

# STORM

BY

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Eric panted tiredly, slouching forward in his chair. The makeshift backstage area behind his booth was all the privacy he could get, and it wouldn't last long. These were peak hours.

Tipping up a liter bottle of water, he gulped down nearly half of it at once; the cool liquid made him feel a little better, even though he dribbled the water all over himself. It was summer, and his grey fur (streaked with patterns of white and ash in a perfect display of nature's logical beauty) was at its thinnest, but the two thousand humans crowding the convention center churned the air into a near-sweltering uncomfortable haze. Today marked the three-hundred and eightieth day since he had shown the world that werewolves—or at least, he—was real, and not a fevered nightmare from the depths of human depravity, nor a creature to really be feared.

He was able to transform himself back into his human shape with just a little meditation, but right now, that wasn't much of an option for Eric Harper. The process simply took too much energy, and he was already both hungry and thirsty; he didn't want to fall asleep from exhaustion. People were waiting, and even though he was getting tired, he didn't want to disappoint them.

With a deep sigh, the beast stood up and padded softly on digitigrade feet to the heavy black curtain separating his quiet closet of solitude from the multitude ahead.

Dipping his seven-foot frame just to get through the entryway, Eric—or Fenris, as he called himself for the press, a name once suggested to him by the Wolf Center—stepped into the pen yet again, wolfish tail wagging involuntarily behind him.

For a "werewolf exhibit" (which was little more than a meet-and-greet,) the setup at the convention was surprisingly elaborate. It was more like a stage show than a place to dole out autographs. Fenris was a huge show stopper anywhere he went, and anyone who hosted him would be the subject of enormous publicity for weeks to come; as a result, the convention owners had spared no expense. In a dimly lit corner of the center, artists from the University's drama department were commissioned to bring in giant fiberglass and plastic pine trees, which had been set up to crudely resemble a forest, and real soil was brought in to cover the floor. Fake torchlights illuminated the plastic grove, giving a cinematic, if somewhat artificial, feel to the whole thing.

They were familiar, if somewhat quaint, surroundings; this wasn't the first time Fenris had made himself available to his undying legions of fans. Nevertheless, every appearance was somehow still jarring for him. The enormous attention was hard to get used to, whether it was the first time or the tenth.

As soon as Fenris's monstrous werewolf form stepped into the light, the gawking line of curious convention goers erupted into gasps and nervous chattering. Two security guards were stationed to help hold the crowd back, and they stood with their arms crossed stern jawed and anxious, ready to tackle troublemakers and toss them out of the building. (To go along with the overall werewolf motif and the fantasy content of the convention, the guards were goofily dressed like

medieval huntsmen from some fairy story, contributing even more to the event's bizarre atmosphere.) Fenris mused that he could probably take care of himself far better than they could, but he was glad that the owners took precautions.

One poor girl, probably not even out of her teens, fainted at the sight of him; luckily her friends caught her and carefully pulled her out of the line. No one else even acknowledged the affair; it was a common occurrence. Despite all their imagined bravery and open mindedness, most members of the general public—even stark raving horror movie fanatics with fake fangs, vampire tattoos, and the whole getup—still didn't quite have the mental stamina to accept that werewolves actually existed. The result of this revelation, solidified beyond any reasonable doubt by seeing Fenris in person, was often complete psychological shutdown. They would be fine of course, and mentally much better off for the experience. But they would be unconscious for quite awhile.

The throng of fans shifted restlessly, pushing and prodding against each other, desperate to get a good look at the werewolf .

Fenris could already see people eagerly pulling dollar bills out of their wallets. He relished every minute of this; like a puppet master, he held total sway and power over the entire crowd. Every size and shape of geek imaginable, from curious little kids wearing comic book shirts (supervised by their disconcerted parents,) to 60-year-old science fiction writers who could barely contain their excitement, lined up to meet him. Of course no one cared to meet the pink-skinned version, *Eric Harper*, the former college student who suddenly became the most talked about figure of the century. They wanted to meet the *wolf*, creature of legend, with all its fangs, claws, and majesty.

Sometimes though, it was more than just an obsession with the fantastic. The werewolf had somehow unlocked something spiritual, or at least pseudo-spiritual, in otherwise normal, unconcerned human beings. He had met countless people—young, old, American, European, demographics didn't seem to matter—who claimed that they too had an animal somewhere inside of them, dying to break free and make its feral being known, and they wondered how he was able to do it, while they weren't. Gifted with a talent for empathy that bordered on supernatural, Fenris could discern that these people weren't lying, and they weren't out of their minds, or at least he didn't think so; they seemed to really, genuinely feel more in tune with their primordial *other* than with their identity as human beings. After a few dozen encounters of this phenomenon, Eric discovered that it was disturbingly widespread, and even though he never had an answer to the question, it had lingered on his mind for months, to the point where he was finally starting to understand it.

Still, even though he was generally the subject of global adoration, Eric hadn't wanted the beast to become his new identity. The very thought of it scared the wits out of him. After the initial shock of becoming a werewolf had worn off, it had taken months for him to beat back his instincts, to learn how to make his wolf blood work for him instead of against him. Eric could feel the wildness in the back of his brain, and he didn't want it to take over. No, that was the last

thing he wanted, although some days it seemed like his resistance was growing ever weaker. On occasion, he wanted to simply give it all up, become a wolf and roam the woods alone. His agents from the Wolf Center had called it a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” and had told him to be wary of it. He was trying.

Stepping forward into the open as gracefully as he could, Fenris lifted his muzzle high and let out a woeful howl that echoed off the aluminum ceiling and caused the whole building to stop and turn. Growling menacingly and stooping forward into a pouncing crouch, Fenris glowered at the line, his yellow eyes piercing every gaze he could meet. It was all for show of course, but it worked every time.

His ears perked, a wry smirk crossed his canine face; he imagined he heard the dry dull thuds of more fans passing out in the aisles. After an awkward pause of near-silence, the crowd burst into cheers, rejoicing at the anticipated display of sheer werewolfness. For most of them, Fenris was like a surreal dream brought to life.

And then they came, let through one by one. They could “pet” him for a measly five dollars, running their hands through his fur to prove to themselves that he was quite real and alive (although Fenris was a bit at odds with the idea of being treated like someone's dog.) Ten dollars netted a dramatic pose and a picture with the werewolf—a cost nearly everyone was willing to produce—and a bite from his fangs, well... a bite was priceless. In the past, Fenris had been offered anything his heart desired if he would only relinquish a bite and transform his benefactor into a werewolf like himself. He had no use for the money; he was already pampered and protected, and every dollar he earned went to his growing foundation at the Wolf Center. Actually, Eric had absolutely no idea whether or not a bite would do anything at all. It had never been tested—he had never been *willing* to test it. Once another human becomes a werewolf it could turn into a slippery slope; there could be utter chaos, and the consequences could be immeasurable. One day, maybe, he might consider it, but not until the furor started to die down. Not until the cameras started to disappear, finding new targets for their fame. Not until the government stopped tracing his calls, salivating to uncover some hidden agenda. And not until the newspapers, who treated him like a media idol, finally got bored and wrote about something else. Even though a year had already passed since he exposed his gift for the world to see, they simply couldn't grow accustomed to the idea of his existence, despite all the carefully measured scientific collaboration he had garnished from the Wolf Center. Tolerance and understanding, not to mention peace and quiet, were hard bargains for a werewolf.

Yet he trusted this crowd more than any other. It wasn't just the strict security measures at the convention: it was the fact that for all their flaws and eccentricities, these people supported him. No one here would throw holy water at him, or pull a well-concealed pistol out of a trench coat to fire away with silver bullets, or try and thrust a needle full of God-knows-what into his hide. The peace of mind was a relief. There was no doubt that some of these people could be called fanatics, but they knew he wouldn't hurt a fly, and in turn, they gave him their trust.

After a few moments, the guards let the first fan through, a young girl with short black hair and glasses. The pale-skinned girl wearing a *Type O Negative* shirt stepped forward tentatively. At first unsure of herself, she wringed her hands, shuffling carefully into the pen. With a worried half-smile, the girl slowly turned her gaze toward Eric's wolfish face, meek hazel eyes peering shyly behind her thick-framed glasses. She stared up at him with a curious intensity. Fenris knew her personality just by looking at her... everyone probably thought she was a "goth," but she was just shy.

In his days of werewolf-meets-America, Eric had seen just about every possible reaction to his better half. When confronted with a hulking, fur-pelted, muzzle-faced mesh of wolf and person, human beings were usually predictable. They either stared wide-eyed and dumbfounded, fainted from shock, laughed hysterically (more from utter disbelief than amusement,) or ran for their lives. It wasn't that Eric-as-werewolf was ugly, or monstrous, except to those who desperately *wished* that he was so. In fact, perhaps it was the opposite: he was so unexpectedly *not* ugly that people's preconceptions exploded like lye meeting water.

This strange-smelling girl did none of those things. Her heart pounded, and with his pointed ears, he could hear it as clearly as a clock striking; but it wasn't from fear. She was doing a good job hiding her excitement. He was impressed.

Nevertheless, there was something odd about the girl, something about her scent. It wasn't a bad scent by any means. Just familiar, too familiar to be comfortable. And as her eyes unceasingly pierced his, Fenris's discomfort increased. He sensed... something... behind those eyes. The girl betrayed an aura unlike any of the mundane people at the convention, and it was an aura that both mesmerized him, and filled the base of his mind with a slowly-growing tension.

Eric looked down at her, ears flattened and mouth unknowingly agape. He felt his tail go stiff. The girl edged closer to the werewolf until she stood nearly toe to toe. Fenris started to take a step back... he wasn't used to people getting so close. For a brief moment, Eric's eyes darted anxiously to the security guards, but their backs were turned, their attention totally focused on the crowd.

Fenris managed to stammer out a growl. "What's your name?" he asked nervously.

Communication was a hallmark of humanity, and becoming a werewolf put a major hamper on the audible portion of it. Wolf-speak—or what Eric presumed to be wolf-speak, although it didn't mean much to him—was incredibly easy; howling, yammering, and even barking like any other canine came naturally to him. English was a different story. It was a staggering, almost painful effort to learn how to talk with a wolf's muzzle, and he didn't take the feat lightly. (Although the vocal chords of wolves and humans are remarkably similar, their palates—the roof of the mouth that, when raised, made language easier to acquire—were not. Fenris was hybridized to some degree, but a werewolf's palate and tongue were simply harder to wrestle control over in the delicate act of forming words.)

The girl didn't answer him. Instead, she slowly, tentatively lifted her hand to touch his chest. He stood perfectly still, watching her every movement. Maybe she just wanted to feel his pelt and then leave. Or maybe she was embarrassed, and didn't want to say her name in public. Some people still held a smoldering hatred for werewolf fraternizers, after all, and their outcries and protests could be scandalous.

After a few moments, the girl stopped stroking his fur, and stood quietly, hands together. Eric didn't want to be rude, but she was taking too long. The girl's turn was nearly up. Still, he couldn't turn her away. She stuck to him like a magnet, and for some bizarre, irrational reason, he didn't want to resist. It was an alarming lack of self-control, even for a werewolf.

Leaning forward, the girl craned her head to speak where he could hear her. "I'm scared," she whispered, her voice nearly drowned by the convention center throng. Fenris was taken aback. The girl hadn't seemed frightened before; in fact, she had been more bold than most. Her deep brown eyes kept him affixed. "I can hear him."

It was certainly an ominous thing to say, and he had no clue what she meant by it. The werewolf's brow narrowed. He knew he should have ended the visit; he knew something was amiss, but he was too curious, and he persisted against all better judgment.

"Hear who?" he croaked. She paused, pondering the question, but gave no quick answer. Instead, she drew even closer, grabbing his hand with both of hers. Like a little girl wanting a hug from her dad, she squeezed Fenris's hand tight; he could feel her pulse quickening through his paw-like pads. He almost jerked away from her, but her face suddenly held a look of desperation; she seemed distraught, her entire demeanor changing. Her skin grew even paler as fear and apprehension caused the blood to flow from her face, and the girl's knuckles turned white as she grasped his paw even tighter.

Her words were ghost-like. "I want to come to him. But I don't want there to be pain," she muttered to him. Her curiosity was quickly turning to panic, and Fenris nearly responded in kind; he had no idea what to do, except to watch in dismay as the girl became even more desperate, even more disturbed. "Please," she begged. "Please don't let it hurt." She seemed suspended in fear, as if in a trance; her eye betrayed an emotion of shock, but she seemed barely conscious.

The whimpering wolf in the back of Eric's mind started to get louder. It was his natural alarm. His instincts were trying to tell him something important, but he was powerless to command them; the big bad wolf in him was on vacation, and he was as helpless as a newborn pup. From the beginning he knew something was strange about this girl, but he was too stupid, too inexperienced to put the pieces together. Now he stood horrified, staring down at her, his clawed hand firm in her hold. The girl was on the verge of breaking down, and he wanted to comfort her, but at the same time, he had a strong urge to bolt for the door and never turn back.

Eric didn't know what he had done, but somehow, he had triggered it. The world was about to topple around him; he was at the center of a new whirlwind, a storm he helped unleash.

He hadn't even learned her name.

The girl shut her eyes tight, a single tear rolling down her pale cheek. She let go of his hand and fell to the dirt floor, violently coughing, clutching her chest in an expression of helpless anguish. Fenris backed away appalled, his heart racing, unable to think, unable to act; all he could do was gawk. People in the crowd started pointing and yelling, only knowing that something horrible was happening, but panicking without the knowledge of *what*; some screamed; others turned from the line and started running. A radius of chaos emanated from the werewolf exhibit, spreading across the entire convention center, which at this point was on the brink of total anarchy. Fenris's guards turned to see the commotion in the pen, and their faces paled.

There before the eyes of the world, a new wedding, a new birth, was underway. Nature was beginning to find its union with mankind.

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"It could be today, or tomorrow. As far as we know it might have already happened. The models aren't reliable, Mr. Bryce." He was starting to get annoyed, but he tried to hide his displeasure. Impulsively, Larson checked his watch, the agitated voice of his superior on the other end of the phone half-drowned by the dull whir of the plane's engines. He was on time. He was always on time, but no one else ever seemed to follow his punctuality. "Just make sure your men are ready. I'm sure you don't want to clean up another mess like Denver."

Larson kept his voice calm, his suit sharp, and his nails clean. He was a professional, and the appearance of "people" like Eric Harper had put him back in business. When the impossible turned out to be reality, sanities tended to shatter like so much glass. Not for Larson. He was one of the few adults capable of accepting the world as it was, as it revealed itself, rationality and irrationality alike. Yet, even with years of experience handling matters like these, he was restless.

All the data they gathered, all the secrets revealed, texts poured over, models computed... everything pointed to something huge on the horizon, but for some reason, the organization refused to accept it. Perhaps they had grown complacent, or maybe old age had dulled the committee's wits. It wasn't important: crisis was all but inevitable. He just hoped he could pick up the pieces.

Larson wished the old man would just let him work in peace. The committee was obsessed with playing games of cloak and dagger like the villains in a cheap spy novel. Larson hated conspiracy, and he loathed trusting field work to bureaucracy. All he could do was smirk and keep his thoughts to himself. It was only a matter of time before they had to show themselves to the public, just as Eric had done a year ago. Secrecy wasn't important anymore... only preparation and control.

Leaning back in his seat uncomfortably, Larson took a sip from his bourbon glass. "Yes Mr. Bryce, results will be forthcoming. I'll be landing within the hour."

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He knew exactly what she was feeling. Eric watched in awe as the girl's body contorted, her bones creaking like old plywood, sweat glossing her skin only to be replaced by bristling animal fur. Her mouth hung open in a silent scream, her teeth stretching, her jaws breaking and reforming on their own, pain and shock coursing a stream of saliva to the floor.

He had a hundred questions with no answers in sight. Eric knew, somehow, that he was responsible for this. Had he somehow turned her? No, that was impossible... he refused to accept it. Eric had interacted with countless people, and none of them had become werewolves.

His stomach twisted into a knot. Everything he had worked for, that he had suffered for, was about to collapse.

A flurry of memory tore Eric's attention. Shuddering, he remembered his own transformation like it was a nightmare. Through a mind numbing haze of burning nausea, pounding heartbeat, and torn clothing, he had quickly realized what he was turning into. He had seen werewolf movies before, everyone had; but they weren't real, now were they? Eric's terror had been visceral, his dread, overwhelming; he had fully expected his mind to slip away, for the beast to take over and unleash its bloodlust. The horror, he knew, would be that he would fight with every single ounce of his strength against it; he would fight hopelessly, watching from within the confines of his own consciousness as every shred of humanity was eaten away by the ravenous hunger of the wolf, until he was nothing more than a savage *creature* with no inhibition, no pity, and no remorse. It was a pagan terror from the depths of millenia-old suppressed consciousness, yanked to the forefront of popular culture by the marvels of entertainment and media.

It didn't happen of course. But he knew how intense this girl's fear must have been.

She would wake up under a blanket of sense and instinct, inhuman signals distorting her thoughts like a drug. It could be euphoric, or it could be maddening. As far as Eric knew, her normal life as a human being was over. A new universe of natural power and spiritual awakening (not to mention publicity, he mused,) awaited her. "Damn it..." he wished he knew her name.

Fenris padded over to the wolf girl laying in the dirt, her transformation complete. Her muscular, wolf-faced form lay coiled and panting. Her eyes—curiously lightened from deep brown to forest green—were half shut, and she seemed to be in some kind of stupor; she must not have had the endurance to withstand the shift. He had never seen or smelt another werewolf in person. Her scent punctured his nostrils, and a peculiar new sensation flooded the primordial plains of his canine mind. Maybe it was some bestial chemical playing tricks on him, but Fenris felt flush; for a moment, the girl seemed more beautiful as a wolf than she had been as a human. Suddenly, inexplicably, Eric felt a desperate urge to protect her. It didn't seem like a normal emotion: it was a feeling of sheer devotion, like he had known her his whole life, and yet, the girl had been a complete stranger before today. The wolf, it seemed, still held a few surprises for him.

The shrill rattle of a fire alarm shook Eric back to earth. One look at the convention center jarred his senses. The scene was a disaster. His guards were long gone, undoubtedly swept up in the

chaos of a thousand panicked bodies rampaging out of the building. The last remnants of the room pushed against the exit doors; tables were overturned, and sellers' wares were scattered and trampled like so much trash. Eric realized everyone's goal was to get away from *him* as fast as they could. They probably thought he had attacked the poor girl, and that maybe they were next. It wasn't harmless "meet the wolf" day anymore; it was a mad rush for survival, and in just a few moments, he had gone from hero to monster. Just like that, the legacy he had built in the past year was gutted. Eric felt like crying. The wolf in him always amplified his emotions, making them more raw.

Through the tumult, Fenris perked his ears. Sirens were blaring. Police sirens. They sounded like trumpets of doom to him, and they were getting closer.

Despair turned to frenzy. He had to escape, and the girl had to come with him. He wasn't going to be on the news, and he certainly wasn't going to be tazed and shackled. Not today.

Leaving her shredded pieces of clothing and shoes behind, Fenris hoisted the half-conscious werewolf effortlessly. His senses were in overdrive: it was flight time. With sharp wolf eyes he panned the room quickly. Finding an exit, Fenris bounded out of the exhibit, the clack of claws on tile and heavy thuds of his padded feet resonating through the now-empty auditorium. He huffed tiredly. The girl was heavier than she had first seemed. The metal fire exit crashed open as he slammed the door with a muscled shoulder.

Squinting in the brilliant afternoon sun, Fenris stepped out into a garbage-strewn alley. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw flashes of blue and red light, and something else caught his attention: the steady whirl of helicopter blades permeated the clear sky. They had sent in the heavy guns.

Adrenaline shot through Eric's veins. Escape was the only thing that mattered now, and Eric's wolf side was begging to do the thinking for him. In a blur of grey, the werewolf turned and bolted down the alley. If only he could get through the suburbs, if only he could find his way to the woods, he could hide, transform back into a human, find safe haven for himself, and for the girl. Images took the place of words in his mind; he was letting himself go to the beast, letting senses guide him, abandoning rationality for the purity of survival.

His thoughts evaporated without warning as brilliant colors burst in Eric's skull, a flash of light like a volley of fireworks. A searing, extraordinary jolt in his chest pierced him like a viper sting, and then slowly morphed into a numbing warmth that spread through his body. His human mind instantly centered itself, the wolf in him bounding for the woods. His balance was lost, his flight was over; he hadn't gone far. They must have been waiting for him.

As Fenris fell, he forced out a single whisper, a single command to his attackers, although it might have only been in his mind. "Don't touch her."

Vision fading, he rolled onto his back, and saw the wolf girl laying next to him on the concrete, her eyes blissfully closed. A final sound, a voice warped by drugged senses, filtered into his brain.

"Time to go Mr. Harper."

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Fire leaped into the night air, its embers drifting slowly through the darkness before flickering and turning cold. He could feel its warmth on his face, and he almost wanted to reach out and touch the flames, to remind himself he was still alive. But he was silent, frozen, separated from himself. A werewolf lay dreaming.

Drums. A low, deep, methodical thunder that matched the blackening sky stirred overhead. A shadowed, spectral wood unfolded before him: a grim procession began to gather, drawn from the Earth itself. Faceless, blurred figures with the vague outlines of men circled the fire, mouthless, wordless, ethereal; the haunting dance of some unknown tribe. Fenris sat among them, transfixed by the flames... did they know he was there? Of course they knew, he realized. He was the wolf, and the drums were calling his name. They had conjured him. This was their ritual to the beast, their covenant to the forest.

Clouds coalesced, lightning flickered, rain began to fall; steam and ash rose from the fire. Yet the drums pounded harder, urging on the storm, strengthening it into a fury. The figures began to change, their outlines starting to morph, their colors inverted: no longer did they resemble men, but black primordial beasts that towered over the flames. They had become wolves like himself, and their stature was majestic, but their dark countenance horrified him. The drums echoed in his breast. A memory from a hundred millenia ago, perhaps even since the dawn of man. How had it found him? He didn't know; it didn't matter. Fenris felt the Earth's blood churning. Nature howled, the storm piercing the sky, and he howled alongside her, reveling in her might and his own. The clouds came lower, swirling around him, the ghostly cry of the wind melding with the still-pounding drums; the storm overtook him.

The wolf felt himself slipping into darkness. The woods were awake again, and he had been their messenger.

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His eyes flew open, and he sat up with a jolt, breathing heavily, cold sweat chilling his skin. It had only been a nightmare, but something about it was tangible and intense, like a long-buried memory dredged up from unknown time, finally recalled like an epiphany. It only added to Eric's disorientation. Looking around, he quickly noticed that he was outside, and that the Sun was just starting to rise, but it was too dark to discern much else, except for the cool grass that he apparently sat in. With some relief, Eric found himself back in human form, his wolfish drive to flee no longer urging him uncontrollably. He was supremely uncomfortable, covered in dirt and sweat, barefoot and wearing nothing but tattered jean shorts... but he stayed perfectly still, his breath the only noise gracing the morning air.

As Eric started to collect himself, paranoia began to take hold. Eric touched his chest compulsively; he remembered a bitter sting, and he vaguely knew that he had fallen, but everything else was a blurred shadow at the edge of his mind. He remembered being at the convention... he had spent the whole weekend there showing off his werewolf half to normals, and the afternoon had been drawing to a close. He remembered a chattering crowd, then yelling, then sirens... and a girl. The girl!

Eric's mind raced. He leaped to his feet. Whirling around, he scanned the area, a knot tying in his stomach. The bastards who did this would pay; the primordial trigger in Eric's brain still pulsed with a rigid determination. He didn't want to fight it: he had to protect her.

The corner of his eye caught a twinge of movement on the ground... and Eric let out a gasp of relief, although he was still tense. The girl was laying in the grass just as he had been, fully human, her now-torn canvas jacket and dew-dampened jeans still clinging to her. A quick glance over the girl told Eric she hadn't been harmed, and that she was starting to wake up. He ran over to her quickly, stooping to get a good look at her face. A tiny remnant of the feeling he had at the convention center still hung from his wolf-tinged heart: she was still beautiful to him. The girl's eyes started to open groggily, a tired groan escaping her.

"Hey," he whispered cautiously. "Hey. Can you hear me?"

Nodding her head slowly, she started to lift herself up. Eric glanced around nervously. He still had no clue where they were, or why they were captured. Although he didn't want to jump to conclusions, he assumed the worst, and it made him choke; he didn't want to be some government lab rat, or some ritual sacrifice for a religious cult.

The rising light offered a disconcerting glimpse at their surroundings. They were penned in, enclosed by a tall chain link fence topped with barbed wire, like some grim parody of a backyard. He could only assume the fence was electrified. Whoever captured them must have been professional, and they wouldn't have taken any chances. Wherever they were, there were no signs of civilization except for the wooden-sided building connected to the enclosure. Thick pine forest surrounded the place. At first glance the whole compound seemed like a park ranger station, but he noticed security cameras peering ominously from the eaves of the house, and the heavy, windowless metal door to the inside was fitted with an electronic keypad. If these were

self-proclaimed werewolf hunters, they certainly weren't backwater hicks.

Eric helped the staggering girl to her feet. He remembered her being pale, but now all the color had gone out of her face; she looked like she had seen a ghost. Her black hair was tangled, strands stuck to her cheeks, and she was smudged with splotches of grass and sand, but otherwise she seemed fine.

"Who... where am I? What the... what the hell is going on?" Glancing around, she talked mostly to herself, her haze still not quite lifted. Eric hoped she wouldn't panic. "Who are you?" She stared at him with a worried look.

Eric sighed. She really had no clue who he was. He realized that Fenris was probably the last thing she had witnessed.

"Eric," he replied blankly. He noticed she wasn't looking at him anymore; she had found the security cameras, and stared at them anxiously. He figured she was on the verge of panic; gingerly, he stepped closer to her. Eric hoped he could calm her down.

"Hey. Look at me. Look at me." She whirled around. "What's your name?"

Hesitantly, she responded. "Cynthia." Finally, part of his curiosity could rest at ease.

Eric tried to be reassuring, but it was hard; he was nervous too, and he had no idea what would happen to them. "Listen Cynthia. Don't worry. We're going to be okay. I don't know who they are, but if they wanted to hurt us they would have done it already."

Cynthia was on the verge of tears. "I don't want to be here. I just want to go home."

Eric drew closer to her, and reached out to touch her shoulder gently. She couldn't have been older than 17 or 18. He was pained, the thought of her young life now irreparably thrown into incomprehensible change made him choke. The same thing had happened to him.

"I want to go home too. And we will. Everything will be fine. Trust me." Cynthia probably didn't even remember what happened to her, or if she did, her rational human mind was working hard to blot it out. The transformation was hard on the girl's fragile body; Eric was just glad that she had even been able to survive it. It wouldn't be long before she figured out what happened.

For a few minutes, they stood silently, peering out into the woods. The wind rustled the pines eerily. They could be anywhere. A disconcerting thought crossed his mind: Eric realized they might not even be in the country anymore.

With a grunt, Eric sat back down in the grass. "Nothing we can do but wait. When they want us, they'll come for us. I've dealt with people like these before. Those cameras probably don't even work." He smiled up at Cynthia, and she looked back at him with a fatalistic smirk. Hopefully

she was starting to feel better. Carefully, Cynthia sat next to him. She started to open up; Eric listened intently.

"I... I don't remember what I did," she muttered quietly. "One second I was at the convention, at the booth with that wolf, and..." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes emptied with a vacant look, her mouth agape; she was starting to remember. Eric knew the sensation all too well. The memories would be unwelcome.

"Oh my god." Her lip trembled. "It wasn't a dream, was it?" She turned to him, seeking comfort, but Eric didn't know how much he could offer. Cynthia's gaze started to revert to terror. She started to stammer, turning her eyes down, reflecting on the sudden realization that rushed into her being. "I'm a werewolf."

"Hey," Eric spoke softly. He reached out again to touch her shoulder, and he noticed that she was shaking. Cynthia turned slowly towards him, her young features marred with both fear and shame. "That's okay," he said. This was the moment of truth. "I am too." He grinned. Hopefully Cynthia was smart enough to put two and two together. Who knows, he wondered... she might even recognize him from TV.

Her expression turned from apprehension to wonder. Cynthia's eyes widened; she stared at Eric with a dumbfounded look, as if she suddenly found out she was sitting next to a super hero. "You're him!" she gasped, standing up suddenly. "You're the guy... I mean wolf... or whatever... from the Center!" Mild pink hues started to return to her face. Realization was a powerful force.

Eric stood up to meet her, wincing from the dull ache in his chest. "That's right. We're *both* werewolves. It's a weird feeling, isn't it?"

Cynthia knew exactly what he meant. "Yeah..." she paused for moment, taking it all in. "I can't believe this is actually happening. I guess I'm not really human anymore, am I? I mean, I'm *more* than human." She shuddered. Her experience mirrored his own. She had the same feelings he had, the same questions, the same sense of both fear and awe that Eric had felt over a year ago.

Briefly, his mind wandered again, his first change returning to him in a mosaic of memory. The moon was only half-full on that hot August night (whoever said werewolves fell under the purview of the full moon turned out to be wrong,) and he had been alone, walking back to his apartment from a late-night class at the university. Without warning, a dense, tingling feeling had suddenly started to prick his skin and flush his face. At first, the feeling had been almost pleasurable (he reckoned now that it was some odd cocktail of chemicals rushing to his brain,) but it had quickly morphed into something alarming. Assuming it must have been some kind of poisoning, or maybe even a heart attack, he had pulled out his cell phone to call an ambulance, but it was too late. The change had begun. Thank God no one had been around to witness it, he thought. There would have been mass hysteria.

At least, mass hysteria earlier than he had planned. After just enough time had passed, after he had come to accept his change as truth and not an insane delusion, Eric had carefully chosen and contacted the International Wolf Center to conduct his public press conference. After a bit of in-person persuasion, the founder himself had agreed to make a statement. Eric assumed it would be the safest, most scientific, most rational route to go. Alas, it didn't matter. He transformed into a werewolf on national television, and he might as well have been a Martian space invader. For a few days, there was an unexpected latent period where everyone was in a kind of apprehensive disbelief. Then, the end-of-the-world people started evangelizing, followed by the Native American neo-shamans, the Ultra-Naturalists, the Vatican, and even the Socialists. Everyone had something to say about the werewolf, some way—however inexplicable—of bending Fenris towards their political will. At the peak of the great werewolf panic, it took two weeks for the riots to die down.

After that, the Wolf Center had transformed into a kind of pseudo-militant support group. The scientists had more than a field day with him—it was the discovery that some of those writers and researchers had been waiting on for decades. Some of the people there were downright obsessed with wolves, real nature nuts... and to learn that there was a man who combined every good aspect of both wolves and humanity, well, must have pushed them a bit closer to the edge of reason. The center was more spiritual than scientific now, ingrained with a fresh blood of neo-pagans, radical traditionalists, and philosophers who saw the appearance of Fenris as nothing less than a sign of Mother Nature herself returning to mend a planet that was so obviously broken beyond repair.

Eric had taken full advantage of their support, but now, trapped in a hole with an innocent girl that was no longer human, he almost wished he had kept to himself.

The memories made him cringe, but it was different now. This time around, he hoped the world wouldn't be quite so surprised; people were already starting to get desensitized. The newborn werewolf would have guidance. Eric would be her teacher, her friend, her *pack mate*—the thought of a pack of werewolves living together suddenly jumped into his head. It was a strange thing to imagine. After all, Cynthia was connected to him, drawn to him somehow; that much was clear to him now, although he didn't fully understand it. Her appearance couldn't be a coincidence. At the convention center, she had mentioned *someone* calling to her... that she wanted to go to him... maybe it was a nightmare like his own? Some kind of premonition? The scientists had performed a thousand tests on Eric, but maddeningly, they still hadn't discovered how his body was able assume traits of *Canis Lupus* at will. As far as they knew, he was mythological. With Cynthia's appearance, a new question had started to trouble him. How many more were there?

"Is that why we're here, you think? Because of what we are?"

Her question brought him back to Earth. This was the third time shadowy figures tried to kidnap him this year, and frankly, it was getting old. They were usually inexperienced, misled fanatics with toys from Soldier of Fortune magazine; Eric had fought them off easily, exposed them, had



them carted off like terrorists. They were arrogant, and he genuinely felt sorry for them.

But this time, the situation smelled different. It made him unsettled.

Eric didn't have time to respond to Cynthia's question. He was cut off by a loud, mechanical noise; metal on metal. Someone was opening the door.

His heart started to race. Cynthia stepped back, practically hiding behind him; stoically, Eric stepped forward to greet his captors. At first he thought about changing into the beast, but if these fools had a vendetta against him, that would only give them more ammunition for their twisted ethics. But still, no one would lay a finger on Cynthia. He would do everything in his power to make sure of that.

Eric stood fast, but he was weaponless; he knew he was practically helpless here. A red light on the door turned to green, and with a metallic squeak, it swung open. The werewolves braced themselves. The eye of the storm was over.

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Tapping absentmindedly on the monitor glass, with calm contemplation, Larson watched Eric Harper wake the girl up. Satisfied that they were both still alive, he turned to his desk, covered in a mess of manila folders, floppy disks, and open books, and casually picked up his favorite curio: a tiny stone figure, a wolf, primitive but smoothly chiseled. Over four thousand years ago, man peered into the woods, and this is what he saw. For some reason the artisan felt compelled to record it. There were no artifacts of deer, or birds, or fish, or even other men in the dusty tomb they had unearthed. Only this simple beast. Was it an expression of nature? A dedication to some forgotten deity? Or just a toy, the curiosity of a bored, highly evolved mind only able to comprehend its own destiny through cryptic, subconscious whispers? Larson turned the figure over and over, admiring it, before a phone call broke his concentration.

He answered it immediately. "Good morning Mr. Bryce."

Mr. Bryce sounded irritated; Larson could tell the old man had been dealing with some untold crisis. "Good morning Larson. Have there been any new developments?"

The committee's goons had been dismissed, undoubtedly redeployed to some frivolous mission, and Larson was alone, a metal door the only thing separating him from two creatures straight out of a horror film. He didn't mind. The old man had confidence that Larson could handle the situation by himself. The facility was solid, and he was little more than a babysitter with a few extra gadgets. Larson knew the werewolves weren't killers, they weren't insane, and they weren't berserk; they were just kids. He mused to himself. For Christ's sake, just yesterday Eric Harper had been in a petting zoo. Extra precautions weren't necessary.

"Mr. Harper is awake. He seems to be doing fine. The wolf has retreated from the girl, and it seems she made it through the night."

"This is good news, Larson." Mr. Bryce seemed pleased; after all, Larson never disappointed him. He was a professional. "Take them out of holding whenever you feel they're ready, and don't tell them too much, but let them get comfortable. We don't want any unwarranted resistance, and an escape is out of the question. I'm sure you realize a course of action has not been finalized. The agency is still waiting on evidence to materialize. Do you understand, Larson?"

"Yes Mr. Bryce. Of course." Larson sneered. Yes, he understood perfectly well. The agency didn't need more evidence if it wanted to prove itself right. Their conspiracy play was still in full force. Larson had never really agreed with their methods, but he always did as he was told; he was ingrained with an artificial sense of duty that not even the promise of retirement would be able to erase. Did Bryce, or any of those naive money-softened suits, really expect to prevent the inexorable? Once the "evidence" started to "materialize," it would be too late for the agency to do anything but point and gawk, and at that point, control would be impossible. This wasn't Tunguska or Roswell or Elkhorn, it wasn't some obscure, isolated mishap that could be swept under a rug or written off scientifically. Now wasn't the time for conspiracies. The very fabric of humanity's state of existence was on the verge of being re-woven.

"You can expect me to arrive soon, Larson. We'll be requesting an update in several hours. Bryce out."

Larson set the phone down and sighed. He was starting to get a headache. Maybe it was time to retire after all. This was the end-all-be-all, and he was right at the center of it.

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Eric was a bit startled, but he stayed quiet and stern, shielding Cynthia as best he could. He had expected the usual foray: black jump suits, cattle prods, assault rifles, and body armor. Instead, the thick metal door opened gingerly, and a middle-aged man with a streak of grey in his hair and a deep blue necktie stepped calmly into the enclosure. He carried two bottles of soda; there were no weapons in sight. The man was alone.

Eric could see no fright in this gentleman's eyes; he held a consternation that was unexpected. Even werewolf hunters were afraid of werewolves. Come to think of it, Eric didn't think he looked like a hunter at all. He was more like a professor, with stress-creased lines on his forehead and sharp grey eyes that never betrayed an unwavering confidence.

The man wasted no time. Without saying a word, he held out a bottle of soda, cold condensation dripping from it; Eric was suddenly reminded just how thirsty he really was, but he was wary. After all, these were kidnappers, and he was not a house guest.

"Go on and take it," the man reassured in a light voice. His accent was definitely American. At least they were probably still in the country, he thought. "And give one to Cynthia too."

Eric started to let his guard down, his shoulders slumping just a small bit. Part of his discomfort vanished. It didn't seem like he was in danger. Not yet anyway, and he knew how to take advantage of hospitality, even when it came from his assailants. Cautiously, he took the bottle and quickly started to unscrew the top. Closing his eyes, he eagerly took a big gulp from the refreshing drink. Eric started to pass the second bottle to Cynthia, but she completely ignored him.

Gathering up a burst of courage, Cynthia boldly stepped out from behind Eric, and angrily confronted the man with the tie.

"We didn't hurt anyone," she spat, her frustration visible. "We don't deserve this! Let us out of here right now!" Her brown eyes were like daggers. All signs of the shy schoolgirl he met at the convention melted away, revealing a steel strength underneath.

Eric shot her a concerned look, and gasped under his breath at what he saw, what he sensed; sweat starting to bead on his palms. Cynthia's eyes were green again; her wolf was starting to come out. He could smell it, a bitter metallic odor, almost like blood... a precursor to the change. She was a newborn werewolf, and strong emotions could spur on the transformation; he knew that from first hand experience. If she shifted now, it could be disastrous. As far as Eric knew, a whole platoon could be watching them from behind those cameras, ready to burst in at a moment's notice. Eric realized that all Cynthia could think about was escape. Self-preservation was an especially powerful force for a werewolf.

Before Eric could act, the man responded coolly, totally unphased. "You know I can't do that. Not right now. But I know how you feel, and I agree with you. I'd like to get out of here myself. This is a bad place for any of us to be. If you give me a chance, I'll explain everything."

Cynthia's eyes reverted to their human brown. Eric let out a sigh of relief. He had seen it all, from the righteous fanatic approach to the worried father approach. He knew how to spot a white lie, and this guy was good at his job; Cynthia bought into his charisma. As long as she felt better, and wasn't on the verge of shifting, Eric didn't care what the man said.

"Perhaps a more proper introduction is in order. Then, maybe I can answer some of your questions."

Eric wondered if the man would tell them his real name.

"My name is Larson. I work for the government. I'm sure you're not surprised, Eric. But don't worry. You're not going to be strapped down for lab coats to poke at you, and neither will Cynthia. You are both here for your own protection."

Eric had to admit, this one was original. He had never been drugged and brought out to the middle of nowhere for his own protection. Larson's justification was hard to believe, and he knew it.

"I apologize for bringing you here the way we did. Tranquilizers are a harsh thing, but hopefully you can understand our measures. It can be very difficult to catch a predator in full sprint."

"Sure," Eric sneered, wincing, the pain from his fall suddenly sneaking up on him. "Whatever you say Larson. Just get on with it. You can't get away with carting off a couple of werewolves for very long, I hope you know that. After what happened at the convention, we're probably all over the news. Everyone will be looking for us." Larson started to respond, but Cynthia piped in with a cracked, worried voice, her strength from moments earlier softening under her own realization.

"Oh god... I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I just... I had to find him." It was like she had been slapped in the face. The solemn reality of their situation was starting to get through to her. Eric realized that she must have felt somewhat responsible for their predicament.

Eric tried to reassure her. "No, no Cynthia, this wasn't your fault, it just--"

"Find who?" Larson asked, cutting him off sharply. He just wanted her to keep talking. The more questions she raised, the more she would be inclined to listen to him.

"Eric I mean. I had to go to the convention to meet him. I needed to. I can't explain it," she sniffled.

Larson continued, curious to see what Cynthia would reveal. "Oh? But you don't think Eric caused all this? He didn't... make you what you are?"

"No, of course not!" she blurted, staring at Larson intensely. "At least... I don't think he did." Cynthia and Eric looked at each other bewildered; they both held the same unanswered suspicion: what strange force brought them together? "I just... I don't know if I can describe it... I had a dream. Actually more like a nightmare... or even a hallucination. It got under my skin... it was like, it showed me what to do, where to go," she trailed off, dark memories briefly clouding her thoughts. "Something told me to go to him."

"A dream about wolves," Larson answered matter-of-factly. He already knew all the details. Cynthia's confession was just confirmation for him; it wouldn't affect anything in the long run, but maybe it would help them realize the gravity of their fate. "There was a storm too, yes? A deafening wind perhaps?"

Eric was disarmed. At once, he interrupted Larson before the girl could say anything else. "What do you mean? What do you mean, 'a storm?' What are you talking about?" he stammered, glancing at Cynthia. Was it the same nightmare? The same disturbing vision he had? Maybe that's why she was so drawn to him. Eric racked his mind for quick answers, but found nothing. "What the hell do you know about it?"

Noticing that Eric was on the verge of an outburst, Larson cut him off abruptly.

"Yes, I know about the dream. I know a few things that you don't understand yet, but you will soon. The agency has been following this situation for quite some time, since even before your magnificent transformation, Mr. Harper." Larson chose his words carefully. The last thing he wanted was to induce another panic; besides, Mr. Bryce would be none too pleased if he revealed too much.

"Agency? What agency?" Cynthia asked nervously.

The truth was on the cusp of revelation, and Eric's mouth was dry. He always suspected he was part of something bigger, something more significant; but he could never quite pinpoint it. He had seen hints, witnessed brief visions in his dreams, but somehow, Cynthia's transformation at the center must have brought everything to a head. Eric felt guilty, an old knot resurfacing in his stomach. He had treated being a werewolf like being a rockstar. He didn't respect the beast... once he wrestled control of it, the wolf was nothing more than a plaything for him, an easy ticket to excitement and adventure. Eric had always secretly welcomed the attention the wolf brought, taking immature delight in all the hatred, the worship, the unity, and the chaos his appearance had spawned; the consequences were insignificant to him. One day he would tear through some fundamentalist compound, and the next day, he would get paid for being snuggled at a fantasy convention. Almost like an ancient god toying with his followers, for a year Fenris dominated the imaginations and actions of millions of people.

A dim fear had always lurked in the back of his mind; a dark forest, a wild place of tooth and claw, beckoned him, but he had tried to ignore it. He hadn't wanted to let the wolf bring him closer to the primordial, natural roots of his being; with all his strength of will, he had tried to

suppress the very werewolf essence that made his heart leap at the beauty of woods and the scent of prey. Now, the dream wasn't a meager glimpse; it was a full-blown vision, one that he could no longer avoid. Eric didn't feel safe anymore, and he didn't feel like he was in control. Only Cynthia—like Nature's princess at last rescued—comforted him now, and he didn't even understand why.

Larson reacted to the question with surprise; he had been so enthralled by research over the past few days, he nearly forgot the answer.

"The Agency for Mythological Defense, of course." His response was sufficient. Its implications were staggering to them. The werewolves' jaws dropped.

"No more fooling around outdoors. Let me show you two inside. There's a shower and clean clothes in the locker room." He turned to re-enter the building. "We don't have much time, and there are many things you need to see."

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Eric's earlier suspicion turned out to be right. This was an old ranger's station, retrofitted with the enclosure in the back, along with a bit of surveillance equipment. At least the building had hot water. Eric and Cynthia finished their shower and put on the clean, generic cotton clothes Larson had left in the locker room. There weren't any security cameras in the washroom, luckily (probably because there were only two doors in the whole place, and both of them had complicated-looking keypads... they would be hard-pressed to escape.) For now, Eric and Cynthia started to feel more like guests and less like prisoners, although the atmosphere was still uneasy.

Light streamed in from high windows as they entered the round foyer. Larson was waiting patiently for them, hands folded on the polished oak table in the center of the room. Amidst a dozen stacks of file folders, thick dusty books, and a few other strange trinkets and curios, Larson had set a plate of ham sandwiches.

"Have a seat. I made these for you." Larson didn't even look at them. He slid up to the table and started fidgeting with his papers. Tentatively, Eric and Cynthia took seats next to each other. Hunger had finally gotten to them—it had been at least 24 hours since they ate anything—and they both eagerly tore into the sandwiches like they hadn't eaten in months. "There. Now I hope you're feeling better. You'll both want to save your energy."

Larson had spoken with Mr. Bryce while the two werewolves were cleaning up. The old man was apparently on route via helicopter, and would arrive sometime that afternoon. Larson's new directive was to keep talking until Mr. Bryce arrived, a request that didn't particularly enthrall him. Chit-chat was not one of his strong points. In the past, his targets might have required interrogation, or in rare cases, nullification; but certainly not entertainment. Larson was getting uncomfortable with the whole situation. He knew how dire the circumstances were, and he couldn't help but wonder whether it was a smart decision to tell Eric and Cynthia anything at all, at least not until he knew the Agency's final course of action.

"Now Mr. Harper. And Ms. Silver." Larson eyed them intently. Eric raised an eyebrow at Cynthia. This was the first time he heard her last name. He was embarrassed... he realized they hadn't thoroughly introduced themselves. "Time is of the essence here. So here's what I'm going to do to make this easy on all of us." Larson impulsively drummed his fingers on the table, waiting to see if he had their full attention.

Eric had no reason not to listen to him... not at this point. If Larson knew anything at all about his dream, or about his encounter with Cynthia (what secrets was she hiding? Did she even know?) then he needed to find out... urgently. He shifted in his seat, leaning forward to get a good look at the table and its contents. He was restless, and so was she; they were teetering at the edge of something colossal, and Eric didn't know if they were ready for it.

Larson, on the other hand, was ready for anything. He had devoted the past few years of his life on this work; he probably knew it backwards and forwards, but it would take words from the horse's mouth to put together the final pieces in the puzzle. Quietly he took note of Eric's



discomfort, and he continued. "You will ask me a question. And I'll answer it. If you ask me something that I do not wish to answer, you'll know."

"And understand this." Larson reckoned he might as well be honest; this was almost like a confessional for him. A levee was about to break, and he only hoped the flood wouldn't sweep away everything they had worked for. Information could be a dangerous weapon, especially when the very fate of mankind hung in the balance; doling out revelations too recklessly could be disastrous. "I have some questions myself, as does the Agency. It would benefit everyone involved if I could have your utmost cooperation, Mr. Harper."

With a brief glance over the haphazardly laid-out materials, Eric caught a glimpse of a peculiar figurine: a tiny, stone-chiseled wolf. For some reason, the wolf grasped his attention more than any of the dry papers or indiscernible diagrams on the table. Picking it up, he studied it, intrigued.

Larson let Eric gaze at the figure for a few moments before breaking the silence. "Familiar, isn't it?"

Eric didn't answer him. He realized that it *was* familiar, but like so much else, he didn't know *why*. Cynthia saw that Eric was transfixed by the statue. She wanted to say something, anything, to break the spell; she intended to just ask a simple question, but she ended up spilling her guts instead.

"Look Mr. Larson. I don't know much about what's going on here. Before yesterday I was just a normal girl. I go to high school, I have parents, and I live in a house with a yard." Larson mused quietly. Maybe his confessional wouldn't be so one-sided after all. "Yeah, I watch TV. I watch movies, and I know everything about shadowy conspiracies, monsters, and whatever. And I already know the answer to this question. But I wanted to hear it straight from you, because you obviously know more than Eric here." Eric glanced at her disapprovingly, his concentration on the figurine instantly broken. "No offense Eric."

"So. I want you to tell me. Am... I... a werewolf?" Cynthia could already guess the truth, in fact she admitted it; but that didn't stop her heart from beating faster. Her stress level rose quickly; her face turned pink, and she put both hands on the table to stab at Larson with a killing glare. Eric started to get nervous, but Larson remained calm. Gently, Larson started to dig around in his pocket, before producing what looked like a small mirror.

"I keep this mirror around, just in case I need to show someone the truth." Larson fought off a flashback; he had used the tiny, polished piece of metal many times before, to answer questions much like Cynthia's. Without reservation, he held it up to her face.

"See for yourself." Cynthia's eyes, nearly wolfish, and forest green as they had turned before, shot open as she gazed at her reflection. A short gasp escaped her lips. Cynthia snatched the mirror from Larson's hand and leered at herself. She wasn't shocked at the realization... no,

Cynthia felt something else. Her green eyes reflected a new beauty, a strange fantasy, an essence she had always glimpsed in fog-laden dreams, but could never grasp: it was as if Mother Nature herself had injected purity into her soul. Cynthia felt... triumphant.

With a burden lifted from her shoulders, the girl set the mirror down on the table slumped back in her seat.

"You didn't see the eyes of a monster there?" Larson mulled over his own question. He stood up patiently and began to pace the foyer, his arms behind his back. Eric and Cynthia sat mesmerized. His inquiry was rhetorical; he ended up answering himself. "No, of course not. As Mr. Harper has been eager to point out to his millions of screaming devotees, he, and others like him should they exist, are presumably not monsters after all. If he were, we would have removed him from play a long time ago. Luckily he was not—and my funding has never been stronger. I suppose I should thank you for that, Eric."

Eric shot back with a question of his own. "Removed from play? You mean assassinated, right? I'm not an idiot Larson. I've dealt with all kinds of would-be monster killers, and they all fit the same mold."

"And yet we're not your average monster killers, Mr. Harper. Surely you've figured that out by now."

Eric remained unimpressed. "Then why don't you tell me what you do, Larson. We'd both love to hear about it. What the hell kind of person locks himself, unarmed, with two werewolves, in a shack in the middle of the woods, without so much as batting an eyelid?"

"A fair question." Larson's gaze turned more serious. "The answer is a hundred years old, Mr. Harper." Lost in thought, Larson started to twirl his pen absentmindedly; almost like he had been planning this spiel for years. "We are a shield, one forged at the turn of the twentieth century in response to rising supernatural activity in areas populated by human beings. Despite what you might think, mythological events are not incredibly common, and their proceedings are rarely notable. But in the event that they are, as it were, significant to the well-being of our species, the Agency for Mythological Defense will step in. For every forest we raze, every stone we upturn in our quest to expand our hold on the world, on occasion, we stumble upon the world's secrets."

"Werewolves were one of those secrets, weren't they," Eric speculated.

"Yes they were. And they weren't alone. Our goal was to protect Western citizens against what we perceived to be imminent supernatural threats. Through a combination of containment and misinformation, we've succeeded in shielding the public at large from situations that might have escalated to panic-level proportions. For example, these days, Roswell is a lunatic hoax, and the Beast of Bray Road is just a wild dog; no one really knows the truth. And we were perfectly fine with our methods... that is, until you came along." Larson shot him a fuming glance. "You, Mr. Harper, changed everything."

Eric smiled, silently gloating to himself. He felt somewhat vindicated to have toppled the Agency's conspiracy. He had suspected organizations like Larson's existed; the more trouble he caused them, the more satisfied he felt.

"Unfortunately you have no idea just how much is about to change. It's more than you think. Far, far more than you could possibly imagine. You should have just stayed in the woods like a good wolf."

Eric retorted sharply. "But I'm not a wolf. Not entirely, and I'm not some 'supernatural threat.' People deserved to see the truth."

Larson let out a snort. "A lot of good you did by showing them. You threw every scientific and religious assumption out the window. You created an intellectual society on the brink of total chaos, Mr. Harper. People don't like to find out that their next door neighbor could be a ravenous demon hiding in pink flesh."

Eric shot out of his seat, teeth clenched. "I'm not a goddamn demon!"

"It doesn't matter what you are, or what you think you are," Larson responded dryly. "It only matters what people perceive, and the fact of the matter is that in the wake of your appearance, your tenuous supporters did not come easily. You *did* cause chaos, Mr. Harper."

"Chaos that your agency allowed." Eric crossed his arms and sat back down. Tired of being berated, he was starting to get upset; Larson wasn't answering anything.

Larson seemed annoyed at Eric's accusation. "Our organization has thus far operated unseen. To expose ourselves then would have only exacerbated the situation and fostered more distrust among the public. Tell me something. Do you even trust yourself, Mr. Harper?"

The question caught him off guard. Come to think of it, he didn't trust himself, not really; not since he witnessed the birth of a new werewolf at his feet, and assumed it was somehow his doing. It was only yesterday. The girl-turned-wolf lay panting... a figure from a dream. Just thinking of her somehow forced the storm-laden nightmare to echo in his mind yet again; he remembered it vividly now. Closing his eyes for even a brief second, Eric heard the drums pounding, the cold wind whirling, the fire roaring.

Eric peered at Cynthia, and noticed that she was gazing at him dreamily. The same memory, the same reverie pulsed in her heart. It was as if a part of their being had become entwined on some otherworldly level. She spoke softly, and it took Eric a moment to realize that she was addressing Larson, and not him.

"The nightmare. You mentioned before that you knew about it, that you knew what it meant."

Eric kept his mouth shut... he needed to hear what Larson had to say. The dream weighed more heavily on him than any other feeling, any other memory. In such a short time, it had become a burden.

Larson stopped pacing to address Cynthia directly. "How strong do you think you are, Ms. Silver? How much truth can you and Eric tolerate? I've shattered minds with truth before, and yours carries a special gravity."

Cynthia averted her eyes and stayed quiet. She honestly didn't know her own strength; she couldn't even guess her own willingness to accept the truth.

"The nightmare feels... ancient, doesn't it? Like a memory from some other world that you don't quite remember inhabiting? Yet... as vivid as a painting in a museum."

Eric was silent. What Larson said was true.

"Ahhhh so if what I'm saying is true, and I believe it is," he analyzed the two werewolves for any sign of deceit, and there was none, "then my research has not been in vain. The dream comes in flashes, in symbols and brief images; there isn't a single recording of the events in the nightmare. We had to assemble the premonition piece by excruciating piece. The memories of gods don't die with time, Mr. Harper. No, in many legends throughout history, the gods are told to live eternally. Although they may be forgotten by men, by the gods, men have not been forgotten." Larson reached over the table to pick up his wolf curio. Again gazing at it intently, he paced the room slowly.

"There was a time, Mr. Harper, in a past with scarcely any record, where nature herself was much like a god to men. A god with whom an early, primitive, mankind, a mankind who made no differentiation between himself and the beast of the woods, once made a covenant."

"That sounds like a load of nature-worshiper BS. Like something I'd read about in the pagan section at the book store. I don't believe any of that junk," Eric skulked. It was the kind of superstitious rhetoric he had heard a dozen times before from the starry-eyed mystics that congregated around the Wolf Center. They always had grand visions of ancient pacts and goddess-driven prophecies that for reasons only they seemed to understand, were about to come true, if only in thanks to *his* arrival. If there was one thing besides beast-man that Eric had not planned to be, it was a new-age symbol.

"I'm sure a year ago, you didn't believe in werewolves either."

Larson's point was clear.

"You see, in nearly every system of myth for thousands of years, we observe a common theme. A description of humanity's final culmination. A timeline that suggests not a straight line, but in fact, a circle. We start at one point on the circle, spiritually and methodically pure, and in time

move away from that point, becoming muddled and corrupt, eventually moving so far away that we can no longer see it. And then, just as our civilization seems to move beyond reliance on myth, just as our earliest covenants are forgotten, we see our inevitable return to that point looming on the horizon. An old god comes to reclaim her territory."

Cynthia cut in ominously. "What you're talking about sounds like the end of the world."

"It does sound like it, doesn't it Ms. Silver?" Larson quipped.

"I went to Church when I was a little girl, and they used to read from Revelations, about all the weird signs and Biblical events that would come during the end times. Are you about to tell us that its actually going to happen?"

Larson chuckled to himself. Ms. Silver was so naive, but he couldn't blame her; it was a popular superstition to subscribe to, mainly because it was already cleanly recorded and described. There were no secrets, no research involved in interpreting Revelations; it was too easy. He looked at her coldly.

"Well?" she pressed him.

"You're talking about the Bible." Larson replied frankly. "No, not as far as we can tell. No, Ms. Silver, what I'm talking about isn't an end to the world, and it has nothing to do with Abrahamic revelations, although many people seem to be convinced that it does."

At once, he thought of Mr. Bryce. Larson found it odd that Mr. Bryce was taking so long to transmit the agency's preferred course of action. Bryce was a senior chairman of the committee, and his orders were typically swift and efficient, regardless of the severity of the circumstances at hand. Larson tried not to let his personal curiosity distract him. Asking too many questions was a dangerous practice for someone in his position.

"I believe it's a return to the beginning. A cross roads, if you will. We are nearing our original point on the circle. Like I already mentioned."

Curiously, the committee's dedication to Larson's research had been less than stellar in the past few weeks. Although they left him to his own devices, Bryce had been particularly scornful whenever Larson's research interrupted his field duties. They had been questioning his conclusions more often, and his recommended procedures had been voted down on more than one occasion. Larson had simply written it off as a conflict of interest. The agency had always counted on Larson for his field proficiency, not for his scholarly compunction. It was a stigma he had hoped to reverse, but his efforts were in vain.

"How do you know?" Eric looked at the research strewn across the table. What Larson was trying to describe made sense in a way, but Eric still hadn't fully grasped the entirety of it. "What makes your agency so sure this is happening?"

"All our research, all the countless minute puzzle pieces, pointed us in the right direction. A rune phrase on a stone in Germany, an out-of-place sentence in a Cherokee legend, a rotten tome in a Vatican sub chamber. For decades I've been piecing together the truth, and every new creature, every supernatural occurrence we encountered, only strengthened our drive. We had gathered so much information that we had no clue how to organize it."

He paused, squinting, staring up at the bright window above.

"That is, until the messengers arrived. The dreamers."

Eric and Cynthia sat up in their chairs compulsively. What did Larson mean by that?

"The Adam and Eve we had been searching for. The one sign clarifying that yes, the circle was closing, that yes, we were finally, at long last nearing an apex of our existence. Mr. Harper... Ms. Silver... you, I'm afraid, are poised to usher in a new era for human identity."

A grim silence blanketed the room. Cynthia was drained, and Eric sat solemnly, his thoughts twisted in two different directions. Part of him wanted to spit into this smug fool's face for lying to them; after all, it couldn't possibly be true. How could they be harbingers of doom? It just didn't make sense. Yet, another part of him wanted to believe Larson. Maybe that's why the agency had captured them for their own protection? If they were part of some inevitable prophecy, if they had some incomprehensible role in the future of mankind, shouldn't they do everything in their power to make sure it comes to pass?

Unless it really *was* the end of the world. If it was... maybe getting rid of them was the only way to stop it.

Apparently they both came to the same realization. Eric and Cynthia looked at each other desperately. Slowly sliding back his chair, Eric got up as quietly as he could. Larson was still staring up the window, deep in thought; he didn't seem to notice them. Eric took Cynthia's hand, and they softly started to back away from the table. The front door was heavy, its lock fitted with the same keypad Eric had seen earlier. Only a werewolf would have the brawn to smash through it...

Larson turned, and looked at his watch. "I wouldn't bother trying to leave if I were you."

Eric and Cynthia froze. It was like Larson could read their minds.

"It's already started, Mr. Harper. All it took was for you two to come together. We had been watching, waiting... the location was certainly unexpected, but the timing was impeccable, and the results were predictable. Ms. Silver's true essence was revealed, and our—my—efforts were justified." He gestured loosely to the table full of work. "Twenty years of accumulation; perhaps the most complete analysis of a mythological phenomenon in history, condensed into just a few hundred pages." He stepped closer to them, looking them in the eye. "Your appearance, and

everything here, is simply the conclusion. The final step in a long journey towards reconciliation."

Eric could feel pins and needles on the back of his neck, and he noticed that Cynthia was trembling. Larson was right: it was too much for him to comprehend. His mind simply wasn't strong enough, and neither was hers. Being a werewolf was one thing, but being the prophesied messenger of a new epoch of human existence was a trial that he didn't feel like bearing. The conclusion, reconciliation, a new era: Larson's words pounded Eric's brain, and the spectral nightmare burst into his being as the pieces finally fell together like lock and key. The wolf howled, the dancing figures changed, morphing into their new shapes, their new being, men into wolves, a storm descending, fire dying, the frostbitten goddess of nature herself surging with delight as her ancient pact at last was fulfilled; the girl bonded to him, her blood his own! The images were too much; too much! Was this a descent into insanity? Without warning, Eric stepped forward briskly, exploding in Larson's face.

"You listen to me Larson! I'm getting tired of your goddamn conspiracies. I don't want this... I don't want it! I don't want your protection, or your prophecy, or whatever hell you've unleashed! I can take care of myself, and I can take care of Cynthia too." He held Cynthia close; Eric could tell that she was on the verge of sobbing. "I don't give a damn about your research, or your agency. You're trying to tell us that we're part of the damn apocalypse?! Are you out of your mind?" Larson held up his hands defensively, but he couldn't get a word in. "All you've told us... all you... all you..." Eric started huffing, the prickling sensation on his skin growing tighter, more intense. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Cynthia breathing heavily too, tiny beads of sweat appearing on her reddened forehead. Eric looked at his hands in horror as his muscles tightened, his chest contracted, his skin crawled... they were transforming.

Eric's mind raced. How could he lose control? He had perfected the shift a long time ago; he could control it through any burst of emotion. But now he was powerless. "No..." he grumbled, his palate lowering, his throat twisting subtly. Eric groaned with pain, as if it was his first change, and he fell to his knees. Next to him, Cynthia screamed, a guttural, visceral yell from shock. The nightmare faded from his mind, replaced by the haze of instinct, the rushing of chemical euphoria; the wolf was here at last, and it gnawed furiously to be free.

His eyes were closed. Letting the pain fall away from his mind, Eric took a deep breath, and exhaled. It was an old practice; he learned it from his martial arts teacher before going public. He meditated... a deep breath, and exhale. Deep breath. Exhale. He ignored the beast. He focused only on his human face; he visualized himself in front of a mirror, unchanging and unflinching. Reaching out, he found Cynthia's hand and grasped it tightly. His change was reverting, but she wasn't out of the woods yet. Eric kept his eyes closed, but he whispered to her. "Take a deep breath Cynthia. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes. Think about your face in the mirror. Don't think about anything else. Take a deep breath and exhale."

After a few minutes (what seemed like an eternity,) Eric started to calm down. He was back to normal, and out of the corner of his vision, he noticed Cynthia had started to come back as well.

They sat on the cold wooden floor, motionless except for the rise and fall of their chests.

Larson's surprisingly gentle voice broke the calm. "Now you might start to understand. You won't be able to do that for long, Eric. Gradually, the wolf will break its bonds. And nothing, and I mean nothing, can stop it. Not for you. Not for anyone." A rare twinge of sympathy plucked Larson's conscience. Eric Harper truly had no clue what was in store for him. What lay in store for all of them.

Cynthia had tried to be brave, but finally, a single tear rolled down her cheek. She had seen her green eyes in the mirror and thought it was a gift, one that she could use at will; but the idea of turning into a werewolf permanently was a hard shock. She and Eric would no longer have a place in human society. A strange marriage of man and beast; what would it be like to live this way? Her parents, her school, her friends... she imagined that they would be gone, or at least, they wouldn't remember her. All she would have left was... Eric.

Eric glanced at Cynthia, and felt the warm spring in his chest start to well up again. He could tell she saw him the same way; it was a strange, supernatural love. It suddenly dawned on him: even if this was the end of Earth as he knew it, at least they would be together, their destiny woven.

He turned to Larson, who had stood silently watching.

"Why us? Why were we chosen for this?"

Larson pondered the question, turning it over in his head, thousands of notes fluttering by in search of the answer. "That," he noted, "is something we haven't been able to determine. Perhaps the answer will come in time." Larson's attention snapped back to duty.

"My superior will be arriving very soon. I would imagine we'll be going to a safer, larger facility. Whatever happens, the Agency will guarantee your safety." It was a blatant lie of course; Larson had no idea what the committee truly had in mind for Eric and Cynthia. At least they would remain calm in the mean time.

Larson opened his cell phone and started dialing, Eric and Cynthia watching tiredly. After a moment, his face drew a worried look, which in turn, made them worried too; it was the first time they had seen Larson appear anything less than perfectly composed.

Larson muttered under his breath. "Goddammit Bryce." Why wasn't Mr. Bryce answering? His helicopter was supposed to arrive on the hour, and it was nearly a quarter past. The old man was never on time, but it was one thing to be late; it was another thing to not answer the phone. Larson had done everything the committee demanded... not only had he contained the werewolves, but he had briefed them, comforted them, and endured them, even though it wasn't his typical job to do so.

He dialed again. There was no answer. Again, and yet again, Mr. Bryce failed to pick up his



phone. Was something wrong? What was the delay? Had Mr. Bryce run into some unexpected difficulty? What? His brow furrowed; this was highly unusual. Larson was never kept out of the loop; even when he was deep into a major field initiative, communication with the committee had been prompt.

The station was dead silent. Larson couldn't even hear birds chirping in the woods.

His pupils narrowed. The blood ran from his face. With a staggering, horrifying revelation, Larson understood what was happening.

"Eric, Cynthia," he muttered. They both stood up anxiously; Larson rarely used their first names. Eric sensed something had gone wrong.

"We have to leave. We have to leave. Now."

"What?! Why? What's going on?" Distress started to creep into Cynthia's voice.

Larson frantically, maddeningly punched in the numbers to open the front door. Its light turned from red to green, and he heaved the door open instantly, bright afternoon sun pouring through into the station. Eric grabbed Cynthia's hand; the time for questions was over. Larson whirled around, exasperated.

"Let's go, let's go! Move it, goddammit!"

Rushing out of the building with the two werewolves in tow, Larson stumbled hastily down the steps and into the drive. A short trail led from the station down to his jeep; he ran, and they ran with him. He left all of his research, all his precious work, his evidence, his analysis. It didn't matter anymore. He got the answers he was looking for. Now all he could do was run, his chest burning; he hoped Eric and Cynthia were still behind him, but he didn't turn to look. They were almost there.

A piercing scream ripped the sky. The noise was clear, unmistakable, deafening. It was no helicopter.

Rubber smoked as the Jeep's tires burned to escape the driveway. He didn't have time to tell them to hang on. The black vehicle tore away, crashing in reverse down the path, and then slammed down the trail into the woods with full four-wheeled force. A chain gate smashed with a clank; Larson had forgotten about it, and it sent the Jeep into a lurch and drift. Tall pine trees zoomed past them on either side.

A flash, a roar, orange flame casting cruel shadows on the trees, piercing the daylight with an intensity even brighter than the setting sun. The billowing fireball and shock wave of a hundred-thousand-dollar piece of technology engulfed Larson's ranger station, throwing a million flaming shards of debris into the air. The agency's betrayal drifted into the sky, a black pillar of smoke.

Groaning, Cynthia shoved herself out of the shattered Jeep and fell to the ground with a thunk. Fighting off a haze of disorientation, she looked around as sharply as she could. The momentous force of the explosion that decimated the facility had pushed their vehicle off the trail, sending it careening into a pine tree. A sick feeling choked Cynthia's throat as she examined the wreck: Larson was slumped over the steering wheel, unmoving, the front end of the Jeep crumpled into an indistinguishable mass. Cynthia couldn't tell if he was still alive. In an instant, she thought about Eric. He wasn't in the Jeep. Whirling around, Cynthia searched for him frantically, an inner voice begging that he was okay.

Eric lay on the muddy trail with one hand on his stomach, his eyes half closed. He must have been tossed from the Jeep when it crashed. At once, Cynthia rushed over to him, kneeling over his limp body; she saw his chest rising and falling, and sighed with relief. At least he was alive, and still conscious.

"Ugh... Cynthia," Eric started to move, trying fruitlessly to sit up. His strength was gone; grumbling in discomfort, Eric closed his eyes and laid still.

"Eric, just hang on. You're alright. Just sit still." Strangely, Cynthia noticed that Eric didn't have a single scratch on him... no scrapes, no blood. Few people could survive a throw like that, much less come out of it untouched. Her thoughts drifted to a movie she had seen once, and a sudden idea startled her. Werewolves could heal fast.

A sharp metallic clank caught her attention; turning, she saw Larson, shirt torn and head bleeding, sluggishly try to pry open the broken Jeep door. He squinted with pain, his arm resting on the door; he could barely move. Cynthia hurried over to the wreckage to help him; Larson's voice cracked as he struggled to speak.

"That's not... that's not all," he stopped to wretch a heaving cough, and Cynthia noticed a trickle of blood from his lips. He was badly hurt. "They're on their way. They need to... they need to... finish... ughhh," Larson slumped back in the car seat, his face twisted in an expression of agony.

Cynthia could only guess what Larson meant. It took a single sound from the woods to clarify it for her.

It was a dog barking. The incomprehensible shouts of men on the hunt echoed down through the pines.

Eyes wide, she stared back at Larson, furious for an answer.

"Agents." He moaned. Larson wheezed once, and fell silent, slipping into unconsciousness.

Cynthia choked back tears of panic; what the hell was she supposed to do? She was just a girl, she had no weapons and no way to escape. She wasn't strong enough to drag Eric through the woods by herself, much less Larson, yet she couldn't leave them behind.

"Dammit. Dammit," she mumbled under her breath. Cynthia thought about just letting them come. Maybe they wouldn't hurt her. Maybe they were just after Larson, and they would let her and Eric go. Of course, these were just rationalizations; the still-billowing column of black smoke beyond the treeline was a sobering reminder for her. The werewolves were marked for death, and with an almost giddy depression, Cynthia accepted it.

She could hear the agents drawing closer; a bizarre twinge in her nose... she could smell the musky scent of the hunting dogs even from this far. Cynthia smirked with a dry fatalism; the wolf must have given her that sense of smell. The odor was almost overpowering, and yet...

All of a sudden, a new sensation, a new understanding, broke through a window in Cynthia's consciousness. She wasn't going to die today. Neither was Eric. Hell, she would save Larson too, even though he was the one who kidnapped them in the first place. In a moment of clarity, Cynthia's own eyes, the eyes she had witnessed in Larson's mirror, flashed into her mind. She had seen a perfection in them, the soul of a new creature, a creature awakened with purity—and and the power, and mercilessness—of the Earth itself.

At last, the wolf broke its chain: no longer repressed, no longer hidden, the primal surge of a timeless beast burst forth into Cynthia's blood stream.

She let the uncomprising rush of pleasure and pain engulf her body. It was an avalanche of feeling, and she remembered it clearly: memories of the convention center boiled to life in her mind, and then melted away, pure sensation overtaking her immediate consciousness.

An electric shock convulsed Cynthia's frame as her nerves mutated, her muscles morphing into a taut sculpture of oddly human anatomy. She fell to her knees; the change was irreversible now, and she embraced it. Shutting her eyes tight, she felt her face cracking: her teeth started to rearrange, now ending in carnivorous points, her entire jaw elongating; it was an incredibly tense sensation, as if her skull was being squeezed in a vise. With ears migrating upwards into devilish peaks, the savage visage of a wolf quickly replaced her human features. Elsewhere, parts of her skeleton stretched and reformed; through a prickling fog, Cynthia felt a dull, alien pain at the base of her spine as a wolf-ish tail snaked into place. Thick ropes of tendon lengthened forcefully as her feet, abandoning her shoes, distorted into something more four-toed, clawed, and canine.

A soft ripping noise filtered into her now-pointed ears. Her clothes began to tear; her green eyes opened just in time to witness the remnants of her pale human hide disappear under a thickening forest of warming, steel-tinted fur. She held up her hands, and with wonder, she saw her whitening nails grow eerily into sharpened talons.

Time seemed to slow down. Cynthia's heartbeat pulsed methodically, perfectly; she could feel it intensely. Like a drug, her wolfish blood coursed through her limbs, flooding her consciousness with clean senses. Her eyes turned to the woods, her lupine ears perked involuntarily: the forest was impossibly sharp, like a curtain had been finally lifted from her vision, and the mulling buzz

of a thousand scents and noises swarmed her brain. It didn't overwhelm her, not like she expected. Instead, it was like a lush, delectable symphony. Concentrating, she could filter any single voice, or she could let them all run together in their own natural chorus; it was an ecstasy of sensual wisdom that no human being could possibly comprehend.

The transformation was complete. Her body, once unaccustomed to the change, was now strengthened by it. Her fear melted under the pulsing realization of her own ferocious purity; her own natural exuberance tempered by her still-intact human mind. Two worlds coalesced into one.

She carefully, slowly stood up, adjusting flawlessly to digitigrade feet; her balance came naturally. Fragments of her clothing fell to the ground, but for now, she was too entranced to let modesty creep up on her.

Maybe this was what it felt like to be the messenger of a god... perhaps, even a god herself.

The agents were almost upon their position.

She was ready to show them her gift.

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The agent's eyes were like a hawk. With a sweat-stained grimace, beneath his camouflage cap he peered restlessly into the dim woods, his comrades at either side carefully picking their boots through the underbrush. They were silent, but their rifles were ready, their armor piercing bullets and thick body armor assuredly more than adequate protection against any threat. Bryce had only sent eight of them, a bit smaller than what comprised a typical sweep-and-clear crew, but that was all the agency could afford to send; even as important as this mission had been, their resources were strained to the breaking point. No matter: they were only looking for bodies after all, and bodies don't put up much of a fight. Their destination was clear enough; the profuse smoke and ashes still poured out of the blasted station ruins, the fumes of burning plastic and lumber stinging their nostrils.

Steadily and methodically, they paced ever closer to the smoke. Two of the guards walked burly German Shepherds by the leash; the dogs, barking madly only moments before and tugging desperately to dash into the woods after some unseen thing, were now quiet and complacent. Almost as if they were frightened. One dog whimpered softly and stopped walking; his master's face hardened into a concerned frown. He held up a hand, a signal to stop which each agent saw clearly; the line drew to a halt. The whimpering of dogs was the only sound they heard against the not-too-distant crackling of flames. A cold mountain wind kicked about a twirl of dead leaves, but the agents weren't distracted; they stood resolute, squinted eyes scanning the trees slowly for any sign of danger. They saw nothing.

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A fresh, predatory urge meshed seamlessly with Cynthia's conscious personality, a wild and bestial thread that most civilized human beings had long since abandoned. It wasn't like a second voice in conflict with her, as she had imagined it would be, and it certainly didn't seem irrational; no sinister, monstrous presence urged her to commit uncontrollable acts of violence. Nevertheless, her mind had been altered; nature had taken her human cognition and sculpted it with a feral, animalistic intuition.

She had witnessed Eric tame the beast, or at least assert a dominant rationality over the influence of wolfish instinct, but that wasn't something she was quite able—or even willing—to do.

If this was what being a werewolf felt like, this pure unfettered feeling of freedom and unrestrained wild revelry, then Cynthia didn't know if she ever wanted to be human again. With each passing moment, a bit of her identity as a normal suburban girl fell away like a puzzle piece that just didn't seem to fit, replaced by the vibrant (yet strangely frightening) essence of the wolf.

Crouching motionless amid the trees, her hot breath turning to thin fog in the mountain air, she tilted her ears (that she could move them at will was odd, but somehow expected) and lifted her nose to the wind, collecting every new sense. Every smell, every image, every noise sparked a bizarre twinge of familiarity that flared in her mind and then vanished as quickly as it came. Instinct found a matching emotion for every sensation, and unconsciously, her humanity found a

matching word: to Cynthia, the brown woods looked like “home,” the crackling fire sounded like “pain,” and the fear-ridden stench of the approaching soldiers perked a sense of... “prey.”

Prey. The blood-tinged thought echoed both consciously and subtly. Yet, Cynthia wasn't shocked at herself. No, this particular instinct was what she *longed* for, what she desperately needed. She focused on it, but she quickly discovered that focus wasn't a werewolf's strong point. Her brain repeated the word for her, the instinct now returning to excite her heart into a pounding rhythm. At this very moment, she felt cunning, and powerful, and deadly; a swell of natural arrogance uplifted her. This is what would save them. Instinct, and the primeval wisdom she had gained from it. Somehow, without being taught, with no guidance whatsoever, Cynthia knew exactly what the concept of “prey” meant: it wasn't just a word, or even a sensation; it was almost like the very meaning of life itself. She was the huntress now unleashed: a frail girl no more, she embraced the wolf, and she would use its power to be as destructive as she desired (and desire, it seemed, was slowly becoming indistinguishable from impulse.)

Quietly, Cynthia licked her fangs, feeling their sharpness, realizing the horrible crushing power surrounding them. A soft pant grew more frenzied as her blood began to charge her limbs. Was the beast taking over? Was she urging it on? It didn't matter... her muscles grew taut; she couldn't stand still much longer.

At last, it was done. In her last fleeting thought before she tore after the odor of living meat, Cynthia's wild-spun mind briefly recalled what Larson had said earlier. The wolf had broken its bonds. And nothing would be able to stop it now.

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Groggily, Eric crept through the underbrush, trying to stay quiet. His head ached; Eric's strange werewolf blood could mend nearly any injury, but the pain always lingered. With some strain he managed to drag himself onto a ledge overlooking the forest bed, not far from the wrecked jeep. He had seen Cynthia transform into the beast and disappear through the trees. A nervous voice in his conscience told him what she was about to do. But he needed to see it for himself. Too weak to help her, Eric could only hope that Cynthia's will was strong enough to withstand the onslaught of untamed instinct. Of every urge that could possibly befall a werewolf's primal mind, the desire to hunt was a flame nearly inextinguishable.

Ahead, with a squint against the setting Sun, Eric could make out a handful of tall figures against the tree line. They couldn't see him; carefully, he peered through a patch of weeds and thin branches. It was the agents, but they had stopped moving, and their dogs were silent. Eric wondered what they were doing. Had they been spooked by something?

Without warning, out of the corner of his vision, Eric saw a new figure rushing across the woods, a shadow, a dark blur that moved so quickly that he almost missed it. Eerily, the hulking creature hardly made a sound, even though it seemed to crash recklessly through the leaves and brush. His eyes widened, and Eric clenched his teeth hard. A sullen feeling of horror seeped into his gut. It was a devil. It was Cynthia... or something that *used* to be Cynthia. Eric had fought off humans as a werewolf before, but he was always careful and deliberate; he never wanted to hurt anyone, much less kill them, despite what his ravenous predatory impulses demanded. At once, a dark, violent dance erupted in the forest, a terror that he would be forced to witness. Somewhere deep inside his consciousness, Eric's soul smirked grimly. Maybe his secret desire had always been this. Perhaps it was nearly every man's desire... to be a beast, and hunt without remorse for the prey.

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The agent never saw the thing that doomed him. A flash of muscle and fur, the werewolf flew from the woods in the blink of an eye. The human didn't have time to scream. In an instant, the swift beast, guided by pure instinctual wisdom, barreled into the agent with full force, sending him into the ground with a noise reminiscent of a hammer on wet cheese. His shocked face turned pale as ivory claws tore away his throat, blood soaking his body and the earth all around; the soldier's death came quickly.

Immediately, the agent's companions turned with frightened faces at the grisly beast, but they had little time to react; the werewolf bounded from her kill towards her second soft-fleshed target with a cunning and intentional efficiency. Unlike the last one, this agent screamed a torn-throat shout of panic as the bloodied nightmare lunged at him. Months of training dissolved as he threw up his arms to shield himself, dropping his gun.

Cynthia no longer saw human beings shredding beneath her talons. She saw something more akin to *food*. The wolf soothed her morality; instinct reminded her that what she was doing was

only natural. It wasn't murder, and it wasn't vengeance; it wasn't even self-defense... the agents were caught totally and completely unaware. It was as simple as slaughtering stray cattle that had haplessly wandered into her territory. When logic returned to her brain, when her senses and emotions finally had an opportunity to rest, she would remember perfectly clear what she had done, the death she had unleashed. Blissfully, she would escape remorse.

The coldness of it all, the sheer brutality of the controlled violence, disturbed Eric as he watched, mouth agape, from the trees. He was motionless. If he tried to help her (or worse, stop her,) she could turn on him, even if unintentionally.

An anonymous shout of “fall back!” caused the rest of the agents (and their abandoned dogs) to scatter feverishly in all directions like deer chased by gunshot. They ran for their lives as the huffing, bristling werewolf cut down a third, and then a fourth, of their comrades, including the sergeant who led them. Choked screams of pain and the horrid realization of death filtered into the woods. The beast had forgotten to use its claws on one, and instead clamped her powerful jaws over his head, crushing his skull like a melon; the mutilated body crumpled like a sack of rocks, and the werewolf was already bearing down upon her next victim before it even hit the ground.

The raw, bitter odor of blood only drove Cynthia into a stronger frenzy. Control was out of the question. Eric had shown her how to stop the shift before it reached its peak, but he had mentioned nothing about how to wrestle control of fully materialized werewolf Eros. She was the antithesis of the quiet, shy, goth schoolgirl who was sitting in class only days prior. Now, she had total power, the ultimate hunter, and her freed essence of being relished every second of it.

One terrified agent, a young recruit fresh out of boot camp, backed up against a tree and raised his rifle frantically at the beast. His pupils shrank with fear, his lip trembled; he squeezed the trigger, and a sharp, staccato *crack-crack-crack* filled the air. The range was just close enough, his aim, just good enough; the hot bullets pierced the werewolf's pelt.

Cynthia howled and yelped from the searing pain, and blood poured from the pinpoint wounds in her side, but she didn't stop. Saliva dripped from her gleaming teeth as she plodded towards her attacker, claws raised. She confronted him, and with a single swipe, his flimsy weapon flew to the dirt. Cowering, whimpering, he shut his eyes tight in anticipation.

Then, unexpectedly, perhaps from the pain, or maybe even from some hidden shred of compassion, she halted. The werewolf's heart began to slow. Slowly, curiously, the crimson haze of dead-set instinct that had guided her only moments before began to lift. Her prey had fled, and she was injured. Chest rising and falling deeply, Cynthia fell to her knees, ignoring the unarmed man in front of her. He took advantage of the moment and burst towards the woods... his life had been spared.

The beast knelt, blood slowly dripping from her maw, huge splotches of red already drying into her fur. The wolf decided that her hunt was over. She closed her eyes calmly. Her vision was



dim. It was the sudden surge of adrenaline resolving. All she could do was breath, and let her human soul return to the wolf; instinct, however feral, would always balance itself. Already, her bullet wounds began to close.

Overhead, the clouds began to form billowing amorphous shapes over the setting sun. As soon as he saw Cynthia drop to her knees, Eric leapt from his spot and ran to her. The agents were long gone.

A part of him half-heartedly wondered why the sky was turning dark in mid-afternoon. Perhaps it was his mind playing tricks on him. He had only one concern... Cynthia, and everything else, no matter how dire, was secondary. He had forgotten about Larson, about the wreck, the soldiers, and the bloody wake Cynthia had left... his devotion to the girl, however bizarre, was nearly absolute.

Eric slowed, and gently, carefully approached the kneeling werewolf. A drop of rain caught his attention, spattering on his shoulder, and more followed. Black clouds pooled overhead, and the dense rain began to penetrate the treetops. The dim sun and brewing storm cast the whole forest in an eerie shade of blue, and aside from the rain, everything was perfectly still.

“Cynthia?” Eric whispered, making sure to keep his distance.

Her lupine gaze turned to him, her deep green eyes lazily half-shut. Blood-mixed water trickled in rivulets down the werewolf's fur.

Cynthia didn't say a word. She couldn't. All she could muster was a dog-like whimper, her pointed ears turned down. She was cold, and only now did she embarrassingly realize that despite her wolfish pelt, she wore nothing. (It would be a terrible time to turn back into human being, she thought to herself... that is, if she even knew how.) Furthermore, the taste of blood in her mouth was both sweet and sickening, a grim reminder of the terror she had wrought. Her revelry had all but died, replaced by misery. As a werewolf, she was incredibly strong, but she wasn't prepared for this experience. Instinct alone had become unnervingly relentless; it made her too restless to be comfortable.

The wind began to gather momentum. It was a familiar wind, and a familiar storm. Eric gazed at the sky... he had seen those clouds before. They both had. Like in a dream.

“We have to go.” Eric knew that Larson was probably still alive, and he still had no clue where they were. If the Agency found out they had survived, Eric reckoned they would be chased to the ends of the Earth.

Cynthia stood up, dripping wet. Eric frowned. He knew what she must have felt like. She had been through both heaven and hell, exhilaration and nightmare... he was surprised she hadn't broken down already.

Sulking through the rain and mud, Eric and the wolf that was Cynthia trudged back to the jeep wreckage. Lightning flickered, and a deep thunder started to roll in the horizon. The storm stretched onward, as far as Eric could see... no rays of sun waited for them. It truly did seem like the end of the world.

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Larson fell out of the torn metal husk and landed painfully in the mud, cold water and blood already soaking his clothes. He released a grunt of pain and a wince. His shoulder was dislocated, his head was gashed, and several of his ribs were cracked. With every pulse, with every shallow breath, he could feel the bones grinding together; like electricity, white hot pain shot through his body as he lay broken. He could barely move, and although he had heard shouts and gunshots in the woods, he was helpless. Even if could stand up and run, it would be pointless anyway. Soon enough, the pain wouldn't matter anymore. *It* had already started. Bryce—the Agency—was too late. As Larson closed his eyes, his grimace turned into a bitter smile. He had really just been an observer. A watcher. For all his supposed power, for all his influence, Larson realized that in the end, he had built an archive merely chronicling the inevitable, and even that had been destroyed. Bryce was an insane fool, but his time was over.

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Eric and the wolf-girl found Larson laying not far from the jeep. He was still alive, and Eric was thankful for that, mainly because he had no idea where to go. They were soaked to the bone as the storm emptied a relentless torrent over the woods. Eric knelt close, and strained as hard as he could to hear Larson's weak rasp over the downpour.

"They're gone. They're all gone," he barked at the pained Larson. "We have to get out of here. Where do we go?"

Larson raised his head, and for a moment, he thought about trying to stand, but it was useless; the pain was too much. It took all his strength to talk. "The trail... goes for four miles, down the mountain... to a town, but..."

"A town? What town? Where are we Larson?!"

He took a quick glance at Cynthia to see if she was fine. The werewolf's ears were perked, and she twisted her head in a new direction every few seconds, taking in every sensation. Her instincts urged her to filter the rain for new sounds and scents. At least she was occupied.

Larson croaked. "Montana, Eric... we're in Montana."

Eric sighed. Every question answered was like a hundred pounds lifted from his shoulders. "What town? What town is it?" He shouted. Larson's face grew stiff. Even though Larson was injured, Eric could tell something—something else—was very wrong.

"We can't go there."

"What do you mean? Why not?" Maybe the town had a clinic, or even a hospital. Larson might go into shock if they couldn't get him there, and who knows if Bryce would send another team to look for the first. As he turned to Cynthia, he immediately knew what Larson meant... the girl was still transformed into a half-human beast. To show her fanged face in front of a town of isolated mountain folk would create panic. Cynthia lowered her muzzle and stared woefully at Eric with wolfish green eyes, and he snorted in frustration.

"Maybe it won't be too hard... if she still can't turn back, maybe she could just stay out of sight while we found a doctor, or—"

"NO!" Larson yelled, cutting Eric off. His eyes widened, and more than an ounce of strength returned to him. Eric was taken aback by the sudden display. "No Eric," he repeated. "That's not the reason. Trust me... when I say... we can not enter the town. Don't... question it."

Eric didn't question it. He had learned by now that Larson meant every word of what he said. The Agency had betrayed him, after all, and Eric decided that Larson probably had nothing to lose by helping them. As with everything else, Eric figured that the truth would thrust itself upon him soon enough.

"Alright," Eric admitted calmly. "So what do we do?"

Larson groaned and propped himself up with one arm. Eric moved in, intent on helping him, but Larson waved him away. He breathed deeply, his hoarse whisper disappearing. Eric mused that the man had remarkable stamina for a middle-aged desk jockey. How injured could he be?

The grey-haired agent pushed himself on two feet with a pained heave, and stood as if he were perfectly fit. Eric's jaw dropped open.

Cynthia bared her teeth and growled, a low canine rumble...a new, strange odor had filtered into her instinct-aided nostrils. Immediately, the word for it popped into her mind: "wolf." She stopped growling. It was a scent of familiarity, but it was alien, and she couldn't tell if it was dangerous or welcome. The scent poured from Larson's body like potpourri. She opened her jaws and tried to speak, tried desperately to utter a word, but her tongue simply couldn't brush the roof of her mouth the way she expected. Instead, her ears flattened, and she barked a warning, a deep, feral noise that caused Eric to whirl and face her. Larson shot her a penetrating glance.

"Cynthia!"

Larson stepped forward, his pain melting away, his bones mended, his full vigor returned, and then some. Eric turned to face him with a stern expression.

"Mr. Harper. I warned you that changes were coming. It's happening already. What you have heralded into this world cannot be undone."

"I don't want to hear it Larson. I know what's happening to you. I can sense it, and so can she." Eric could feel the anger and frustration well up inside him. "I'm not afraid of you."

At once, Eric lunged forward and grabbed the unsurprised Larson by the shirt. The agent stood calmly. "That's right Larson. I know what you are, and I guess you're going to tell me that I made you that way, right? Well I don't care." Eric was on the verge of violence. He wanted to unleash his anger on this man, this kidnapper, this unwanted prophet. Eric gritted his slowly-sharpening teeth, his fingernails lengthening into claws, silently tearing the fabric of Larson's shirt. Blood pulsed to his face, the change was coming, and he didn't bother trying to stop it. Cynthia tensed, her wet fur bristling where it could, her lupine brow furrowing... she would protect Eric just as he had protected her. But she didn't need to. Eric's voice deepened, and he thundered in the storm. "Show us then. Show us what you've become!" Eric lifted Larson off the ground with both hands, the man's shoes dangling nearly a foot off the wet soil. Larson remained cold. Maintaining his nerve was his specialty. His voice was smooth and unincensed.

"This won't help us, Eric. Yes. I have gained the gift, or the curse, or whatever you think it is. I must admit I didn't fully expect it to happen. But it has. It has, Eric."

Larson's own words sent a chill down his spine. Despite all his imagined preparation, he didn't have even the smallest notion of what it would be like to become a werewolf. He tried to accept it, and he was desperate to welcome it... but terror tugged at his mind all the same.

To Eric, Larson's speech was hollow. The change had started. Eric's muscles began to twist, and underneath his rain-soaked clothes, his hair began growing into pelt; the wolf had nearly revealed itself. Larson kept talking.

"There is only one place where we can be safe now. I will lead us to it. Just... put me down."

Eric's face contorted, his clothes starting to tear. In a dramatic display beneath flashing lightning and swirling storm clouds, within moments, the sinewy, primal form of an animal that was neither fully wolf nor fully man stood wet and huffing in the fading sunlight. In the rush of adrenaline that followed the change, Fenris dropped Larson and fell to his knees. He had transformed into the beast countless times, and yet, this time, something was different. Heart pounding intensely, Fenris fought the instinctual urge to bound into the woods; an incredible, indescribable feeling of both palpable fear and sheer excitement overwhelmed him. Involuntarily, the werewolf's tongue lolled out of his mouth as he panted, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Larson watched grimly. Cynthia padded over to Eric and knelt beside him, almost ceremoniously. His yellow eyes were wide, a troubled look imprinted on his wolfish face. With surprising gentleness for a werewolf, Cynthia leaned forward, and before her human rationality realized what she was doing, she tenderly licked his muzzle. At once, Fenris stopped panting and his pulse diminished. Slowly, he turned to face Cynthia, her warm breath still inches away, cutting through the rain.

Eric understood what was happening, or at least a dim idea floated in his consciousness. At any other time, he would have been able to control the change, no matter how intense his emotions became... but now, Larson's words from the station flashed before him—he wouldn't be able to do it for long. It was a solemn truth.

The sheer gravity of it all finally hit him. He wanted to scream, but at the same time, his head was dizzy from a rush of pure unbridled elation.

His dream materialized, the skin-drums pounding, the fire flickering higher in his mind. Wolf had grabbed man by his teeth and consumed him whole, taking him in, forming a new beast, transcending soft, pink-skinned humanity with the essential being of the woods. Two parts became whole; their worlds no longer transversed, but woven seamlessly.

Fenris could no longer contain it. He threw back his head, neck arching, and closed his eyes. There, in the rain, Cynthia by his side, with a surge of primitive compulsion that echoed every desire of Nature herself, he howled. It was a clean song to the rising moon that sliced through the tumultuous sky, and it jarred even Larson's seasoned composure. Again he let forth a powerful wail, and again, and again; even the very woods froze to his cry. It was too much for Cynthia to bear, and she joined the cry, letting all human inhibition slip away to reveal an ancient poetry. Their song lasted only a few moments, but to Larson, it was as if time itself stopped to let the werewolves be heard.

At last, in silence, they were motionless. An eternity passed before they finally stood, eyes at last opened. All three stared at each other solemnly. Although the sound of pattering rain quickly made itself known once again, the werewolves ignored the cold. He wondered if the storm would ever pass... it seemed to stretch on eternally. Almost like in his dream.

He didn't get a chance to think about it. Larson cracked the silence.

"Well?"

Fenris's guttural voice snarled. "If you know where to take us, we'll follow you Larson." Cynthia nodded in agreement. Fenris realized that eventually, he would have to teach her how to speak.

After all. They would never be human again. The werewolf was their new existence, their new body and mind, intuition and power, forever. Fenris didn't know if Cynthia realized it yet, but she was clever enough. He wouldn't need to tell her.

"We have to go to headquarters. We've made preparations for the event there. If we succeed, we may be able to weather the Agency's storm—and this one—for a significant period of time. We can figure out what to do afterward."

"Headquarters?!" Fenris barked. "For the agency? Won't they be waiting for us? Isn't your boss still there?"

"He probably is, yes. But trust me. Their hands will be well occupied before we arrive. If Mr. Bryce—" Larson nearly stopped himself, realizing he had just given away the old man's name. Fortunately, it didn't matter anymore. "If my superior, Mr. Bryce, is still alive, we will have no other option than to remove him from play."

"What do you mean?" Fenris retorted. "Why wouldn't he still be alive?"

"You and Cynthia have been through quite a lot today. But what happens now would be better to show than to tell. You might not believe me, otherwise. As you may already know, however, you are the key to it. You, Fenris... and Silver." Silver, thought Larson. If Fenris had his own wolf name, then that would be hers.

Fenris's lips curled into a fang-bearing grimace. "The key to what? We haven't done anything!"

Larson responded sharply. "It isn't what you've done, wolf. Don't you get it? Haven't you started to understand? It's what you are. You and Silver are the first. The first of a new race. The first to signal the long foretold bridge between man and animal. You... had... the dream."

Cynthia Silver started to feel alarmed as she listened on, and her wolfish visage was poor at hiding emotion. Fenris put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. She didn't know if he was ready to be a half-wolf permanently, but it seemed like they had no choice in the matter. She had already seen the power she was capable of unleashing as a werewolf, the bloodshed and ferocity... but she had also felt the rush of wild instinct, and the treasure of freedom that it granted her, and relished it. Silver felt... complete. As if her whole life, she was meant to finally be this—this beast—her very soul crying out for the primordial spirit that had been given to her. And she knew that Fenris felt the same way. Perhaps that's why she was chosen for this. Perhaps that's why she, out of every shy girl in the world, was chosen to experience the vision, to be the actress of prophecy. Reaching up, she touched Fenris's paw softly, and a comfortable warmth soothed her even through the rushing torrent. Gently, Fenris held her in his arm, and leaned to nuzzle her as she had done, although secretly, instinct had nothing to do with it. They felt like the King and Queen of wolves (to himself, Fenris mused—perhaps they really were?) and at that moment, they both understood why they must have been drawn together in this fate. They were two halves of the same soul.

The werewolves' brief moment of peace was shattered by Larson's interruption.

"Yes, well." He seemed irked. "If we are leaving we had better do it now. At the edge of the town below is a helicopter pad, outside of the main hospital. I know how to fly it. Just pray that it is still there." With that, he turned and started to disappear into the rain, marching down the trail and beckoning Fenris and Silver to follow.

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Nature seemed very upset.

Although the intense downpour of rain had finally stopped, the storm was by no means over. Threatening ash-colored clouds hung low over the horizon, and the wind blowing constantly from the north was silent enough to seem ominous. The two werewolves trotted down the mountain trail so swiftly and easily that Larson was nearly left behind several times, although with his newfound stamina, the man was no slouch. Without stopping to take a breath, they leaped over logs and ducked under branches with superhuman gracefulness. Fenris fleetingly wondered whether the rain would return and wash away their massive inhuman footprints in the mud, or whether they would be tracked by unseen pursuers. It wasn't important, he supposed. Their massive nasal acuity could smell out any beast or man for miles behind the breeze.

Frankly, the dog-like odor of their own slowly-drying fur was hard to shut out.

For Silver, thinking was an important activity. Not just to ignore her weird canine stench, or her growing hunger, or her lack of clothes. It helped *center* her. Humans can't *really* know what it's like to be a beast. Her mind tried, all of its own accord, to experience the world only in images and sensations; it was a state of visceral, shameless sensuality, all purity and no abstraction. Fenris had reminded her that it was this animalistic passion for living—this pure instinct that could only be described as *wild*—which would guide her actions... if only she stopped thinking. In the end, it was human introspection that turned out to be the true gift, as it allowed the werewolf to embrace being an animal without the danger of losing her mind.

Ironically, her train of thought was occasionally distracted by the smell of deer, or mountain goat, or both, not far away. It only made her hungrier.

The misty woods and stark rain clouds reminded her of a horror movie, and with a sinking feeling, she came to realize that *they* were the monsters. She smiled to herself at the thought of it (her dog at home had smiled, snarled, turned his ears down, and panted countless times... what a strange sensation to now know what it felt like.) After all... if one has become the very terror of the woods itself, what else is there to fear?

She had killed men today. That she felt no remorse was a matter of fact, mainly because she didn't really feel like it was Cynthia doing the killing. It had been Silver. An alternate ego, an ego that set aside all shreds of apish morality, replacing them with fibers of mammalian predation. Wolves killed. There was no crying for it. (Somewhere in the back of her mind, she *did* want to cry. She wanted to break down and tear her own heart out. But instinct had laid a padlock on it and thrown away the key. One day, the lock might rust and give way, but hopefully not for a long, long time.)

Silver tried to blot out thoughts about her home, her parents, her school, her “normal” life back in Utah. In retrospect, becoming a werewolf was something that she had always daydreamed about. Or a vampire, or even something more mundane, like a rock star. Was it a latent desire somehow related to her current fate, or simply the typical fantasy of a Goth Girl, a self-imposed



outcast? Her friends shared the same ideas, but right now they were probably sitting in their suburban homes eating dinner with their families. They didn't know what it was like to be truly cut off from civilization, to not even be *human*. Maybe they saw the chaos Fenris caused at the convention on TV, or maybe they didn't. The Agency probably had a knack for confiscating videotapes. Her parents knew she had gone to the convention, and she had even told them why—she wanted, beyond any normal fan's obsession, to meet the cute boy who also happened to be a werewolf.

She grunted. They probably thought she was at a party and just hadn't phoned home. After all, Eric's little werewolf fan get-togethers were rumored to be the stuff of legend, both figuratively and literally.

In a way, she envied their ignorance. In fact, she was starting to get used to being away from it all. The whisper deep in her consciousness telling her that it was all gone forever wasn't loud enough yet.

Fenris, on the other hand, was all worry. Scents of live food and wet dog didn't bother him; he had mastered control over his lupine characteristics long ago (or so he thought.) It was Larson's speeches and revelations that swirled in his mind. He was unable to turn back to his human self, a fact that had already been hinted to him, and he was starting to understand *why*, but it made him even more distressed. Larson had said that he was the start of a new *race*, suggesting perhaps that there were other werewolves out there. Or maybe it had something to do with Cynthia? Larson had, after all, compared them to Adam and Eve. Had he meant...? No, Fenris thought. He was drawn to the girl-now-beast with a bewildering devotion, but there was something else going on. Something bigger.

Grim images of wrathful nature spirits, coming back from the eons to unleash some untold hell on the world, snickered in Fenris's head, and he was drawn back to the ever-tormenting dream and the cryptic signs within it. Then again, he thought, perhaps the dream wasn't quite the nightmare he had always presumed. The shadow of wolf and man dancing against the light of the fire, the storm, the wind overtaking him... there was no pain, no true fear there... at least, no fear for the wolf, only fear for the men. There was actually a sense of peace. A sense of wholeness and... *balance*. If man had forsaken his ancient covenant with nature as Larson said, and would be thrust upon that covenant forcefully, maybe even dangerously...

At the start of it all, Fenris didn't believe in magic, and he wasn't spiritual. Even when he became a werewolf, he had always supposed there was some kind of scientific explanation behind it. Maybe he was the next step in human evolution. He was a big comic book fan, and some of the pseudo-scientific ideas in those stories—notions about rapid evolution, mutation, and the like—had always fascinated him. Of course, the clamoring werewolf prophets of the world had other ideas. To untold numbers of both followers and detractors, the werewolf was not only preternatural, but metaphysical. Even the scientists from the Wolf Center, shocked though they were when he showed his gift to them, abandoned their methods and treated him like the second coming of a messiah. “Truly, man has at last found his bond with the woods,” they said.

And yet, he took his name from the great wolf in Scandinavian mythology. The wolf that heralded the end of the world. If what Larson said was true... it would be fitting.

As they made their way down the cumbersome trail, the treeline began to thin, gradually revealing points of yellow and orange light from buildings below the foot of the mountain. The sky was growing darker still, as night slowly crept over them. Larson motioned for them to stop. His voice was a whisper.

“There. It's the town.”

It didn't look like much from there. A small mountain village, undoubtedly little more than a tourist attraction.

“We're a bit east of West Glacier, near the park. The ranger station was just that. There's scarcely three hundred people here, and it's all hotels, but we still can't get too close. There's an infirmary on the outer edge of the village with a private helicopter to transport patients off the mountain. The place is covertly maintained by the Agency, ensuring a backup route of transportation.”

“What *about* the Agency? The headquarters?” Fenris growled.

“The fighter that destroyed the station was from Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls. In fact, Mr. Bryce, my superior, is a former officer who once worked there. The Agency's building though is just outside Kalispell.”

“You know them. Will they be waiting for us?”

“They will have received reports from their failed operation by now. Whatever remnants of their kill squad you failed to eliminate have likely already taken refuge in the town. Yes, they will be prepared, and not only for us. For the Storm.” Larson was still reluctant to reveal everything to the two. There was always the very slim possibility that somehow, in his arrogance, he had misinterpreted the event, misunderstood the gravity of either the dream or the prophecy.

“Prepared for the storm?” Fenris was confused, but he knew there was more to what Larson said than he was letting on. As a half-man half-wolf, communication was merely half language, perhaps even less. A thousand subtle gestures and bodily cues, unconsciously recognized by most human beings, unfolded like a second speech to Fenris. As with the wild wolf itself, both he and Silver possessed a remarkably accurate sense of empathy.

“Yes.” Larson paused as the werewolves' feral eyes pierced him through the darkness. For once, he shuddered, and his composure was broken. Soon, those eyes would be his.

Silently stepping around leaves and underbrush, Larson led Fenris and Silver off the trail and across a dew-moistened field stretching between the edge of the woods and the monolithic

buildings of the village. The sun was nearly gone; they had no clue what time it was, but the deep storm front filtered the dying rays of daytime into an opaque hue of nightshade. The darkness was more than suitable to shield them from prying eyes, although an orange glimmer of street lights cast an eerie glow over the quiet shops and motels of the tourist town. They made their way around the village by staying close to the rocky embankments and hills at the foot of the mountain; the town itself was starkly nestled in the park to the point of inaccessibility. If there was a road through the woods, they hadn't seen it, although they could peer into the square from time to time and catch a glimpse of a parked jeep or truck. There were no people.

What startled Fenris the most wasn't the fact that he couldn't *see* anyone in the town. It was that he couldn't *smell* anyone. Almost as if the village had been deserted, leaving darkened windows and empty vehicles behind. He didn't have time to ask questions.

Suddenly, Larson stopped moving. Doubling over, he clutched his chest, and strained with all his might not to cough. He was fighting the change. Fenris understood that if Larson transformed into the beast now, they would have no guidance, and no pilot for the helicopter. A few tense moments passed, and they had a strong doubt that Larson would be able to repress the wolf, but his inner strength once again proved to be remarkable. Yet, Fenris knew that the longer Larson battled against the change, the more explosive it would be when it was finally unavoidable. It was like trying to stop oneself from growing old—it was simply impossible.

As Larson recomposed himself, Fenris and Silver both felt an urgent twinge in the back of their minds, that uncanny wolfish sense of the abnormal. Both werewolves stood straight up, their ears perked. With sharp eyes they scanned the dead-silent facade of buildings, hearts pounding. Something had been watching them, Fenris was sure of it, but they could see nothing, and no odd scent had reached their noses. The only sound was a cool wind blowing through the trees and brush. Huffing for breath, Larson straightened himself. He grabbed Fenris by the arm, startling him; the werewolf whirled around. He could tell that Larson was frightened. They had to move faster.

Slipping beneath the shadows of trees and the long-cast black shrouds of two- and three-storied buildings, they eventually left the hotels and street lamps behind. In a clearing ahead was the helicopter landing, just outside a low concrete building that must have been the infirmary. It was fenced off with chain-link, but that would pose little problem for them. The halogen light that was supposed to illuminate the area was turned off, leaving only a bare glint off the helicopter's canopy glass to tell them that it was still there. Fenris looked around once more to ensure they hadn't been followed, and then effortlessly, he grabbed the fence with a clawed paw, tearing the metal from the ground and twisting a hole large enough for them to crawl through.

They padded across the wet concrete to the air ambulance. At once, Larson threw open the door to the cockpit and climbed in; the werewolves hoisted themselves into the cabin. Silver mused that it would have been a strange sight; a vehicle made to save lives, one of the only symbols of safety one could rely on, being boarded by werewolves.

In only a few moments, the mechanical whine and screech of twirling helicopter blades deafened the area, rudely breaking the silence of the mountains.

It was then that they noticed it. The smell. An odor so intense, it overpowered even the exhaust and fumes from the helicopter. It was a rustic, primal, wolfish scent, like Larson's stench when he first started to transform, but much stronger. The scent was everywhere, all around the helicopter pad. Fenris and Silver were nearly thrown into a panic. The chopper began to lift off, rising off the ground a few feet at a time, quickly gaining altitude... there was nothing they could do now. Fenris peered out the window as they rose, and saw below, a dim procession of reflected light. Eyes. Pairs of yellow, silver, and green, staring at them from the darkness. Dozens of them. It was a surreal and strangely beautiful vision. There was only one thing in the world the figures could have been.

They were werewolves.

And as the chopper peeled away from the sky over the town towards the south, all three of them swore that through the tumult and storm winds, they heard the echo of howling.

Larson knew what Fenris and Silver had seen. He remained silent.

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Mr. Bryce didn't feel like watching the storm anymore. The black-tinted glass on the top floor provided a perfect view of the skyline at Kalispell, and even though the city was a drop in the ocean compared to Billings or even Great Falls, they hadn't built their foundation here for the population, not even for the rugged beauty of the surrounding wilderness. They had done it for the isolation, and the likelihood of plausible deniability. Folks here didn't ask many questions. They were too concerned with the tourist trade, and if they ever saw men in black shuttling to and fro, they assumed it had something to do with the Air Force Base. Kalispell had been a near-perfect cover for their operation, but now it would be a barely escapable death trap. Or so he had convinced himself.

Sipping bourbon from a glass just as he had seen Larson do a thousand times before, Bryce sat in front of his monitor inattentively.

He should have been more thorough. Putting Larson in charge of the entire situation was a poor move, but it was one he needed to take. Bryce secretly loathed reading, and he couldn't be bothered with all the mythological and religious mumbo jumbo that Larson was so fond of. Bryce knew that if anyone could chart their course, it would be him; but Larson failed to produce anything of substantive merit. In fact, the man had dared suggest that what they were facing was unavoidable. *Unavoidable!*

Bryce set his glass down. Maybe Larson was right in his own way. He was getting too old.

It had been nearly his life's goal to protect the sovereignty of the human species, especially the continued future of the people of the United States of America. That was why the Agency was formed. That's why they *did* what they did. Things like werewolves weren't supposed to exist, but if they appeared, why the hell were they traipsing around the country showing off their fangs to everyone? The kid was a goddamn *monster*, yet no one wanted to act on him, they had just wanted to "wait and see." Maybe the religious nutjobs would do their work for them. But no. It hadn't worked that way; instead, the kid was protected. People *cherished* the damn thing, while Bryce hated him. He hated werewolves, he hated wolves, he even hated dogs, not really for any fault of their own, but mainly because everyone loved them so much and he didn't understand why. Everything that didn't walk on two legs had its rightful place, and it was at their right hand, not eye level. If only the tree huggers knew what he knew, they wouldn't sleep for a year. There were things with fangs and claws that nature had vomited forth over the course of a millennium, things howling and slaving for a taste of human flesh. Bryce even had scars from fighting them over the years; he had witnessed shambling nightmares almost too terrible to be real.

And he would be damned before joining them.

Light rain blew sideways, spattering the glass of the helicopter canopy like a hail of bullets. The wind was starting to whip into a frenzy, and it made the ride jarring and unpleasant. Fenris had never been sick as a werewolf before, but he was getting close. In the cabin, the two cramped beasts could only leer out of their windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of anything strange or out of place. Fenris held Silver's paw tight to comfort her. They shifted uncomfortably trying to keep the blood flowing to their tails, which were crammed against the hard metal back of the chamber. The noise was even worse: the pummeling blades of the aircraft pounded their heads incessantly; canine ears weren't particularly well-equipped to handle racket this loud. When this ordeal was over, they would promise themselves never to step foot in a helicopter again.

It hadn't taken long to reach Kalispell. Lightning shot over the town, followed by reels of devastating thunder. Fenris could see the lights below... street lights and lamp posts, and some lit windows. But that wasn't all. As they approached the edge of the city, they could see what looked like smoke, billowing into the sky from a dozen sources. Fires were burning, and as Fenris and Silver watched on in astonishment, they could see the source of it. Cars in the streets were aflame; buildings and houses were pouring smoke from orange fire whipped by the wind; the flashing lights of police cars streaked by as they passed overhead; tiny two-legged figures scattered below, but Fenris couldn't tell if they were people, or...

Kalispell was in total chaos. The scene reminded him of the riots he saw on TV, not too long after he revealed his werewolf half to the world. Even Larson didn't expect this display.

"My God..." he whispered in awe to himself. He was prepared for violence, but nothing so lawless and widespread. Was this happening... all over the world? The *entire* world?

Fenris turned away from the window and barked into the cockpit at Larson.

"What the hell is this Larson?! What's happening down there?"

Larson thought about the answer for a moment before shouting back.

"People are waking up."

The helicopter raced over the Kalispell skyline. Larson could see their destination ahead, a tall, black building at the outer edge of the city, towering above the trees and well away from the rest of the city's houses and businesses. It was the headquarters. The roof was illuminated with bright guide lights; the fenced and walled compound around it seemed intact, but they couldn't see anyone. Hopefully the noise from the storm would drown out their descent.

Deftly, Larson bore the helicopter to the roof of the ominous structure. On occasion, a gust of tremendous wind threatened to blow the slowly-descending aircraft out of alignment, but luckily Larson was skilled enough to handle it.

Before the aircraft could even fully stop, the werewolves burst from the metal carriage and out

into the storm. Fur fluttering in the squall, Fenris's muscles tightened, and he darted this way and that, sniffing in all directions, ready to fend off any would-be attacker. The roof was deserted. Crouching, Silver followed closely behind him. Larson shut down the helicopter and slid the cockpit door closed. He didn't know if they would need to use the helicopter again.

Across the roof they could see the dark aluminum door marking the entrance to the building. Before Fenris could tear for the entrance, Larson laid a hand on the beast's shoulder to halt him.

"If they have guards," he nearly had to shout over the wind, "they would be on the ground floor. We can't assume that no one saw us land, although no one inside would have been able to hear us. Bryce's office is on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, not far below. There won't be an alarm, since no one would have anticipated an assault from the roof."

They nodded in understanding, and rushed to the door. It was locked. With both hands, Fenris let out a wolfish snarl and heaved, breaking the metal door open with a loud *ka-chunk*. Cautiously he stuck his snout into the building, a draft of air-conditioned dryness catching him off guard. Without a word, the werewolf descended the stairs, feet padding heavily on the concrete. Silver and Larson followed tentatively. The time for subtlety was over.

After a moment, the trio found themselves in a bare office hallway. There was no room for caution now. In one corner of the hall, a security camera eyed them unblinkingly. In a flash, Fenris crouched once and leaped with all the agility of a wild beast, down the hall and through the air. A taloned paw swiped the camera from the ceiling in a rain of plaster and metallic debris; the device was smashed to bits, but unfortunately not before it caught a glimpse of the intruders.

Fenris had broken into compounds and bunkers before; he was used to the whole process. So far, the Agency seemed no more special than the Church or the Van Helsing Society, and they were both amateurs. His mind briefly flashed to his own encounters with the Society... they were pampered conservative kids who had read too much Bram Stoker, and who decided to take it upon themselves to protect the welfare of their homes and families, mainly by capturing him in a poaching net one day and dragging him to their makeshift compound. When he transformed into the wolf, they nearly wet themselves; they were all glory and all fun, not even thinking about the possibility that a fanged nightmare would *really* tear through the woods after them. The fools had scattered like so much chaff, their fathers' pea shooters useless in untrained hands, and the next day they were all handcuffed and shuffled away on kidnapping and assault charges. Fenris's Wolf Center comrades were well adept at cleaning up messes.

The thought barely crossed his mind when a door at the other end of the hall burst open, and two black-garbed agents rushed in with assault rifles.

He wouldn't give them time to fire. In a pounce of inhuman speed, the werewolf grabbed Larson around the throat with a grey-pelted arm, holding the man against his body like a shield. The wolf-man roared his challenge down the hall.

“Drop them, or he dies!” Fenris let all his fury come forth, baring his fangs, slobbering, and growling with a demonic voice and monstrous front. Silver, understanding his plan, tensed her muscles and showed her teeth with a feral grumble.

Larson was smart. He knew exactly what Fenris was doing, and acted in kind, even though his adrenaline was pumping furiously.

“Do it! Do whatever it says!”

The two bewildered guards slowly lowered their weapons, placed them on the floor, and held up their hands as if they were being robbed.

Fenris glanced at Silver, and out of the corner of his muzzle, he growled his order. “Go! Now!”

In a tremendous burst of power and animalistic fury, the snarling, maddened beast-girl slammed down the hall nearly on all fours, claws tearing into the carpet. In seconds she was upon the helpless guards, who barely had the chance to reach for their weapons again. She grabbed them both by the throat, one in each arm, and lifted them off the ground, her talons digging into their necks, rivulets of blood dripping onto the ground. Their faces turned white, their eyes wide, transfixed on the devilish wolf, their mouths hung open in a choked attempt to scream. Even Fenris was surprised at Silver's strength.

As Cynthia's gaze pierced the souls of the two men, her stomach urged her to slaughter them, and earlier she would have done so with barely a thought. But she had gained some measure of control over her raging instincts, and instead of crushing the guards' throats like cardboard tubes, she merely choked the breath out of them, their unconscious bodies dropped unceremoniously in a crumpled heap. Quickly, Silver examined the door from where they came; seeing no one else, she shut it hard and turned to Fenris.

Fenris had already let Larson go, but he didn't seem well for it. He was coughing violently, holding his chest, bending over as if he was ready to be sick.

“Larson?” It was a pointless question. Immediately, Fenris and Silver realized what was happening to him. While she could only watch in grim silence, Fenris tried to calm him.

“It's happening. Don't try and fight it Larson. Lie down. Lie down, it will make it easier. Just breath.” The werewolf, in the softest voice a werewolf could muster, tried intensely to help the man through the transformation.

Larson must have heard him, because he promptly laid on his back, his eyes shut tight, his face drawn in an expression of shock and anguish. Gently, Fenris continued to whisper to him, even as his convulsions grew even more violent.



“Larson... It's still you Larson... remember... You have to hold on to who you are, no matter what!”

Sweat beaded on his brow, his skin turning pale. His back arched, his spine cracking, extending, his muscles rippling in bizarre mutation. Fenris backed away as Larson's clothes began to shred, as midnight-black fur tore through his shirt in places, as his face twisted and contorted, his head constructing itself into a more wolf-like shape. Larson's smooth voice deepened into a guttural expression; he grunted, growled, and thrashed about, the change overwhelming him.

After what seemed like an eternity, the creature that was once Larson heaved steaming breath into the hall and stood on two legs, carefully, deliberately. Bits of torn shirt fell away. Unlike Fenris and Silver's grey-and-white-streaked pelts, Larson-as-werewolf was pitch black. His sharp yellow eyes opened, and he stared at the two other members of his race with a look that betrayed primordial viciousness.

Fenris nearly started to approach him. But something was wrong. He could smell it. Something was very wrong.

In a howl of disbelief, Fenris began to shout “No--!”, but he was cut off as the bristling black werewolf lunged with bestial fury, tackling him and locking his jaws around Fenris's throat, crashing to the floor. Larson had lost his mind.

Silver jumped into the fray, raking at Larson's back, trying fruitlessly to throw the beast off the surprised Fenris. With an absentminded kick, the werewolf thrust a black leg into Silver's midsection with a sickening thud, throwing her across the hallway and into the wall. She fell to the ground shaken.

Blood sprayed from Fenris's neck; the bloodthirsty werewolf had jaws like a vice. Fireworks burst in Fenris's head from the pain and shock, but his fury was unquenchable. He plowed his right fist into Larson's face, once, twice, and then a third time with the sharp crack of splintering bone. Larson howled in pain as one of his teeth flew against the wall in a splatter of blood; he immediately lost his grip on Fenris. Without hesitation, Fenris planted his feet squarely into Larson's chest, throwing him back and to the ground. Like some fur-covered martial artist, the grey wolf pounced back to his feet and charged towards his attacker; Fenris slammed into the recovering Larson with full momentum, digging his claws into the black werewolf's shoulders and flinging him into the wall. The force was too much for the drywall to take, and the plaster crumbled in a cloud of dust, violently shaking the hall.

At first jarred, Larson quickly responded by slashing Fenris's chest with a full set of ivory claws. A violent “riiiiiip” cut through the air as fur and flesh shredded, revealing bloody red lines of muscle. Fenris fell back in agony, clutching his chest. He shouted. “Larson! No, don't--!” but it was pointless; his mind was beyond saving. The monster stepped from the concave wall with salivating jowls; to him, Fenris was nothing more than a rival that needed to be destroyed. This was no question of dominance. It was kill or be killed.

Cynthia Silver yelped a blood-curdling half-howl, her human-like voice nearly breaking the barrier between wolf and girl. Larson whirled, only to meet Silver's shattering force as she tackled him from across the hall. He was caught off-guard and again fell to the ground, Silver on top of him in full kill mode, slashing and clawing frantically. Blood red lines appeared, one, two, ten, on Larson's lupine face and upper body. A high-pitched shriek of anger and distress echoed through the building as he succumbed to her relentless strikes. He would pay. She didn't care anymore; it was clear that he was beyond saving. Silver would put him out of his misery.

Fenris had to stop her. Larson had no idea what he was doing. Without him, they would have died in the fireball back at the ranger station. Through a haze of blood and stinging pain, he staggered to the out-of-control Silver. With a last burst of strength, he hoisted her around the waist with both arms, pulling her still-flailing body off the motionless Larson. She roared and gnashed her teeth in throes of desperation, but he pulled her away all the same.

"Silver..." he rasped. "It's over. Stop. It's over."

His grip fell, but she stopped moving. Exhausted, she rolled away from him, propping herself up against the wall, heaving from exertion. She leered at the black-pelted werewolf at the end of the hallway. Larson lay in a growing pool of blood, torn by dozens of crimson wounds. His eyes were closed; they doubted that he was still alive.

Suddenly, a very-human voice cut through the temporary reprieve.

"Yes. It's over."

The werewolves didn't have time even to stand before a hail of projectiles pierced their bodies; there stood none other than Mr. Bryce, flanked on either side by fully armed and armored guardsmen, who had just emptied their tranquilizer guns. Without a single protest, Fenris and Silver slipped into darkness.

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Blurred, fearful awakening. Half-conscious, Fenris mumbled something under his breath about a dream. Only when his own muzzle appeared in his field of vision did he realize that he was still alive, and very much not dreaming. The second thing he noticed was a burning ache in his wrists and ankles. The werewolf was shackled and chained. Looking around the dimly-lit room, he could tell that he was in some kind of holding cell. His energy quickly returning, he stood up, and gritting his teeth, he pulled and strained on the chains with all of his might, to no avail. Next to him, also awake but making no effort to test her restraints, was Silver, quietly sitting on the floor, pained by a downtrodden look.

A door opened on the opposite side of the room. A tall, thin, suited man with white hair and stern, military-born disposition walked calmly into the chamber, placing a manila folder stuffed with papers on a stainless-steel table in the middle of the room. Fenris had been in a room like this before, but this time, there was no two-way mirror.

“I was waiting for you to awaken,” spoke Mr. Bryce with an unphased voice that reminded them of Larson. “I take it you’ve already gotten out your fuss, creature. Don’t strain your wrists. Not even you can break those chains.”

Fenris and Silver stayed perfectly quiet. They both felt the same urgency, but they knew that whatever Fenris said would only give Bryce more ammunition. Fenris was woefully tempted to let the wolf take over, to let instinct alone carry him to either escape or destruction. He was so tired of appealing to logic, so tired of talk. He wanted it to end... he wanted rest.

“You’re wondering why I haven’t done away with you already. I’ve had the opportunity.”

Truthfully, they *had* wondered.

Mr. Bryce picked up a small remote control from the table and turned it towards a row of monitors on the wall. With a single press, the screens sprung to life, filling the room with a phosphorescent glow.

“I wanted to show you first. Show you what you’ve caused, Mr. Harper, and...” he flipped open the folder nonchalantly, “Ms. Silver.”

Eric Harper shouted with unrestrained vigor, his rough wolf voice echoing like a peel of thunder in the concrete room.

“I am *Fenris* now.” And he was. He had never been a werewolf for quite as long as this, but the great powers of the form were slowly growing irresistible.

“Ah yes,” Bryce responded coolly. “All the majesty and strength of the wolf with the cleverness of a human being. Yes, Fenris, I’ve heard that Wolf Center rhetoric hundreds of times in the past year. It changes nothing. You are a monster, and what you’ve brought into this world, even unknowingly, has changed the entire order of the human race.”

Bryce gestured casually to the monitors on the wall. “These are our cameras, placed overlooking major city centers in North America.” The werewolves' angry, bitter eyes followed him, transfixed on the images they showed. “By now I assume you've seen others besides yourselves transform... into a new kind of life?”

“Larson,” Fenris muttered. Silver whimpered next to him, remembering what she had done.

“Oh, Larson was one, yes. But not the only one. Undoubtedly you passed by North Oak—the town at the edge of the woods—to procure your helicopter, yes?”

It was true, of course. They *had* seen others... the lights, the eyes, staring up at them from the night. Bryce was a worm, but at least he was no liar. One casual glance at the screens revealed scenes like what they witnessed in Kalispell: fires burning in the night. Abandoned buildings, cities on the edge of anarchy.

“Civilization, beast. On the brink of ruin.” For a moment, there was silence, as they watched the screens unfold the drama of a changing world. Fenris was beyond the point of arguing. It really was happening, and if they were the start of it, well... Larson would have been right.

“The storm came.” Fenris mainly spoke to himself, his mind lost in memories of his own dream. All feral senses and intuitions vanished at that moment: it was him, and the dream. The vision of the woods, the fire, the darkness, the rain. The skin drums in his memory began to play once more. That earthen, steady rhythm... it soothed him to think of it.

“Larson told me what it meant once.” Bryce turned away from them, seemingly lost in retrospection. “He said... it was a *cleansing* rain. A storm to wash away impurity. He said from all that he had read, all that he had researched, it was his conclusion that our downfall—humanity's downfall, I suppose he meant—was inevitable. But I guess it isn't really a downfall at all, now is it? Those coffee-house hippies on television, the ones that follow you around like loyal tail-wagging dogs, taking every ounce of the Wolf Center's reports as gospel, would say it was just a transition to a new era.”

“Not a new era. An old one.” Fenris grumbled.

Bryce frowned, and then grew angry. “New, old, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter!” He slammed his hands on the table and stared at Fenris's wolf eyes with an unrelenting intensity. “Man and beast are not brothers! This is not some Disneyland sentimental bedtime story! We are meant to be utter masters of this world, and nothing less!” His face was red, his brow furrowed. Fenris shot back with a growl.

“You're insane.”

At this point, if nothing else had convinced him, Fenris was reassured that the Agency was all a sham. It was never meant to protect the human species from anything. It was all a mad, ideological agenda. The last clawed grasp of a dying order of men. An ancient cycle had begun anew; Nature had forced herself through a seemingly unconquerable bastion of clever science and civilized dominion, bringing her promises and covenants to bear upon a world of human beings who never should have abandoned them in the first place. If perhaps civilization had not wrought its fires as it did... perhaps if man's insatiable thirst for both knowledge and comfort never drove him away from the woods... humanity would have been prepared.

Even before he became a werewolf, Eric knew people who thought they had more in common with animals than humans. So did Cynthia. He had always thought they were kind of strange. Perhaps there was something more to it? Maybe the signs of this new age had always been there, even without his appearance, and were ignored, or worse, written off as eccentric, or even insane?

The goddess was here. In *them*. As she had always been. A smirk crossed his muzzle, and didn't go unnoticed.

"Now you know the truth," Bryce retorted. "It's not too late. I can stop it."

The werewolf poured out his hatred, gripping his chains, straining senselessly against the concrete wall.

"You can't stop it! You're finished! Look, look at what's happening!"

Bryce ignored the barking, snarling wolf. What were the words of a demon? They meant nothing. The old man reached into his coat, procuring a revolver. His expression was almost sad. Truthfully, he relished this moment, his power over these beasts, his unhindered control. Almost to the point where he didn't want it to end. But he knew it must.

"Silver bullets."

Fenris's heart raced. Silver stood up and looked at him for an answer, for an escape. But he could provide none.

Perhaps they weren't alone, or maybe they weren't meant to fall in this cold bunker to the hand of a madman. Perhaps Nature—or some other unknowable force—was protecting them. But suddenly, before Bryce could raise his weapon, the rattling sounds of gunshots echoed from outside the room, followed closely by terrified screams, and... silence. Bryce turned to the door.

"No..." he whispered to himself.

It would be the last thing he spoke.

In an explosion of glass and harnessed aggression, the door to the holding chamber flew off its hinges, slammed against the metal table, and clattered to the ground. Bryce ducked instinctively.

There, in the doorway, silhouetted against the dim artificial light, was the shadow of a wolf-faced behemoth. Stained with blood, the black-furred Larson heaved living breath, his wounds closed. A terrible vengeance struck in his lightning eyes. The werewolf turned to the trembling Mr. Bryce, and shot his fist towards the man like a viper strike, slashing Bryce's hand to ribbons. His moans of pain were pitiful as the revolver clattered to the ground. With fangs bared in a fury that rivaled even Cynthia's, the werebeast plodded towards the cowering old man, paw dripping with crimson remnants of his ferocity.

They couldn't watch, even as accustomed to violence as they were. The sounds alone were enough to suggest how Bryce's life ended.

Fenris and Silver shrunk against the wall. They were helpless against this once-human monstrosity. Yet, the werewolf approached them cautiously, his hatred at rest. With rational, deliberate movements, much to Fenris's amazement, it held up a key—undoubtedly taken from Bryce's corpse—and though fumbling with inhuman hands, the beast-that-was-Larson unlocked their restraints.

“Larson!” Fenris gasped. “You're... you're...”

Larson had regained the human thread of his personality. Fenris later determined that it was his near-death condition that forced the wolf to retreat in favor of a more rational state of being. Werewolves still held many surprises, even for him.

The black wolf nodded once, and beckoned for them to follow. Rubbing their sore wrists, swiftly and carefully they left the holding cell behind, passed a pair of slain guards, and trotted up the stairs to the bottom floor (it seemed that they were in a basement of sorts.) Climbing the stairs and passing through a short series of corridors, they found themselves near the main entrance to the place. None of the doors were locked, and no more guards could be seen. It was no longer necessary to handle the security cameras; for all intents and purposes, the Agency for Mythological Defense had been overthrown.

The lobby to the Agency headquarters was utterly empty. The front doors were closed, but not barred; through the glass, they could see that it was still night... or, it was still dark at least. Approaching the doors, the three werewolves stared out into the darkness. In the distance, the echo of a muffled explosion filtered into their ears. It was either thunder, or something worse. Even though the headquarters was relatively far from the rest of Kalispell, the glimmering light of fire could still be seen.

With an eerily human-like motion, Larson casually opened the front door. One at a time, they stepped out into the cool air. The rain had stopped, but the flicker of lightning still carried its purple glow across the sky.

Fenris didn't say a word. They couldn't stay here, not anymore, but they all knew where they had to go: the forest was all around them. It would be an easy place for a trio of wolf folk to take shelter; perhaps they would even find food.

Disappearing into the shadow, the werewolves crept beyond the city, beyond the fields and fences, past the lights of fires, and past all signs of human civilization.

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On the third day, the clouds began to part, at last revealing a yellow sun that shined down on a new world. Deep in the refuge of the park, in wilderness away from campgrounds and human sites, Fenris, Silver, and Larson had made their home in a set of caves at the foot of the mountains. There was a clearing too, and it was the most comfortable place to sleep they could find, even though they had no means to build a camp fire (they determined their pelts were enough to keep them warm, at any rate.)

Fenris had been frustratingly trying to teach the other two werewolves how to speak English. The first few steps—lifting the tongue a certain way, learning how to move one's jaw subtly, were the most difficult—but soon enough, they were exchanging words and phrases.

Learning how to live as a hybrid of wolf and man was a taxing quest, and every day, they—Larson and Silver especially—discovered a dozen new traits and new sensations. On the third afternoon, when the sky was still grey with a thick overhanging of storm, their hunger had driven them to restlessness and irritability. The cool mountain stream they had found was perfect for quenching their thirst (as wolves, they drank straight from the stream without a second thought for sterilization,) but they needed food.

At last, it was Silver who suggested that they disperse into the woods to try and hunt—a task for which their instincts proved more than adequate. None of them had ever eaten raw deer before (they had all tasted rare steak at one point during their human lives, and that's what it reminded them of most, although without the metallic bitterness of meat processed with the means of technology,) but as they shared their bloody kill, Fenris couldn't help but to realize just how inhuman they had become.

To keep himself grounded, he tried to treat their predicament like an extended camping trip, but Silver had pointed out that campers don't usually have fur and fangs. She had a point.

They had to keep *talking* to each other, they couldn't abandon their human personalities—although soon enough they were driven more and more towards both survival and exploration.

After a short time, they found themselves running and jumping through the woods looking for new sights and smells more often than sitting around talking. On the fifth day, the wolf folk had grown perfectly comfortable creeping and milling about the wilderness in an absence of clothing. Most delightfully, they had also discovered a certain joy in howling like true wolves during the night. They relished every opportunity to do so, gathering cross-legged beneath the stars at the base of their clearing, and howling until their hearts bled with sheer wonder at the gift of pure natural transcendence that had been bestowed upon them.

Yet, it was the fate of the city that kept them most curious. Every time Fenris asked Larson about it, his answer was always “just wait, it's still far too dangerous,” as if they hadn't waited long enough. At night, Silver had unpleasant dreams about her human home and her family; Fenris tried to comfort her, tried to tell her that they were alright, but it was getting harder. Larson, on the other hand, remained aloof. He had adapted to his new form even better than they had; the



black werewolf was an incredible sight to behold as he effortlessly leaped and bounded around the trees and rocks, searching for small prey.

After a week had passed, maybe more—Fenris had lost track—their territory in the woods had been scoured of game, and Larson suggested that they needed to move on.

Before they embarked to new territory, even deeper into the woods of Glacier Park, they gathered for one last great howl in their clearing.

This time, startlingly, their cries were answered.

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The werewolves stopped at once, craning their heads, their pointed ears flicking towards the alien sound that echoed down through the trees. They knew the difference between a wolf's howl and their own; their human deliberation lent their own song an unintended sterility, and their instincts only hammered the subtleties home.

These howls *weren't* from wolves. And that's what silenced them. The three werewolves stood at once, their eyes piercing the night, seeking any sign of danger. After a few minutes, the howling stopped. Only a pale breeze gave sound to the woods.

Fenris, Silver, and Larson looked at each other in the darkness. Fenris wasn't sure what to say, but he kept his voice as quiet as he could.

“Werewolves.”

Silver turned to him; even in the dark, Fenris could tell her expression was a worried one.

“Others? Like us?! How can that even be possible-” as her voice started to rise, Larson cut in with a rasp.

“Sssh!” he hissed. “If they are werewolves, then their hearing is as good as ours.”

Fenris was stern. He had to know the truth. “We need to go to them.”

“No,” Larson responded. Fenris only pressed it.

“*If* they're werewolves, we need to find them, we need to see for ourselves-”

“NO you fool,” the black wolf croaked. “We don't know if they really *are* like us.”

Fenris closed his mouth. He and Silver understood what Larson meant. They had retained their

human consciousness only through his guidance, his experience and knowledge. If there were other werewolves out there, they could be purely wild, primal, even dangerous. Wolves were intensely territorial, and they were known to defend themselves against intruders even to the death—especially if those intruders were members of their own species. Feral werewolves would be no different, and if they went looking for them, they might be walking into a death trap.

It was then that something in Fenris snapped. He shook his head silently. They had been living like beasts for too long, ignoring the outside world, the world that Larson had convinced them was changed irreparably. Had he forgotten everything he had seen? Everything he had come to believe was true? They needed, even beyond the pain of death, to *know*.

No longer acknowledging Larson, or even Silver, Fenris turned, clambered over the rocks and logs surrounding their camp, and slipped into the forest.

Larson seemed annoyed as he turned to the wolf girl.

“We can't let him go alone.”

And with that, they followed Fenris's trail into the woods.

The beast-man had mastered the art of moving silently. Beyond the assistance of padded feet, it was a kind of graceful forest ballet that with practice, soon came naturally. Fenris stepped swiftly around the underbrush all the while scarcely making a noise, and after what seemed like only a few moments (it had really been nearly a quarter hour,) he—and the two wolf folk following him closely—reached the scent he was looking for. The source of the howls they had heard. It was a grassy clearing, a place nestled in the middle of the pine forest, not unlike their own home beneath the rocks.

Cautiously, Fenris stepped into the grove. A full moon glowed brightly overhead; there were no clouds tonight, and the pale light cast the woods all around in a mysterious dim shade. The rustle of pine branches above was from a light wind that flowed from the north. He took one careful step, and then another, until he stood motionless, directly in the center of the clearing, staring muzzle-upwards at the astonishing night sky. Larson and Silver were not far behind.

Ages passed as the three spirits stood in what seemed to be the most beautiful spot in the woods they had ever seen, doing nothing but gazing at the moon and the stars. It was entrancing. Given a few more moments, they would have forgotten all about why they were here in the first place, content to stay transfixed by Nature's lantern.

A twig snapping.

The noise jerked the werewolves' attention away from the sky and down towards the woods. Their tails bristled, their ears lowered; they fully expected to be set upon by a legion of attackers. Perhaps they were too paranoid.

But it was there, just beyond the trees of the clearing, that the eyes appeared.

Eyes. Just like the ones Fenris had seen before the chaos—from the glass window of the helicopter as they took off from the little town to the north. God, had it really been that long since their final change? The memory was cloudy; although it was only a bit more than a week prior, the events of the Agency's unfolding chaos seemed like a lifetime ago.

The eyes came, two at a time, yellow, silver, even some were jade, and at heights that betrayed their owners even before the beasts stepped into view. They *were* other werewolves. A whole pack of them. Fenris whirled around, quickly sizing up eight, no nine—ten—figures materializing from the woods.

They didn't enter the glade. The werewolves stopped at the edge of it, only a few yards away, patiently waiting, silent and still.

Then, from out of the shadows, tentatively stepped what Fenris presumed to be their leader, a tall (even taller than the monstrous Larson) snow-white pelted beast with keen slate eyes. Gingerly, he approached the three, taking one careful step, and then another, just as Fenris had done when he entered the clearing.

Looking around, he could tell that these werewolves must have been living in the woods just as long as they had. Some of them still wore shreds of human clothing; some had streaks of dirt, ash, or blood in their fur; some were thin, almost emaciated from hunger. They looked like they had been through utter hell and back. Fenris, Silver, and Larson realized that these new wolf people weren't adversaries. They were *survivors*. Refugees from the storm.

The white wolf stood before Fenris like a statue. A tense moment of silence passed, the wind still the only disturbance in the glade, before the werewolf finally opened his jaws.

“Can... can you talk?” The wolf uttered shakily. Whoever he used to be, this werewolf had taught himself how to speak. Maybe they all had.

Immediately, Fenris and his companions let down their guard, their taut muscles relaxing, their stance shifting. He was absolutely astonished, and could think of only one response.

“Yes,” Fenris stammered.

From this point forward, he realized, they would never be alone again.

Stretching lazily in the green grass, Fenris scraped the soft ground with his claws and yawned. Yellow spring sunshine rained down on the field at the edge of the woods with a pleasant warmth. Silver rolled over and threw her arm over him, drawing herself closer to his soft fur. His musty, earthen scent was supremely comforting to her, but they were both starting to get hungry; their afternoon nap might have to be cut short. It was almost time for the Hunt.

With a misty-eyed curiosity, Silver whispered to Fenris the one question he could have never anticipated.

“What day is it?”

He was quiet. Honestly, Fenris didn't know the answer.

“Sunday. I think.”

Every day felt like Sunday to him anyway.

It must have been six or seven months since Larson left for the south, seeking more answers to questions that had been eating away at his well being. They had wished him off with luck, and hoped that his journey was a swift one.

In the park, life had taken a new turn. Their Pack had grown to outstanding numbers. Perhaps it wasn't even worthy of being called a Pack... in truth, it was more like a *nation*. And they weren't accepting just werewolves anymore.

Some members of Fenris's new-found family had taken to the wild life much stronger than he would have liked, but they always listened to his word. After all, he and Silver were the First, and as far as the other werewolves were concerned, their word was gospel. Fenris's mind drifted to the early days, when he had offhandedly mused that he and Silver would be the King and Queen of wolves. He was only half-joking then, but it had turned out to be true.

It had become his charge to maintain the memory of human life among the animal folk at all costs, and Silver supported him. Every now and then, a tiny band of stragglers would come along that somehow missed the Great Change, and his pack would welcome them with open paws, even though they were soft-skinned and wary, and ignorant to the revelry of the Nature spirit. One day maybe She would decide to bless them with the change, but no matter; to Fenris, they were all brothers.

It was in this very situation that Fenris was incredibly glad for all the pagan junk he had picked up from the Wolf Center goons. He could only imagine what they were like now... in fact, he didn't want to know. They would probably come looking for him eventually, as did most of the other Changed who connected him and Silver to the event. He had used his limited ritualistic knowledge, along with Silver, who luckily remembered quite a bit of mysticism from her goth

days, to organize the spirituality of the animal folk into a honed vision. Their dream was starting to become a legend to live by; Fenris passed the tale along to anyone who would hear it. About the storm, the rain, the fire, and the shadows that turned from men to wolves (and, as it turned out, many other beasts.)

Interestingly, as a former anthropologist-now-fox had explained to him, Fenris's "Pack" was really just a feral model of older human tribal societies. They hunted, they sang, they raised their families, they had limited ritualistic tendencies. Yes, this was all well and good to Fenris, but it never described just *how* and *why* every man, woman, and child had been overtaken by the primordial essence of the wilderness. It didn't explain their spirit, their unending joy, their near-maddening elation and sense of unity at what they had become. For that explanation, he reckoned, one would have to peer through the mists of time beyond human remembrance. It was a vision he had once.

No one—not even the werebeasts who had once been scientists and doctors—dared try and explain the Great Change with human reason. For they had all learned since then, that Nature wasn't merely a word, a simplified concept from a textbook; she was an incredibly real force with a mind of her own, and humanity had angered her one too many times.

Fenris and Silver—now mates for life—along with the help of the werewolves from the woods they met that one night, had banded together to form their Order, and it had spread far beyond even Glacier Park. He had visited Kalispell many times after the disaster, and many more cities and towns beyond, although they were reluctant to travel past the wilds of Montana, for fear of the lawlessness they might find out there.

Alas, there probably *wasn't* any lawlessness. Beasts and birds lived by social rules, but not laws; those were an entirely human invention, and most people weren't entirely human anymore.

Grass had grown through pavement wherever it had been laid. It was sometimes shocking how quickly nature managed to take over her domain... maybe it was just a curious side effect of civilization being unceremoniously abandoned, or maybe it was a process hastened by the powers of the storm. Vines and seedlings sprouted from the foundations of buildings; bridges and dams had started to crumble, freeing Nature's waters; there was no such thing as the "Internet," or "television," or even "electricity." Not these days.

And yet, they lived more free than they had ever been. No longer confined by walls, every creature felt like they had a purpose within a greater whole. The effects of human minds suddenly inundated with animalistic instincts and abilities had been both remarkable and staggering. The greatest art, the greatest athleticism, the greatest *state of life* that Fenris and Silver had ever known was slowly revealing itself from even the lowest and most common among them. The animal spirit had unlocked so much latent potential from these once-stunted human beings that they couldn't imagine an existence any other way.

Larson was right. It was a return not to the lowest point on the circle of being, but the highest. If their most ancient ancestors, the ones whose voices had spoken to Fenris in his visions from beyond the void of space and time, had lived in this way, how had the world gone wrong?

Fenris supposed it didn't really matter. All that mattered is that he was here with *her*, and that they were perfect.

He could hear drums calling. As the werewolf pried himself from the warm earth to join his mate's hunting party, his eyes caught the edge of the snow-capped mountains in the distance. They were beautiful, and struck him suddenly with their majesty. He hoped that now, all folk would hold such beauty to their hearts, since they were an inextricable *part* of it.

It was a fresh, incomparable life, and with it would come many new adventures—and tribulations.