

Alex sighed heavily, but noticing how the voice had not demanded making the guns safe, he laid down the .45 first, then—

"If you leave them able to fire, I will do away with the ones you seek."

The dagger sunk deeper into Alex's chest. He should have guessed. The .45's safety was applied first and its magazine ejected, then the cylinders of the .44 were emptied.

The voice went silent for a time, Alex's anger fluctuating the longer it stayed so.

When at last the voice spoke again, he had been eyeing the .45 for a good while. "Why should I let them go?"

In spite of the pent-up rage within Alex's head and chest, he held his words back. What proof did he have that his words would not lead to one of them being hurt? The words he wanted to say clawed at him, the rending of his insides worsening by the second as he continued to refuse to speak.

The voice on the other side did not pressure him. Alex took advantage. He attempted to sigh the discomfort out, a seemingly pointless endeavor, but the extra time to think slowly allowed himself to calm down.

Why should Shane and his family be let go? The question repeated over and over in his head. He barely knew them. What honest response could he give? And with Angela the only reason he could see for them being abducted...

Alex took a few quickening breaths before answering. "You've scared them enough."

The voice did not immediately answer. Alex made no effort to add more, though already he was thinking over what else to say.

"You are in no position to judge that."

Alex sighed heavily to counter the rise in his anger. "Then what reason is there to keep them locked up and borderline starving?"

The voice stayed quiet for a while.

"Tell me," it eventually said, "do you think this is because of one dead human?"

The hell? Alex felt his heart freeze at that sentence. He had barely told anyone about Angela. How would the owner of this voice know that? But as he let the question stew, its meaning became clear: Shane was the target. He and Michael and Carol were just collateral.

He began losing the fight with his bottled-up emotions at that point, and imaging Shane's parents losing him only made it harder. A shuddering breath got away from him before he put his hand over his mouth.

"A string of werewolf-related killings was not about to escape my notice. Not when they happen within my territory."

It took Alex a few seconds to latch onto part of the sentence he just heard. 'My territory'? Who spoke like that, much less implied that? His first assumption was another werewolf, possibly more, but how they would afford hunters like the ones who captured him and the others was a point he was unable to answer. And moreover, how had he not noticed their scents before now?

He kept up the attempts to relax his breathing...

"And do not assume I am not aware who is responsible."

Alex sighed a shuddering sigh as fire built in his chest. "You never intended to let us go. Don't dick me around."

The voice did not respond. Alex wished the owner dead, by his own hand.

As he stared at the speaker, a change in his eyesight spiked his heartrate. Now his vision was that of another. What he saw were the doors he had passed through to enter the fifth floor, by way of nightvision that was far clearer, bordering a half removal of the darkness his flashlight had pierced.

And then the new vision began to move, as if attached to a human body. Alex frantically reached for his chest and body, feeling it still there, but moving his own eyes did not move this new vision.

As his backside came into view, he spun his body around but overshot the spin and stumbled. He caught himself with the edge of the table, just in time for the movement of his detached vision to stop. After a second, he heard stretching skin and cracking bones coming from behind his actual ears, and the height of his new vision rose.

"As you wish."

The voice no longer came from the speaker. It came from behind his actual body, from something much larger than him.

His heart in a frantic race, Alex ran his hands over the table for the .45 and the magazine. He felt both as the one stealing his eyesight made its way closer. Loading the magazine had become a test of feeling for his right hand, then sticking it into the handle. The stealer of his eyesight was halfway to him.

He pulled the slide back as his stolen eyesight drew closer, then pushed his arms up and over his head. Now he could see the .45, aimed to the left of his stolen eyesight.

But the trigger failed him. He squeezed it again. It refused to fire.

He had forgotten the safety.

He was forced to watch as his stolen eyesight tilted a bit, and then a huge clawed—and scaled—paw knocked his body aside. He felt the impact and the slide, the stealer of his eyesight watching the entirety. It gave him no time to recover before closing in and planting the same massive paw over his body, the claws missing his skin but the weight pinning his body to the dusty floor.

"Fuck you," Alex shouted as the sound of a gaseous inhale came to his ears. He saw his own eyes, the blue irises and black pupils replaced with solid white, close. His stolen eyesight was not given the same benefit, and he heard the creature breathe on him.

Its breath was cold and it numbed his body before his stolen eyesight was lost.

* * *

The feeling of Bailey licking his face snatched Alex's attention. His dog didn't stop when he shot up, instead keeping up the gesture as though he had just shifted out of his wolf-man form. Alex's chest swelled with pleasure the longer it went on, and his arms soon wrapped around his dog's neck. Bailey didn't fight the gesture, though as his tongue relaxed licking his owner's face, Alex's thought returned to the...

No, it wasn't a nightmare. He had felt everything while in that place.

His skin, however, gave off no traces that he remembered from there.

The next thing he remembered was the date of the last full moon. November 11th. He went for his bedside drawers, but his phone was gone. Was it still at Shane's house?

Oh fuck. Oh no.

As if sensing his distress, Bailey inched closer and licked his owner to get his attention. Alex ignored his pet's attempts in favor of getting out of bed and turning on his XBOX.

The date was November 20th, 2011. For nine days he had been abducted. They had been abducted.

But where were his own parents?

His chest and heart tightened as he remembered the discovery of his bookmark. It couldn't be, but how else could someone have gotten it?

Alex made for the living room and threw open the bay window curtains. Both his father's truck and his mother's sedan were not in the driveway. His tension eased for only a moment however, and he made for the kitchen next.

The house's phone was sitting on the counter, and Alex dialed his father first.

One ring. No answer.

Two rings. No answer.

Three rings. No answer.

Four...

"Hello?"

Alex breathed a sigh openly. "Hey, Dad."

"Hello, Son. Finally woke up it seems."

The hell? His father's response and the tone of it refused to leave his mind. Why was he so casual about hearing his voice?

"Alex?" His father's tone turned questioning.

Alex was too stunned to answer. Did his father not know? How?

"Can you not hear me?" His father's tone remained questioning.

His own throat remained locked up.

"Stupid phone line. Call me back if you can hear me."

The line disconnected. He dialed his mother's number.

Three rings was how long he waited.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

His mother picked up on his tone immediately. "What's wrong?"

Alex's throat locked up again. Her response. It wasn't right. Had his abductor threatened them? No, his parents would have been overjoyed to hear his voice after being gone. They had after seeing him as a human again.

"Alex, what's wrong?"

Now Alex was torn. Should he tell his parents what happened? He had nothing but the gap in dates to offer, but the way they were speaking implied they would think he was nuts if he brought that up.

But why were they acting this way?

"Please don't go silent on me."

Alex sighed. "I'm not."

"Then why do you sound like something's upsetting you?"

"Just had an unpleasant thought before I called."

"What kind?"

"It's nothing. It'll pass."

His mother waited a few seconds. "I have to go. I'll see you tonight."

"You too. Love you."

As his mother returned the latter words, Alex hung up, the phone gripped in his hand as his arm relaxed and fell.

What was going on? Had his abductor done something to them? It was the only way he could explain getting back into his house.

The huge paw, and white-blue scales of the thing that attacked him.

He almost started laughing before letting off a bit of his bottled emotions. The first guess as to what that was tore him even more between laughing and a clenched throat. It couldn't be... But werewolves were real...

Only when his attention drifted back to Shane and his family did his thoughts start to clear. Doing his best to recall the number for Shane's dad, he dialed it and waited.

Two rings sounded. No answer.

Four rings. No answer.

Six.

Eight.

Sixteen.

No voicemail.

Oh God, no. More of his bottled emotions escaped.

He slammed the phone down, now trembling with fear and rage. Had what he said doomed all three of them? The idea sunk the dagger of guilt into his heart, and several tears hit the counter before he left the kitchen.

He returned to his room and got dressed, Bailey at his side, then left the house with him, intent on checking Shane's home.

The walk there was a somber one, not helped by the grim-looking overcast sky. His mind was unable to tear away from

the thought of what he would find. Bailey stayed more focused on the sidewalk and grass and things other dogs had marked, though a few times, he attempted to pull Alex's attention to him. Alex gave him the head rubs he wanted, then got back to walking.

When he at last arrived at the street, he stood in place for a minute. Even from where he stood, he could see evidence of them not being home: newspapers piling in the lawn and driveway. He soon forced himself to go closer, then turn up the walkway to the front door.

The presence of the house had become more unsettling, but instead of allowing that to slow him down, Alex rang the doorbell. He heard the sound travel through the house, but even after a minute, no one answered.

He was quick to decide he had to check the back as well, and got Bailey to keep up.

The windows along the kitchen's wall revealed no one coming for the door. The backyard was the same as he remembered it, and the side door of the garage was closed.

At the very least, he could get his phone back. Michael would no doubt attempt to reach him that way.

The door was unlocked, but as Alex opened the door, the newly allowed light shone on something that shook him greatly: a hanging, white envelope.

With his name handwritten on the front.