

CALL OF THE BEAST

A Role-play Between Saxgirl1010 and the Malignant-Librarian.

Main Characters: Versa Novak, Sylvie (McLowen)

Secondary Characters: Adolphus, Duncan, Chunhua, Alcander

Tertiary Characters: Mr. Novak

Part 1: Visit to the Wild

Canadian forests were gorgeous this time of year, despite the snow -- or maybe because of it. The trees bowed in the howling wind, wind that would suddenly stop and leave an eerie silence. Lumps of soft-looking snow disguised heavy boulders. Pines and firs thrived; it was a gorgeous forest.

Lean, smart hares rushed through the snow, their wintery pelts glistening with melted snow, and starving squirrels hung out of the trees, searching for acorns. Wild boars would snuffle and grunt, pawing their delicate hooves and squealing when they found a likely truffle spot.

Canada was just gorgeous this time of year, and the animals thrived -- winter was their element, because it stayed around a helluva lot longer than the other seasons.

This held true when the sun set behind the mountains. At any rate, the true beauty of Canada emerged when the sky had turned its deepest purple, seeming to draw the life out of the forest, the life that an average citizen was not, could not, be aware of. Little did they know that a powerful force was lurking in these forests, right underneath their noses.

Already dusk settled upon the land, and the wind whipped on the water of the nearby lakes. Lying outside on her back, a tall, slender girl was staring up into the miles and miles of purple unknown lingering in the Canadian sky. She removed her hands from their crossed position behind her head propping her up. She moved them to her sides, stretching them out like she was making a snow angel.

Versa let out a long sigh of relief.

"It is so much nicer to be here than anywhere... there."

A noise rustled in the bushes but several yards away, clumps of snow falling with soft thuds

onto more snow. Low grunts could be heard behind the bush, and an excited snort. If she were to look, Versa might see a bony little tail with a hairy tassel peeking out from behind the bush. It looked like a boar was searching for truffles -- indeed, the animal stepped out from behind the bush, looking for a different angle from which to dig, and acknowledged Versa with a blink of its piggish little eyes before turning its back to her and digging fiercely. Its tusks gleamed a beautiful purplish-white in the dying light.

The presence of the boar moved Versa to an upright position. Seeing the scruffy little fellow was hardly the scariest thing she had ever witnessed, but the porcine intruder still raised the delicate hairs on the back of her neck.

She merely growled at it under her breath.

Deciding that she had been lying on the ground far too long anyway, even in an uncharacteristically stylish winter parka, Versa stood up and looked around. The boar was still digging around curiously for its underground prize.

Versa couldn't help it.

I haven't eaten in hours...

She couldn't curb the pang of hunger in her stomach, and the sight of the boar comically made her think about bacon. With a chuckle, she shook her head to try to push the thought out of her mind, but it simply would not go subsided. When she realized that there was still a semblance of purple-blue in the sky, stippled with stars, Versa decided to find out what was really lurking in the woods. She set off after the boar.

The boar continued to dig, wagging its tail merrily. It was tearing up huge clods of brown dirt and spreading them on top of the immaculate whiteness that was the fresh snow. Its little cloven hooves were adept at sinking deep into the frozen soil and tearing it out. The boar squealed -- the truffle was within its sight -- and then heard Versa move. Startling, it reluctantly left the truffle and broke into a startled run, squealing in surprise as the girl rushed at it, weaving expertly through the trees and not once looking back.

Its squeals continued -- "Eee-EEEEK! Eee-EEEEK! Eee-EE--"

The squeals were abruptly cut short as the animal disappeared into the shadows of the deep woods. The woods were suddenly deathly quiet. Not even a squirrel chattered, and the birds huddled nervously in their nests.

What just happened?

A few short breaths escaped Versa's lips from the exertion of chasing the boar.

"Damn, he got away," she muttered, but suddenly fell silent as well.

It was getting dark quickly now; Versa didn't need a mirror to know that her pupils were dilating and her eyes growing somewhat luminous, trying to let in as much light as possible. Her senses were sharpened. With her acute observation of this now-silent forest, the hackles on her neck rose once more. Past the bluish cloud that her frozen breath was making, Versa could see nothing. No movement, no anything. Just the wind tearing through the trees.

A large stick lying on the ground alerted her - Versa could very well protect herself - but for some inexplicable reason, she thought it would be a good idea to pick it up. With the stick, she took a deep breath and trod into the forest, only hearing the last of autumn's leaves crunch beneath her shoes.

Versa's approach piqued a response. Something shifted in the woods -- something that Versa's keen, not-quite-human vision detected. It was a slight movement -- a rippling of something fluid in the half-light. It sunk into the shadows, the shushing noise of the boar's heavy, limp body being dragged through the snow the only sound.

Clearly, if Versa would let it, the animal -- whatever it was, would leave her alone.

The scent of this mystery creature was not easy to detect. The wind was blowing all over the landscape, hardly leaving an opportunity for an aroma to linger in the air. Versa's face contorted into a strange mask of concentration and confusion: her nostrils flared, eyes staring straight ahead into the abyss. She held the stick deftly with her left hand, her stronger arm. Slightly, it quivered by her side, not in fear, but rather in the effect of an adrenaline rush.

Whatever this thing was, Versa wanted to know.

Being out in the open range of Canada, so different than her familiar forests of Oregon, made her blood start to pump. She was vivacious, unafraid, ready to play a dangerous game of hide and seek.

With the slightest hint of a snarl in her voice, Versa stood at the edge of the snowbank and uttered, "Why don't you come out and play?"

There was a low grunt from the shadows, and a rasping panting noise. More disconcerting was the quiet 'splish' of a liquid dripping suddenly onto the snow. The shadows shifted and leaned forward towards her a bit -- hesitating -- hearing the snarl in her voice and considering it.

Versa stopped all motion. She still stood tall, edgy with curiosity, but now leaned her head toward the drifting shadows, looking for any telltale signs of what this thing could be. No glowing eyes, no distinguishable noise. But suddenly a scent filled her nostrils that had escaped her before, and it was not that of the animal's.

That decided it. The animal stepped into the fading sunlight. A paw the size of a dinner plate slid out into the light, overgrown black claws hanging over the toes and sinking partially into the snow, fur fanning out slightly above the naked pink of the worn paw pads, just barely visible under the toes. It was a wolf, but unlike any wolf Versa had ever seen in photographs before.

The wolf was huge.

It must have stood at four feet or so at the shoulder, hulking shoulders looming over a large head with enormous, Dane-like jowls, the likes of which hadn't been seen on this earth since the Pleistocene. A small cranial cavity seemed imbalanced in proportion to the enormity of the wolf's mouth; its heavy maw hanging open slightly and sending gusts of smoky breath into the air. Its teeth were huge and polished with speckles of blood, tongue dangling out of its mouth like a raw slice of ham. Its body was huge and bulging with muscles that rippled and bunched like a great cat's with its every movement. Its back was hunched and huge, hind legs considerably smaller than its forelegs, giving it a top-heavy, brutish appearance -- not unlike a hyena. Its fur was flat silver -- the lightest shade of gray possible before fading to white, and its hackles were raised lazily, tiny eyes flashing their tapetum lucidum in the looming darkness.

It peeled back its fat jowls to expose mottled pink gums and let out a growl -- a growl that rumbled low in its cavernous chest and exploded out of its maw in splatters of froth and saliva, enormous canine teeth with their secondary dominant tusks most unpleasant. Strands of spittle connected the wolf's teeth, ropy and pink with new blood.

"Holy shit," Versa yelped and jumped clumsily backwards into the snow, not so much in fear, but disbelief of the uncanny size of the beast before her. She knew wolves... quite well, but never, ever had seen one this... monstrous before. The glowing eyes were unnaturally piercing, something so raw and despicable...

Versa's chest rose with every breath. Frozen in place with incredulity, she dared not move a

muscle. The stick trembled in her hand much more this time. No sane human would ever try to communicate with this hulking canine, yet Versa opened her mouth to speak.

"Please..." A pause. "Don't hurt me." She was in the middle of nowhere, with not a soul to hear her confession. "I'm one of your kind," Versa proclaimed, a bestial growl added onto the end with conviction.

The wolf watched her through its mismatched small eyes, hidden by heavy brows and the curling of the skin on its snout, wrinkle after angry wrinkle folding in over themselves. It didn't seem to like the stick, and it glanced at the offending item. When Versa growled, its ears perked with surprise, exposing the enormous blue porcelain discs that gauged the soft skin under its ears, fur spread awkwardly to make room for the strange jewelry. Its head went from a lowered, defensive position to raised up tilted ever-so-slightly to one side.

"Rarrarrgh?" it said.

Observation was easy enough for Versa - this massive wolf-beast didn't approve of her defensiveness, having a weapon in hand - and she promptly dropped the stick. She even took a step closer. For some reason, Versa could feel a connection with the monster before her. This was no ordinary wolf. Other than her family line, Versa had never known of any other werewolves... it was always sort of dream of hers to find another lycanthrope that wasn't a total quack who just pretended to be one. It was her only logical explanation for the wolf, seeing its odd eyes and somewhat tribal adornments in the ears.

That's not just a genetic defect... could this be another one like me?

In response to its utterance, which Versa assumed was a question, she opened her mouth to reveal much longer-than-human canine teeth. Relatively able to overcome her still mostly-human vocal chords, Versa let out a raspy, (if not desperate), but definitely lupine growl.

The wolf dipped its huge head, exposing the whites of its eyes in a very human expression of surprise.

It sauntered over to her, tail raised to express dominance, and tentatively stuck out its huge snout close to her face -- sniffing. Its nostrils flexed close to Versa's face, ink-black and dry and chapped from the harsh winds, running only a tiny bit. It snuffed her, careful to keep its throat away from her potentially dangerous teeth -- although the huge mane of fur would probably defend it if need be -- and grunted in her face.

"Buff," it said, making a weird half-woofing noise in her face, hot breath gushing over Versa's face and sending her silky brown hair flowing. Its small, unimpressive tail twitched in a semblance of a wag.

Versa was tempted to laugh as the wolf's hot cloud of breath rushed over her face, almost like a strangely humongous puppy dog's. Instead, she stared at it, still in awe at this sublime creature. Now she understood why all of the other woodland animals were nowhere in sight - this thing would snack them down like hors d'oeuvres.

Slowly her fear was diminishing, but she had no idea what to do next. The wolf seemed convinced.

The wolf snorted in her face and then withdrew, turning its back to her lazily, tail still raised -- ah, it was a female wolf! -- and leaned over to pick up the boar in her big mouth. She glanced over her large shoulder at Versa, then effortlessly lifted the heavy boar and trotted off in a characteristic lupine lope, shoulders rolling lazily with the fluid movement as it wandered off into the trees, clearly heading somewhere.

'I've gotta follow her, or I'll never find out what she is.'

Warily, Versa watched as the wolf withdrew into the forest. She was still amazed at its size, especially how easily it grabbed the boar. She supposed she had no choice but to follow her, using good judgment along the way.

Suddenly it occurred to her that she may at one point need to defend herself. Darkness had settled into almost every nook and cranny of the forest, but had allowed just enough light to shine through the trees. Versa looked up at the sky. An almost-full moon hung overhead, which made her grin delightfully. Even if it was not entirely full, she could force a shift with a bit of effort... who knew if the need would arise?

Part 2: A Show of Dominance

The dire-wolf's ears flicked back, listening to Versa follow her. She stopped suddenly and turned ears cocked forward and stared intently at Versa, curling her lip over the dead boar so that her eyes disappeared into tiny slits that crinkled deep in her face.

"Rurrgh," she growled. This was no place for humans.

Fine, then. Should I really do this? It's kind of unnecessary...

The wolf was obviously not happy, and Versa paused for a moment to consider. In her present state, the wolf could eat her alive. Versa looked at her wrist as if she was wearing a watch. It made her think about any priorities that she might have for the rest of the night.

Nope. None. Mr. Novak was away from the cabin for the night.

And that damned hunger, it just wouldn't go away. The smell of blood and fresh meat sifted into Versa's nostrils...

It won't ... GO... AWAY!

Better to make a slightly stupid decision than a completely idiotic one. Versa unleashed a savage snarl. Her whole brow furrowed, burying her bright green eyes under two angrily arched dark eyebrows.

The wolf reacted to what she perceived to be a show of aggression instantly. The boar was on the ground and her hackles were raised, paws flexed and whole body vibrating with feral tension, huge head raised and mouth hanging open wide to expose all of her impressive teeth, body rearing up to its largest size -- which made the trees around her look comically short in comparison to what should have been a normal-sized wolf, and stared down at Versa. You could practically hear her big heart thudding with adrenaline.

The wolf must've been around six feet tall rearing, something Versa could only match in her own wolf form. Under the shadow of the massive wolf, Versa's adrenaline was sent soaring. In typical fashion, she felt like she had to compete with it. It was not a matter of danger - it was a matter of who was more powerful. Finally she had met her match.

Still hissing, Versa thrashed, throwing the parka off into the snow. Her head began to pound as the blood coursed through every vein in her body. Just like the wolf's, her heart started to pound in excitement. This was the beginning of the change... Versa had to concentrate to force it out. That pressure in her chest, the pressure in her entire frame, like another being was inside, ready to rip through her at any second, was growing by the second.

Without warning, the teenager let out another roar, somehow inflamed already with the qualities of her true nature: the wolf. Her back arched, eyes gleaming with a primal glint of defiance.

The wolf stared as Versa began to transform.

The animal's small eyes widened in surprise as the teenager threw off her parka and began to grow -- muscles rippling and thickening, bones squeaking and clicking as they rearranged themselves, and hair appearing at an increasingly rapid pace. The she-wolf lowered her head, confidence abounding -- she had fought bears even larger than herself before -- this would be no different. The only thing that confused the big wolf was how a human was transforming into a wolf. The wolf knew she was capable of something similar, in the back of her shrunken lupine brain, but wasn't able to call it clearly to mind.

Watching the large wolf staring at her amusedly through nearly shut eyes, Versa was still doubled over, halfway through the shift. The girl was hellbent on proving something to this monster, and she seemed to pour all of her focus into the transformation. Claws burst through naked skin. Every muscle rippled with a nefarious energy, enlarging enough to burst the seams of the simple shirt in which she was dressed. In the harsh Canadian cold, Versa's skin was, for only instants, freezing cold, until thick gray fur sprouted from the pores. Her elongating face was twisted into caustic delight, in ecstasy with power, as saliva dripped from the newly formed fangs.

As a digitigrade paw, wrought from her recently human flesh and bone, stepped backwards into the snow, Versa rose up with a strange curve in her back, almost as if she still had yet to straighten out the kinks in her spine. A newborn tail, capped in dark green fur, darted around before her. With a crack of bone and tendons, Versa stood upright, two feet taller than before, pulsing with nearly two hundred additional pounds of wicked lupine musculature, capable of ripping the life from nearly anything in a split second.

Her ears perked as she snarled. Another cloud of cold breath puffed from her nostrils and in between the cage of white teeth she now was baring, wedged in between her immense jaw. Like the hazy glow of a streetlamp in a bout of fog, Versa's eyes shone an eerie yellow-green. Pathetic strips of fabric hung from her body, merely small trinkets representing her human side. With a feral glare, Versa looked at the wolf before her, who no longer seemed such a threat.

The feral she-wolf sized her opponent up.

... She smelled like a pup, and a pup was a pup, regardless of their size.

The feral wolf snarled and launched herself fearlessly at Versa. Despite the darker werewolf's size advantage, the she-wolf was completely and utterly unafraid, small eyes focused with eerie precision on Versa's chest -- the place that would indicate her every movement. Her mouth was open wide -- a cavernous mass of roiling tongue and sparkling teeth in the moonlight. The pure-

wolf tackled the more dextrous werewolf, paws flung out -- but didn't use her teeth yet, simply trying to straddle the other in a show of dominance, as canines did in an instinctual attempt to prevent a full-fledged fight.

Versa hit the snow and sent the entire snowbank hurling through the air with the force. She knew this wolf must have had more experience with combat, but also knew that as a full-sized werewolf, she was more deft on her feet. In her mind, she tried to imagine this battle as one with typical prey - dive quickly for small prey like rabbits, attack at the throat for larger prey like deer.

Beneath the wolf's gigantic paws, Versa was writhing!

The full weight of the wolf was pressing on her, but she wouldn't let it stay there. For a moment, Versa was lying prone, subjecting to the grip of the wolf's paws, until abruptly she launched the lighter wolf off of her with spring-loaded muscles. It wasn't a flying throw, but gave Versa the opportunity to stand up to her full height of seven and a half feet, looming over her attacker.

The feral wolf grunted and clumsily got back onto her feet after being flung off of the other. Instantly she was back on Versa, utterly unintimidated by the other's size, but simply body-slamming her into the snow once more, panting heavily, tail high in the air and snapping her teeth shut close to the other's neck.

The body language read, 'Stay down!'

At first, Versa thought to protect her neck, which the wolf was aiming at. She turned her head awkwardly to the side and blindly slashed her claws around, realizing that she was in a feeble position, tossed into the snow once more. The claws did not strike flesh. Versa barked, then rumbled out a low growl, shifting around on the white-blanketed ground.

Some sense of human awareness crept up into her mind, and Versa got the bright idea to back down. The wolf was relentless. As her fight or flight mechanism kicked in, she knew that if, given time, she could possibly take down the wolf. She was just not interested in trying, all of a sudden. With sullen yellow eyes, Versa indicated that she was ending the fight - for now.

The feral wolf didn't seem to think so!

She slammed her paw into Versa's chest, provoking her, and then swung her head around and used it like a battering ram, the noise of her big head thudding into Versa's ribcage a weird noise in the quiet of the forest, snow flying around them as they scuffled. She didn't seem to be interested in harming Versa truly -- it was almost as though she were amused and excited by

the fight -- was her tail wagging? It was hard to see through the blur of snow.

Enraged, Versa snarled as the wolf's paw smacked right into her chest. With an almost human gesture of "don't touch me!", her arm drew in toward her midsection in defense.

Fine, you want to play?

Adrenaline was relentlessly coursing now, and Versa had the strength to stand up as she coughed out a growl.

"Rrrawwarrrrh!" Versa grunted, and pounced onto the wolf. She gnashed her teeth a few times, mostly in jest, biting at her muzzle and ears.

The feral wolf grunted and tolerated the snaps with good humor, using only her head and legs as items to knock into Versa.

... Suddenly, a howl rent the air -- one made by neither of the two wrestling in the snow.

The feral wolf froze and perked her ears -- listening hard. She then dragged her rough, hot tongue over Versa's cheek and abruptly turned to leave, picking up the boar. She looked over her shoulder one more time, then up at the moon -- it was now high in the sky -- and then began to lope off into the trees, attention span equal to that of a goldfish, apparently -- or was something calling her?

The howl caught Versa off guard; she lay there in the snow, confused, wondering why the wolf that was just tumbling around with her ran off so suddenly. She too, from her position on the ground, could see that the moon was at its zenith in the night sky.

How many hours has this been going on?

She panted, and a long pink tongue hung playfully from her maw. Her human self was speaking to her, it seemed, urging her to revert back to normal so that she could sleep through this confusion and try to find the wolf again the next day. Intrigue was still present, so she concentrated very hard on shifting back.

Versa stood up and headed back to the trees in front of the cabin, where she could find better shade from the moonlight.

Part 3: A Restless Night

Everything wilted away - fur, muscles, extra flesh, and bone - as Versa knelt down onto the frozen ground. Skin seemed to devour the fading gray fur. Her eyes regain their emerald irises. The muzzle shrunk back into her face, and long brown hair finally hung on her shoulders. Versa felt at peace with the return to her human self for once, knowing that a good night's rest would help her settle down. With a shiver, now fully human, she threw on the parka and retreated to the cabin for the night.

The night was freezing, and by the time Versa woke the next morning, icicles had formed on the eaves of the cabin, and a slick sheen of transparent ice coated the top of the snow, Versa's paw prints leading back to the cabin from the night before were preserved perfectly in ice. The watery Canadian sunlight trickled through the treetops and made the whole world sparkle coldly; there was no sign of the wolf from the night before.

"God, it looks like Christmas out here," Versa observed.

It was only 9AM.

Through the night, Versa had been plagued by a nightmare, which prevented her from sleeping soundly. She simply could not sleep with last night's events on her mind. Luckily, she was incredibly quiet on her feet considering that she wasn't very dainty, and snuck out of the house without waking her father. Something about the forest beckoned her, she noticed, staring at the paw prints encased in ice. With a shiver, Versa walked into the forest once more.

A bright, colorless sun shone high above, causing the snow to beam a blazing white. Luckily, as Versa ventured deeper into the forest, the blinding snow gradually became obscured by blue shade.

The teenager walked for an hour or so without noticing anything out of the norm'; a different boar had come and eaten the truffle the one had left out yesterday, and didn't have the good sense to run like hell from Versa. That was the problem with boars -- they were too bold for their own good. Squirrels chattered and threw nuts at her, and once a hare erupted out from its silent hiding spot blending into the snow but three feet from Versa, falling over itself to get away from her. The trees thickened, and animal nests and pathways were more and more prominent the farther from the cabin the teenager walked.

Pine needles sprinkled the snow like sprinkles on icing. The smell of animal was stronger here, and when the acrid scent of lupine urine assaulted her human nose, Versa knew she had found the feral wolf's territory. As she continued walking, she pulled a stick of pemmican from her

coat. Munching on the venison-and-fruit jerky as she walked, she was aware of that strange silence again. The animals were repelled by her, afraid of something. A whiff of stale urine invaded her nostrils as she stopped.

"Eww," she retorted plainly. Her nose scrunched in disgust. "This is definitely it," Versa whispered. "Now where, exactly..." A few more trees away, she still saw a complete absence of life. No tiny animals roaming, or even hiding, anymore.

Versa finally stopped when the smell was overwhelming. She finished eating the pemmican, sure that she wasn't confusing aromas, and waited for something, hopefully, to appear.

And appear it did.

"What are you doing here?" came a husky female alto from behind her. The voice was rough with disuse.

Versa's hair whipped in surprise, just as her body did, as she turned around. "Huh?"

The woman that stood there stood at six foot plus, and her entire body was singing with muscle. Professional body builders might have had an issue holding a candle to the impressive specimen of human being that sunk into a feral crouch fifteen feet or so from Versa, mismatched blue-and-brown eyes focused on the younger woman's. Her skin was darkly tanned, no doubt from years of living where the sun's light reflected off of the snow and burnt skin in the arctic winds. Her face was uncannily pretty, despite herself; high, sculpted cheekbones and almond eyes, with full chapped lips and a prominent chin.

She wore dark blue hand-fixed leather trimmed with rabbit furs -- it was surprisingly well-made, and ... no shoes. In the middle of winter. Barefoot in three feet of snow. Her biceps bulged lazily under her honey-dark skin, one hand resting on her legging-clad kneecap and the other fisted in the snow. Extremely long and thick nails tapered to wicked points at the tips, as did, strangely, her toenails, which looked more like feral claws than something that belonged on human feet.

She was lovely, in her own way, and it called to Versa -- the call of a beast.

She crouched there lazily, a brace of rabbits lying on the snow by her, mismatched eyes framed with a lace of dark lashes regarding the other frostily.

Versa's eyes bulged wide open as she stared at the astounding woman before her. She, too,

was part-human, part-beast, but the features of this strange human were too much for her to grasp. This had to be the wolf... it was the eyes, and the sheer size of her, that led Versa to believe it.

The teenager's mouth hung open, but she quickly closed her lips tight, forcing them into a pert, neutral position so as not to be rude. Finally she turned her body to face the woman, partly intrigued and partly terrified.

The woman stood up, her abdominal muscles emerging from the flat plane of her stomach like hills on a plain, the skin above her navel threaded through with a bone piercing. Her mid-drift was bare, which seemed to make little sense, considering the freezing wind, but the woman seemed utterly comfortable in the cold. (Maybe her whole body was numb and she couldn't feel anything anymore.) Her hair was dragged back into a high ponytail at the back of her head, and it was long and light gray -- like the hair of an old woman, but she was clearly in her mid-twenties or so.

Her ears, exposed by the ponytail, were gauged painfully full -- with blue discs. Versa's assumptions must have been correct -- the wolf the night before had been wearing the same gauges!

Her full upper lip rolled up into a snarl. "Speak!" she barked, offended. Was her voice really so rusty that she couldn't remember how to speak human? The woman was too proud to admit it, but was slightly concerned that her days living in the wilderness had made her lose her human speech.

"I--" Versa stammered out, knowing that the first word she formed wouldn't make sense, but did so to appease the wintry Amazon standing only feet away. She was breathing heavily, but managed to string together a sentence. "I didn't know... there were others... like me- me. Out here."

Versa wanted to run away, but was still too curious to move from her position. Her chest rose up and down shakily, awaiting a reply.

The woman's silver eyebrow lifted. "Are you stupid?" she said thickly, voice guttural with annoyance. What the hell was this girl talking about? There was a human settlement not far from this place that was crawling with them. Was the girl lost? "The human settlement is that way," she said, jerking her clawed thumb back in the direction Versa had come from. "I suggest you go back to where you belong."

Then she snatched up the brace of rabbits and stalked north -- toward the base of another small mountain that seemed to grow like a wart atop the mountainside they were already on. Her movement was hypnotizing -- like a big cat, all contained muscle and feral movement, hair whipping around behind her in the random pouts of winter wind. The muscles in the backs of her legs were prominent.

It was sad to see the woman leave so abruptly. Versa was hoping that the woman's memory was as strong as her body, but apparently it was not. Almost stuttering, Versa yelped out weakly, "Wait!" expecting the worst. "You don't... remember what happened last night?"

The woman turned around partially, one leg cocked up and resting on a snowy boulder. Even her thigh muscles looked like if they tensed she could send herself rocketing into the air like a fur-clad typhoon. Her brow furrowed. Despite herself, the woman wore her emotions on her sleeve -- her face was as honest as a child's. Last night? What was the girl talking about? She considered this for a moment. Ah, she had been lupus the night before -- a full wolf. 'That time of the month' must have snuck up on her again. Her memory from being in her pure wolf form was complete shit, this she knew, but she was too proud to let it go and admit it.

Trying to seem like she was completely cognizant of the occurrences the night before, she said, "Of course I remember." Only problem was, her face showed the lie.

Finally, this ice-cold woman had let her guard down, it seemed, which Versa had to analyze efficiently before muttering another word. "Really?" she mused somewhat harshly. "You remember killing that boar and dragging it away? And having a little tussle with another wolf?" Versa tried not to cross her arms, knowing that it was a warning sign of defensiveness, but she couldn't help it.

"I'm that other wolf," she stated matter-of-factly.

Part 4: "Back Down"

The woman sprang nimbly onto the top of the boulder, snow scattering, and stared down at Versa. "Don't get fresh with me, girl," she said, the snarl in her voice apparent. The woman may have had the body of a human, but she seemed to have none of the usual social graces. "I could break you like a squirrel."

Her body language changed slightly after that statement -- the realization that Versa wasn't a threat to her in this form seemed to calm her. Swinging the brace of rabbits over her shoulder she unceremoniously declared, "The boar's carcass was near my den when I woke. Yes, I

remember it," she paused, then, "And I do not 'tussle' with other wolves. I kill them. You should be dead."

She stared menacingly down at the other, becoming flustered as embarrassing memories of play-wrestling with Versa the night before crept back into her head. "I don't know why I'm wasting my time with you. You smell like human shit. Get out of my territory," she said suddenly, following that up with a snarl and glare.

The wolf-girl didn't take kindly to having insults slung at her, especially with someone that she was being so patient with. True, she should have known better than to intrude in another wolf's territory, but while here, upon finding another wolf, she would at least try to become its acquaintance rather than its enemy. Surely she'd be safer having another wolf know that she was a wolf too, instead of being disguised a human, left in danger from the creatures that lurked in the forest.

Versa lowered her voice deeper than it already was. A thick breath escaped her lips. "I could have killed you last night." Her eyes were shimmering bright green, now defiant, letting her pride get the best of her.

The woman looked at Versa with annoyance clear on her elegant features. "Was that a threat?" she said, voice deepening in response to Versa's body language, the brace of rabbits sliding slowly from her hand once more. With the rate those rabbits were being dropped and picked up again once more, it was a miracle they weren't falling apart!

Inside her mouth, Versa ran her tongue against her fangs. "Perhaps."

Apparently, though Versa said 'perhaps', the woman heard 'definitely'. She was on Versa in a second, muscles bulging from her skin, letting out an inhuman roar that came from deep in her belly -- knee in Versa's collarbone in an instant, riding her to the ground and slamming her there with the force of a wrestler conducting a pile-drive. The snow was generous, though, and Versa would only have a bruise in the morning -- and maybe her werewolf accelerated healing would rid her of it more quickly, too. Quick as a flash, Sylvie's thighs were on either side of Versa's face, snapping in like a vice and holding the shorter woman there, vulnerable, with her ass crushing into Versa's chest, hard, keeping her from getting up. It was like an imitation of the night before, but in human form -- an 'I'm dominant, dammit' maneuver.

"I don't take kindly to threats," Sylvie said, leaning down to breathe in Versa's face -- breath coppery like new pennies. What she was actually doing was taking the opportunity to smell Versa -- to remember the night before. When she inhaled, the memories came rushing back to

her clearly. Ah, another werewolf -- right, of course. Female, late teens, fed on human food. Dark fur, glowing green eyes, strange markings on back. Sylvie's eyes sparkled with recognition, but she merely tightened her thighs and bared her teeth in Versa's face, large breasts resting on either side of Versa's chin -- unlike a human, she didn't seem in the slightest self-conscious about their positioning.

"Ahh!" Versa gasped as her head rocketed against the ground, the breath sucked out of her, paralyzed between the meaty clamps that were Sylvie's thighs. No word in any dictionary could describe the look on Versa's face - it was an ugly combination of utter disgust, awe, and terror. At first she wrenched to the sides of her face, pulling her cheeks out and over the fangs that were gleaming white, exposed as Versa's mouth gaped open. This expression didn't last long because it turned into clenched teeth - Sylvie's massive bulk on top of Versa's more lithe frame was squeezing all the air out of her like a bellows.

Oh my God, boobs, get them off, get them off!

Like a bull being wrangled by an expert cowhand, Versa wriggled to no avail, trying to signal to Sylvie to let her go. Beyond her bared teeth and chest, Versa could hardly see anything. She was suffocating, but managed to squeak out "Let me... GO!," struggling with all of her potent strength.

It was still no match for Sylvie.

The woman stared at her, then took pity on her and loosened up to allow the other to breathe. "What the hell are you doing up here anyway?" she said suddenly, comfortable that she was dominant. She removed herself from Versa by leaping off of her -- probably to avoid any sudden strikes by the disgruntled girl beneath her, and landed about five feet away or so, in a half-crouch, watching her with a frown on her features. "Are you lost?"

As soon as Sylvie leapt off of her, Versa gulped in a breath of air as if she had been underwater for minutes. There was no sense in being impetuous anymore, for she had been given a second chance. With caution, Versa peeled herself off of the snow. There would be a bruise in the morning on her lower back, probably right around where the green insignia indicative of her lycanthropy was, but it had already started to clear up.

"Ahhh," she moaned, drawing out a breathy long 'h' syllable, clenching her hand to her back as she stood up, shaking. Before speaking, she tried to mentally block out what Sylvie had just put her through.

"No, I'm not lost," Versa answered. "Ever since I got here, I've known that something was here, in the forest. I shouldn't have come here, probably, but I was curious." She was thankful that she could still speak and breathe after the ordeal, and Versa almost chuckled with happiness at the realization. Now that the beast-woman was crouched in a relatively docile position as opposed to before, she felt like she could possibly ask a more tender question without rousing her again. "Don't you ever feel like you're the only one? That you need to find someone else like you to make peace with yourself?"

The woman stared at her like she'd grown another head. After a moment's consideration, she said, "I am at peace with myself," and her voice was honest. She absently scratched at an itch on her thigh, finding a smudge of dirt on her arm and licking it off as nonchalantly as a normal person would tuck their hair behind their ears. "Of course you've known that I was here -- you and I are similar -- not quite the same, I think," she said slowly, "but very similar. You probably smelled my territory. Not smart of you to come here. Curious. Cat. Curious like a cat -- you aren't much a wolf!" the woman taunted, clearly trying to get under Versa's skin, but at the same time, there was a hint of a smirk on her features.

It was almost as though she was play-fighting with words, similar to how they had play-fought with fur and teeth yesterday.

"I'm just as much a wolf as you are, I'm sure." Versa stared at her with a sly admiration, hoping to perhaps get the woman to not turn her away, to open up some of her experiences. She wasn't sure if she really was as much a wolf as this woman was, but knew that they at least shared a beast inside, and that had to stand for something. Versa turned away from her, shoving her hands in the pockets of her parka.

The woman watched her turn away -- and, like a child, whined, "Where do you think you're going?"

The teenager's eyes were like darts staring back at her. A quick huff of a breath came from her lips, followed by an interrogation. "Didn't you just try to kill me about five minutes ago?" Versa pulled her hands out of her pockets, perhaps to be ready to defend herself.

"I'm alpha here," the feral woman said simply. "If you would have just backed down sooner, I wouldn't have had to pounce you." She turned her elegant head to the side and gave Versa a sidelong look from her brown eye, chocolatey in the daylight. A howl rent the air again -- the weird woman's human ears actually physically twitched and she turned to pick up the brace of rabbits. "Ah, stupid distracting puppy," she said admonishingly, wrinkling one side of her nose. "You're making me late!"

Late? For what?

Versa was wondering what possible appointments this woman had to tend to, but figured she couldn't hurt by asking. "Late?" The howl was similar to the one she had heard during the scuffle with the wolf yesterday. She could only ponder.

The woman stared at her for a long moment out of that same chocolate eye, then said, "Yes. Late." Versa hadn't directly asked her what she was late for, so she sneakily avoided answering. Unlike most human beings, skilled in the art of the lie, this woman didn't seem capable of lying. "...If you can keep up, you can come," she mumbled, then took off in a splash of snow, bronzed body disappearing rapidly into the trees up the mountainside.

It was almost an immediate reaction, and Versa couldn't believe she was capable of such a quick start. Hellbent on not losing sight of this woman (though it was hard not to), her legs leapt into motion. Versa had very large feet, which she often tripped over, but she was running quite deftly through the snow. Last night's snowfall, and early morning freeze, caked the snow with a thin layer of ice, which provided ample footing for Versa to run over.

She gritted her teeth, staring only at the woman yards away, running at a pace fast enough to keep up, but not fast enough to sap her energy.

The woman looked behind her and laughed, seeing her catching up. They were heading towards the sheer face of a cliff, ripping out of the ground and towering above them at least twenty feet or so. There were handholds -- one would assume that they would have to climb, since the woman wasn't slowing down. In fact, she seemed to be... speeding up? The feral woman's legs pumped faster and faster and faster, and suddenly, in a puff of snow, she leapt. The leap was inhuman, and startling. One minute she was there, the next she was gone. A thudding noise on top of the cliff alerted Versa to the woman's location.

The woman was standing on top of the cliff. Her bosom was rising and falling lightly with the exertion, but aside from that, she seemed utterly comfortable with the fact that she had just leapt twenty feet into the air without a hitch. She looked at Versa challengingly.

A barrage of fluttering snow stopped Versa's momentum dead, and in a split second the woman was gone. Nowhere in sight. Versa, utterly confused, looked at the top of the cliff, only to see Sylvie standing on its edge proudly, as if some form of teleportation had mysteriously placed her there.

"What?" she uttered aloud. "--how did you get up there?," quiet enough that only Versa heard herself. Or she hoped, at least. Not after coming this far, she thought, grunting, and walked a few steps closer to the cliff, staring in awe up at Sylvie. "Wait... don't just leave me here!"

"I won't," the woman said confidently. "You can do it. Leap!"

"Ehh-," Versa spat out. "Leap? To there? You're superhuman. I'm not, at least not right now!" the girl yelled back. Versa, to prove her point, crouched lowly into the snow, building up potential energy, then jumped into the air. She hardly had any hang time, and fell back into her standing position. "See?"

"You can!" the woman crowed. "Come on, pup, you can DO it! It's just the human-people you live with who tell you that you cannot -- don't believe them. They don't know our power. Even a measly human being could jump this, if they didn't have the mind-barrier that they cannot." For once, Sylvie wished she was more eloquent. Her chest was tightening up nervously; she wanted this fellow wolf to make the jump -- it was important to her, for some godforsaken reason. She held out her hand. "Get a running start. Don't doubt yourself. Come to me."

Another deep sigh followed Sylvie's challenge, and Versa was none too sure that what she had just heard was real. "You want me to jump, just jump, 20 feet into the air..."

Maybe later on this mysterious beast-woman would bestow her astonishing powers upon her, but for right now, Versa was content with having to find another way to get to her. Reluctantly, she decided to see what she could really do, and stepped out onto a fresher layer of snow. Versa started to run as fast as her long legs would take her, and took a leap of faith at the base of the cliff. A one second hang time was all she could scrape up. She snarled, looking at the cliff once again for an answer.

The feral woman looked down at her patiently. Let your beast shine through. You don't need to call the fur and teeth to call its strength. "...Once you jump the cliff, you may come to my home and I will call you 'friend', she said. "Until then... you and I are too different." The woman turned, tanned back rippling with muscle, and walked off, rabbits slung over her shoulder.

The green eyes of Versa stared up at Sylvie, turning away, noting this woman's great strength, both physically and mentally. Versa knew she had the physical strength, her taut muscles tense at the thought, but also realized that her mental strength often times was as flimsy as balsa wood.

Perhaps true strength is not just physical.

A puff of blue breath filled the air as Versa exhaled. She growled, but paused. Growling was so natural to her - and what was she right now? A human. Again she growled, this time trying to make it as genuine as possible. Sylvie's wordless sentence echoed in her head - Let your beast shine through.

(Unbeknownst to Versa, Sylvie had stopped not far from the edge of the cliff, ears perked and listening silently.)

With another lupine grumble, Versa closed her eyes and tried to remove all thoughts of being human from her brain, almost as if she was trying to start a shift. It would never work, considering that it was a painfully bright day, with no sight of the moon, but the best she could do was channel the energy of her inner wolf. As if controlled by puppet strings, Versa's arms reached out in random motions at her sides, grabbing for nothing in the air, fingers flexing vividly in and out. Her teeth were clenched, feeling the fangs touch the insides of her mouth. It was like she was "trying out" her body parts like a child would play with the parts of a doll, wriggling her pointed ears, slowly flexing every muscle.

With a harried snarl, Versa ran at the cliff again, eyes wide open and gleaming a savage green, and planted her feet soundly into the ground before taking a springboard leap off of nothing. It happened too fast for her to process, but Versa let her focus guide her as she soared through the air.

Thunk! The girl landed, albeit a bit clumsily, as she fumbled to catch herself on the snow - at the edge of the cliff.

Instantly a claw-tipped tan hand shot out and grabbed Versa's arm, hauling her the rest of the short way up the cliff. The woman backed up a bit to give Versa some room, grinning down at her with gleaming pearly-white teeth with overgrown fangs just like Versa's. "That was very good," she admitted.

As the woman pulled her up, Versa's heart was beating a wild "thump-thump-thump" with disbelief. Yes, she had just jumped 20 feet in the air as if it was an everyday occurrence. She sucked in a large breath, then let it back out to calm her nerves.

"Whoah. You... you were right," Versa said, stumbling as she rose to her feet. A small self-satisfied snarl came from her lips, and she felt ready to face any challenge ahead.

"Of course I was," said the woman obliviously. She smiled and then jogged the last fifty

meters to a large crack in a rock wall -- pausing at the entrance and ducking inside.

A half-smile showed on Versa's face. The rock wall was a nice deviation from the blazing white snow and trees within the forest; Versa looked at the feature, and strode to where the woman had just entered.

When Versa looked inside the crack, she noticed it went back much farther than one would expect from the facade. It looked like it went in about fifteen feet, before a faint light shone in the back -- as though there were some sort of opening back there to permit sunlight. "Come in," the woman suggested from the back, her voice echoing. The same howl Versa had heard twice before sounded from within the cave, fading to a gurgling yip.

Versa placed her hand along the inside of the wall. It was cold to the touch, but she let her hand ride along its smooth surface as she entered cautiously. She was starting to trust this woman. Slowly she paced to the back of the cave.

The crack opened up into a squarish 'room' of sorts. Versa's boot touched something soft -- and if she were to look down, she'd notice that the floor was lined with furs and dried straw -- it smelled warm and like the woman slept there often. A huge pile of hand-cured furs loomed ominously in the corner -- it probably got arctic there at night -- and a puppy came bounding over to her. It was small and clumsy, with legs longer than its body and a stubby tail -- probably around eight weeks old. It licked her leg excitedly after sniffing her for a long moment.

Versa was glad to be protected from the freezing winds outside, though she was also surprisingly chilly inside the rock outcropping. Did this woman not have a fire started?

The playfulness of the puppy put her at ease. Its tiny feet bounded along the ground as it raced between and around Versa's ankles, romping endlessly. The girl laughed at its carefree demeanor, and as it bounced away happily, she turned her eyes to Sylvie.

Sincerely, she asked, "Is this your home?"

The woman watched them with an eagle eye from her spot crouched on the pile of furs.

"One of them," Sylvie said nonchalantly, scratching behind her ears. "I stay here during the winter months -- it's warmer." She looked at the puppy, who rushed back to her, tail wagging, staring at the rabbits. Sylvie gave it one, snapping it in half to expose the red meat effortlessly. "Where is your home? The human settlement?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the closest town.

Her guest's nostrils flared, smelling the rabbit's fresh scent. "No," Versa replied somewhat sadly. "I'm from Corvallis, in Oregon. I'm only here right now with my father on a short winter break. Our cabin is right near the base of the forest. I definitely needed to get out of Corvallis for a while." Versa wanted to ask more questions about the mysterious woman, but waited until she felt it was appropriate to speak. After all, she was the guest in this dwelling.

"I have not heard of that dwelling," she said, referring to Corvallis. Sylvie hadn't heard of many towns, actually -- but she did know the Newer York settlement. She looked expectantly at Versa. "What is it you are called? Green-eyes?"

Slightly, Versa chuckled, and her heart paced faster, like she was anticipating something. "I'm not Green-eyes. You can call me Versa. Versa Novak."

"Very well, Versa Novak." said the woman. "Do you want some rabbit?" she said suddenly, trying to be polite. She held out a dead rabbit by its hind legs.

"Sure, and thank you," Versa said honestly. The pemmican was hardly enough to fill her stomach, and if she would be caught eating raw meat in the presence of another human, she knew Sylvie was the right person to do it in front of. She took a step forward, an eager expression on her face.

Sylvie let her take the rabbit and then sat down cross-legged on the furs, not eating herself, but watching the puppy eat. "I found him," she said aloud. "I don't know where his parents are. Dead, I expect."

A satisfying feeling of delight and curiosity was welling up in Versa as she stood on the furs. She wasn't sure if she should sit down, but stared at Sylvie, interested in what she was saying. It was a wonder she was so hospitable. "Are you going to keep him for a while?" A dumb question, yes, but she liked that both of them were actively engaged in conversation.

With her teeth, Versa gnawed a slit in the rabbit's pelt.

"I can't keep him anymore than a duck's feathers can keep water," she said. "However, the hunters in this area seem to delight in taking wolf heads home. With their guns they try to impress other humans," she snorted. "If they hadn't any weapons but their meager teeth and claws, they wouldn't be so quick to attack the wolves."

At the mention of guns, Versa stopped pulling at the rabbit. It was a sensitive word for her.

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean." She didn't want to start a sob-story with Sylvie, but knew she had yet another connection with her. Her voice lowered as she began. "My mother was a werewolf, too. Some hunter killed her, with a gun, of course. I didn't think people knew we existed." Versa sighed, pondering out loud. "It's a wonder she almost killed the hunter, or else he would have had the strength to go report his findings. I'd probably be dead now, too."

Sylvie looked at her with something flickering in her mismatched blue-and-brown eyes -- something vaguely like sympathy, but not quite. Animals didn't understand the concept of sympathy fully. Things just were. "Some humans are terrible," she agreed.

The puppy burped.

Quickly, the thought of her mother's death faded away, and Versa sat down on the furs, facing Sylvie, while sitting Indian-style. "It's a real shame," she admitted nonchalantly. But, before tearing away into the rabbit, she stated, "I'm very glad to be what I am."

Sylvie raised silver eyebrows on her tanned face. "That's a weird thing to say," she said bluntly.

"But it's true," the girl responded, and with a slender finger, tore back the rabbit's pelt. With ease, she peeled back the fur, separating its thin skin from the raw muscle beneath. Versa reached for what seemed to be the rabbit's back muscles, taking a chunk of the meat. She looked at it awkwardly, almost not sure if she should, but succumbed to the smell and popped the morsel into her mouth, chewing it slowly.

Sylvie watched her eat silently, and after a moment's thought, said, "Sylvie. That's what I'm called. The puppy I call 'Owl'. It's because of his eyes." Indeed, the brown wolf pup had circular markings around his eyes like spectacles, giving him an owl-like appearance.

"Sylvie," Versa said, letting the name roll off her tongue. "That's a nice name." She wasn't lying, but couldn't come up with anything more to say. She hoped that Owl would come sit by her in companionship, though it made Versa feel much calmer now knowing the woman's name.

Sylvie blinked. "Yeah," she said simply. The barest hint of a blush crept across her dark cheeks when Versa said her name was 'nice' -- no one had ever said that before. She seemed to like the rabbit, which made Sylvie pleased. She was picky with her food; in order to maintain her astounding physique, she had to eat a lot -- all the time. She even left nuts and berries she found out for the hares -- if she fed them, they'd feed her better, in the long run.

"You should be careful, though," Sylvie said suddenly, slowly. "There is a we-- er, uh, wolf pack around here that doesn't take kindly to humans. Hell, they don't take kindly to me, either. Stupid dogs," she said. "They'll eat you alive if they find you, so you'd best bring some of those human hand-claws with you to defend yourself if you intend to make your territory around here."

Upon hearing this, Versa considered the threat of the wolf pack. She was relatively sure she could handle herself - but then again, she always did. Versa always had hubris to fall back on, it seemed. "I don't really plan on starting trouble with them if I can avoid it," Versa said, but then realized that that's why she was sitting in this mountain den right now: her curiosity got the best of her.

Sylvie shrugged her thick shoulders, muscles rolling easily. She stretched out on the furs, abdominal muscles bulging impressively, letting her legs drop apart in a decidedly unfeminine manner. The puppy hiccuped and wandered outside to do its business. "Anyways, you ought to go now. This is about the time of day that I take my nap," she said, dropping her mismatched gaze upon Versa -- letting her know that, although she had earned the right to be in Sylvie's own den, she wasn't trusted enough to be nearby when the she-wolf was sleeping.

Gazing upon the mysterious woman whom she was just starting to be familiar with, Versa merely nodded, rising from the furs to leave her alone. She took the rabbit with her, but reminded herself mentally to abandon what was left of the carcass so as to not terrify her father, who was presumably back at the cabin. Before turning away to depart, Versa spoke to Sylvie quietly. "Thanks for... letting me in here. I appreciate it," she cut off, choosing to say less than more.

Versa didn't know it, but Sylvie blushed even harder and stuffed her face uncomfortably into one of the pelts, grumbling about weird humans, after the green-eyed girl had left.

Down the rocky corridor, Versa could see the white smattering of snow and rocks, but could tell the sky was getting a bit blustery and dark. Finally, she turned one last eye to Sylvie's den, and started the journey home, pulling the hood of her parka comfortably over her head.

Part 5: Wolf Attack

The walk home was blissfully uneventful; the moon began to peek over the horizon, and the winds kicked up. It screamed through the trees, howling and tearing at Versa's parka, tugging at the fur lining and sending her hair every which way as she walked back to the cabin. When

she finally stumbled inside, slamming shut the door behind her, the sudden lack of wind was startling.

Snow was shaken off or dissolved as Versa shook her coat and hair around in a strangely canine gesture, staring into the cabin's main room. Mr. Novak was sitting inside, enjoying the fire he had started, reading a Canadian newspaper.

"Hi hon," he greeted her.

Mr. Novak was probably the only father in the world who didn't feel the need to scrutinize Versa at that moment, asking, 'Where have you been? I was worried sick!' As long as he trusted his daughter to not go and get herself killed, knowing full well that he was to leave her to do her wolfy business alone, he was at peace.

Just like normal, she returned his greeting without much emotion, and sauntered into the next room, hanging up her parka on a coat rack at the front of the cabin. She kicked off her boots.

Versa's mind was wandering, wondering how she'd fall asleep. The woman would not leave her thoughts. She tugged at her green scarf as she sat down on her bed, releasing a sigh. Just as she was about to take off her long-sleeved shirt to change into something more comfortable, she heard a noise outside her window. Her pointed ears wriggled a bit, but she leaned back onto her bed, passing it off as nothing.

Versa's excellent hearing was right. There was indeed a noise outside -- the sound of a paw scraping against wood. It stopped as abruptly as it began, though, and a muffled 'shushing noise' of snow against something else could be heard as something skittered back into the forest. A spider was busily building her web in the corner of Versa's room, tending to a small egg-case that hung like a drop of water on one of the strands.

"Hmmh?" Versa raised her eyebrows, sorting out white noise from the distinctive scraping sound she had just heard. Her face pressed against the window. Only bluish snow and trees greeted her - no animals - and a full moon positioned high in the sky like a white plate.

A small replica of a grandfather clock hung on the wall. Versa looked at it, noting that it was shortly after 8PM, certainly not late enough to send her father's thoughts into a tizzy of concern if she were to leave the cabin again. She pulled herself up off the bed in a sit-up, trying to decide if she should leave again. That noise was definitely not a figment of her imagination. Haphazardly, she entered the living room again, trying not to draw attention to herself. Mr. Novak lowered the newspaper only enough to reveal his blue eyes, staring at Versa with

inquisition through his reading glasses.

"You know," he stated, "it's a full moon tonight? I'm not buying you another coat if you screw that one up." Somehow this was a perfectly ordinary thing for her father to say, not even a hint of sarcasm lingering in his voice.

Curtly, she replied, "Yes, I know. I'll be fine." If Versa had a dollar for every time she had to say those two phrases in her 17 years, she'd be a millionaire.

Her father simply quirked a brow further and grunted, snapping his paper and delving back into the news. When Versa stepped outside, parka abandoned temporarily, there was a frigid silence. Pawprints marked the snow beneath her window -- prints that were dog-sized.

At first, Versa shivered, for once angry that she did not have a thicker layer of fat to keep her warm, but she knew that greater dangers were at hand besides being cold. The paw prints were not unusual, which Versa found surprising. They looked much like those of an average dog, or more likely here in Canada, a wolf. She sniffed the air for an odor, but again, the wind hindered her attempt to pick up much of a smell. Versa followed the trail and hoped that the temperatures would rise.

It didn't. If anything, the temperature dropped. She was able to follow the tracks into the woods a short distance before they became psychotic -- spreading in all different directions, backwards, forwards, scattered haphazardly in all sorts of places -- four different trails lead in four separate directions.

By the time she made it into the mish-mosh of trails, Versa was shivering like mad. Only clad in an old pair of jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and the boots, she was regretting her choice of attire.

"This has to be the wolf-pack Sylvie told me about..."

Versa followed the tracks for over an hour. Her arms were numb, her teeth had long since stopped chattering, and her tears had frozen to her cheeks in icy sheets. The tracks led deeper and deeper into the forest. On top of that, it had begun to snow -- not hard, but enough that the occasional awful snowflake would land on her cheek and burn like an ember. The Canadian night was unforgiving -- but astoundingly beautiful. When Versa paused, once, to catch her breath, looking into the sky was a spiritual experience within itself; the moon was as fat as a silver coin, and shone boldly with sparkling stars cresting it. It was astoundingly beautiful; something that one would never see in a city or town. It made one want to throw one's head back and howl.

This was the first time in a long time where Versa could feel, despite her physical discomfort, a higher sense of connection with the nature surrounding her. Biting wind and snow tossed her hair about, blocking her vision, until she pulled it out of her face to stare in sublime respect at the moon. Suddenly the forlorn memories of any issue that had ever plagued her disappeared from her unconscious mind; this atmosphere allowed her to retreat into the sanctity of the primal bond between beast and nature. Odd as it may have looked, Versa dropped her frozen arms to her sides, tossed her head back, and with an adept, mellow tone, released a mournful howl into the night sky.

Instantly there was an answering howl. It was a loud, explosive, braying howl with a strong tenor to it that faded into a rich bass at the end. 'Stay put,' it seemed to say -- Versa's wolf side translated the howl for her to the best of its ability.

Versa's howl faded to a whine, then a human grunt. Somehow the moon's prescence made everything okay, despite the wicked cold. It was fantastic to hear a returning howl, and Versa stood alone in the forest grove, waiting for the wolf that had presumably attracted her attention.

Her mind was currently split into nothing but images, yet was feeling as if they were real and palpable: Versa could somewhat envision and feel her werewolf legs moving, running through the night, could feel her lupine jaws closing around hapless prey, and wanted to taste the experience, yet held back her thoughts long enough to wait for the distant messenger to arrive before succumbing to her inner beast.

Versa could hear the thudding of running feet -- a biped -- in the snow. Whoever was running, they weren't making any effort to be quiet. The trees shivered as something shoved in between them, and in a flash of blue and silver, Sylvie bounded out onto the snow. She was in human form, barefoot, she skidded across the icy snowbank.

"What are you doing here?" she said, bosom heaving.

It looked like she had been exerting herself exceptionally, and although there were no cuts on her body, there was dried blood on the hem of her loincloth. The moonlight sparkled off of her snow-dusted hair, which had fallen out of its high ponytail and hung down her back, reaching down to her calves. It hung in a thick, glossy sheet of shimmering silver behind her, moving gently with the wind like it was singing a song of its own. Sylvie had lovely hair. Some strands slid in front of her face, obscuring her brown eye and leaving her ice-blue one clear and penetrating in the semi-darkness. The moon illuminated the snow, making the ground brighter than the sky.

The blood caught Versa's eyes, but it did not disturb her; it simply caused her senses to activate. "I had to get out again," the girl declared. "Something was at the cabin's window tonight. There were paw prints that led me here." Versa crossed her arms across her chest to generate heat.

Sylvie didn't need Versa's explanation -- being a wolf inside was explanation enough for wanting to come outside.

Sylvie's ears twitched, the discs in them shifting subtly up and down with the movement.

"They're coming," she said thinly, eyes narrowing. Sliding her arm back behind the heavy curtain of her hair, she shoved it back and out of the way -- quite a feat within itself considering how heavy all of that hair must have been, and dropped into a crouch. "If you run, they will kill you," she said quietly. "If you fight, they will TRY to kill you. Do you understand?" she said, eloquence, as usual, escaping her.

Green, intent eyes stared back at Sylvie. "I understand," Versa said simply, but did not move a muscle. She felt safer here with Sylvie than if she were to run off on her own, even if she transformed, though doing so now would mean having to strip down in her presence, and in the freezing cold. Versa awaited other guidance, still too torn to either run away or to stand there.

Sylvie paused, suddenly seeming to hear Versa. "... Did you say that they were at your den?" she wanted to know, brows furrowing. That wasn't good. The sound of paws snapping through the thin layer of ice collected atop the snowbanks grew louder as they -- whatever 'they' were -- approached, rapidly.

"Yes, they were at the cabin," Versa replied in a hurry, and quickly turned to look in the direction she had come from. Her pointed ears rose almost comically, her brow furrowing as well. "That doesn't sound good," Versa said as the crunching of paws on snow grew louder. Her heart started to pump steadily.

"It's no--" Sylvie began to agree -- but her words were choked off as a mouth sealed around her throat.

They were on them in an instant -- faster than the human eye could comprehend. Wolves -- many of them. They flooded out of the forest, a tide of silky-furred bodies, timber wolves of great size and strength. The one that had Sylvie by the throat had shot out of the woods like a fur-covered bullet, mouth gaping open wide. Sylvie's hand hadn't come up fast enough to

defend herself. Gurgling in blood, Sylvie was slammed viciously into the ground; the large wolf above her worrying her ruined neck like a rag doll, tail flipped up in a display of dominance. Searing-hot blood sprayed across the snow from the severed jugular, hot enough to melt the snow.

Sylvie kicked and struggled wildly, eyes rolling back into her head and mouth opening in a silent scream of pain and rage. Another wolf was on her legs, shredding them with its teeth and claws -- and two wolves were rushing Versa. The rest of the pack hung back, watching with cunning in their yellow eyes to gauge the intruder's strength.

Versa could not believe that the wolves had taken down a mountain of a woman so easily; fear struck her immediately, knowing she was now in jeopardy. You'd better shift RIGHT NOW, Versa told herself amongst the flurry of thoughts running through her head. Smelling the freshly splattered blood across the snow, Versa snarled wildly and leapt out of the way as the two wolves ran straight for her. To hold them off, she used every example of canine defensive body language she could think of, but the bared fangs were not enough. One of the wolves, barking in anger, snapped at her shoulders and chest: Versa growled and kicked the wolf in its muzzle with enough force to send her flying backwards into the snow.

The wolf whined as its head was kicked back violently; the other wolf, seeing that its pack member was injured, jumped onto Versa as she rose from the snow. She snarled, growled, strength enhanced by her anger, and grabbed tufts of the wolf's fur as they both rolled around in the snow. Teeth gnashed in her face, and suddenly Versa cried out in excruciating pain as she felt claws slice through her arm, penetrating the teenager's thick muscle.

Brought on by the bestial rage welling up inside her, and the adrenaline rush from the pain, Versa started to shift as the wolf bit into her leg. Blood, almost immediately, stained the snow and her pants a dark red.

The quicker you shift, the sooner this pain will go away!

Wolves were leaping onto Versa: she was now prey, but they did not, at first, detect the changes she was undergoing. Versa's utter concentration was making her head hurt, amidst fending off the wolves with her arms, still kicking at them in despair, but her mind, too, was now strong enough to force the transformation.

Just like Sylvie had said earlier: Let your beast shine through.

A muzzle quickly formed from Versa's face and nose, the skin pulling like a horrific mask. Gray

fur sprouted from her arms and legs, even around the raw muscle and bloody flesh torn out by the wolves' teeth. She was howling in pain, breathing heavily as claws suddenly ripped through her socks - the boots were kicked off in the chaos. The wolves were not as virulent in their attacks as they saw what seemed to be one of their own kind rising from the ground, dripping in blood. Versa's half-lupine muzzle tweaked into a howl of rage, warning the wolves to back off.

Versa was still growing as one more wolf was still clinging to her back. Muscles expanded to a frightening new size, a tail emerged from her back, ears sprouted into the familiar triangle shape of a wolf's, and in a mere two or three minutes, the transformation was complete. Versa was still throbbing in pain, but now had a size and strength advantage. She flexed in defense, tearing the clothes from her body. The scent of blood filled her nostrils, and the wolves were put somewhat at bay, now biting at her again with less force.

The animals hesitated upon seeing the girl transform into a giant member of their own kin, and their ears laid back uncertainly. They didn't run, though -- but instead observed nervously -- almost as though awaiting orders. Where was their alpha? A howl rent the air once more -- this one deep and bassy. 'Kill them,' it seemed to say. It was nearby.

The howl was interrupted.

There was a startled yelp, and then a terrible ripping, 'schluck' as Sylvie sunk her wicked toe-claws into the wolf's exposed underbelly as it rode her to the ground, kicking her foot deep into its guts and raking it down the belly, slitting its stomach open and exposing its warm intestines to the air. They steamed almost comically as the wolf screamed and threw itself off of Sylvie, yelping.

The wolf on her leg hadn't any time to utter a sound before that same deadly foot came crashing down on the back of its head, heel-first. THUNK! The wolf staggered to the side, dazed. Its fellows hesitated an instant, unsure of what to do.

Sylvie rolled backwards, blood squirting from her shredded neck, crimson liquid oozing down between her breasts and staining the brown rabbit fur that lined her clothing. She coughed and gripped her neck, shaking her head slowly back and forth. The blood was... slowing down? Grunting, Sylvie leapt to her feet and snarled viciously, blood pouring out from her full lips gruesomely, the remnants of her wound.

The wound on her neck was now but a small slit, disappearing even as Sylvie stumbled back in the snow, flicking her own blood off of her hands. Versa knew she hadn't imagined that wolf tearing open Sylvie's neck -- so how was she standing?!

Sylvie panted and stared at Versa as she transformed -- glancing once to the moon and then back at Versa. She hesitated for some godforsaken reason -- and the wolves snatched the opportunity up.

In wolf form, Versa retained most of her human consciousness. Hence, she was astounded that Sylvie was able to rise to her feet once more, knowing that she had just sustained an injury that was most often fatal. She must have the same regenerated healing, she thought. By now, Versa's own wounds were healing quickly, and only small smatterings of blood were left in her gray fur.

But most important on her mind was the wolves that were descending upon Sylvie, caught off guard. A massive handpaw reached out for the closest wolf, and Versa snarled in delight as she heard the animal utter a terrified whine, her claws sinking into its flesh. Versa was undoubtedly larger and stronger than the wolf now in her grasp. Capitalizing on her advantage, she ripped out chunks of fur, flesh, and muscle, sending a cascade of blood onto the snow. With a pitiful noise, the wolf seemed to gurgle out a howl, and fell to the ground with limp paws.

With blood, not her own, now covering her claws, Versa howled up at the moon. She turned to Sylvie with an intent yellowish gaze, and muttered a pleading bark, eager to see what else Sylvie was capable of...

Sylvie stared at the moon -- then at Versa -- and back to the moon. She blinked in surprise when Versa barked at her. Her mismatched eyes seemed a little melancholy. After a moment, she dropped elegantly to her knees, and gave into the pressure squeezing her skull in around her brain, tightening all of the muscles in her body.

The transformation was gruesome.

Bu-thump. Bu-thump. Bu-thump.

Her heartbeat became loud in her ears -- louder, and louder, and louder -- until, had there been silence, the others present in the woods would have heard it, too -- a faint thumping. With each slam of her heart against her ribcage, Sylvie's muscles pulsed -- flexing to agonizing extremes; veins bulging out in purplish streaks; trembling, sweat trickled down the plump fullness of the engorged muscles like dew off ripe fruit.

Bu-thump. Bu-thump. Bu-thump.

Sylvie was utterly silent. Sweat poured down her back, her clothing swelled as the body beneath it grew, and she impatiently tore her clothing off, having barely the semblance of mind to do so. Her nails lengthened and darkened, growing a visible quick to them like a dog. Her face began to contort -- sculpted cheekbones slid backward towards her ears like a spoon through jell-o.

Bu-thump. Bu-thump. Bu-thump!

Her skin oozed and rippled like a blanket over lover's pumping bodies. Her body began swelling and growing -- it was difficult to tell how much larger, because of how she hunched -- face hidden in her arms. The hair on her back rustled and slid over her body, and when it moved aside, fur was there -- short and as silver as the hair on her head.

Sylvie opened her mouth in a silent shriek of pain, heaving dryly as her body reacted to the brutal, fast change in the only ways it knew how. Her teeth tore from her bleeding, sore gums, the secondary tusks clinking noisily against her canines as they shoved down from their root in her skull and slid out into the chilly night air.

Bu-thump. Bu-thump. Bu-thump!

Liquid was everywhere; pouring over the ground, searing hot -- it melted the snow it touched. It was a clear, strange liquid -- not blood, not sweat. Whatever it was, it seemed to be generated by the transformation somehow.

Sylvie's heartbeat was killing her. It was so loud. The call of the beast, the tug, the scream, the hissing of protesting tendons stretched to their limit before the transformation remembered their existence and mercifully lengthened them to match the enormous body it now needed to support.

DUN-THUMP, DUN-THUMP, DUN-THUMP!

Bones snapped and heaved wetly in the moonlight, squelching and sucking as they rearranged themselves and grew. The transformation was nearly complete.

When she unfolded herself from her position lying prostate on the ground, she stood at easily ten feet tall, rage piquing her growth. A huge anthropomorphosized timber wolf stood in the snow, awkwardly quadruple-jointed legs spread wide, huge paws supporting an even huger body -- a body that, unbeknownst to Sylvie herself, weighed over 1,300 pounds. Her mane was huge and thick, ruffled about her neck; her jowls large and heavy, saliva hanging from them --

eyes small and nested in the big head with its pointed gray ears.

Even beneath the thick layer of fur one could see the muscle -- overlaying again and again and again, roiling like a stormy sea and pulsing with strong heartsblood and feral beauty. She had no tail -- hinting at her human intellect hidden inside psychotically rolling mismatched eyes.

Snatching the closest wolf up, Sylvie lifted it to eye level -- which was quite high off the ground it had so comfortably been running away on -- and bellowed in its face. The roar was unlike a noise a real wolf would have made -- a howling rush of hot breath flew into the wolf's face, tearing its fur back from its muzzle and making its eyes water. Sylvie's lips were peeled back as far as they could go from 'round the huge maw, gleaming teeth as large as knives connected by thin ropes of spittle which occasionally gave free from the earsplitting roar and landed with a wet splatter on the wolf's face.

The animal pissed itself.

The only reaction Versa could have was to back away and stare in a level of awe so great that she was paralyzed trying to understand what had just happened. Sylvie was impossibly massive; Versa's blood rushed with, at first, what seemed to be anger and jealousy, in the maddening realization that she was, and always would be, "the pup." At "only" seven and a half feet tall, with a body holding nearly 450 pounds of flesh, muscle, and bone, Versa looked tiny in comparison. Seeing Sylvie's heaving body, coiled with powerful muscle and waves of silver fur, both rippling underneath the moonlight, she somehow found herself wishing for more of... more of something. More power, more of an advantage, more... satisfaction. At that moment, Versa realized that her choice to seek out this woman had been the correct one.

The sense of primal, savage strength they both shared would hopefully bind them, making them an unstoppable force.

Sylvie turned her massive head and smirked down at Versa. "Not them," she said, her voice thick and barely understandable, tongue lolling as she gestured at the cowering wolves nearby -- those who were left were trembling. Suddenly they all looked like wolves again -- small and vulnerable -- a scared family who didn't know what they were doing out there in the Canadian wilderness.

Sylvie dropped onto all fours easily, her long arms touching the ground and then some -- crouched, and was off like a shot into the night huge arms swinging forward to slam into the ground and propel her forward like a running great ape more than a wolf. She was heading in the direction of the howl, and the wolves slunk rapidly to the sides to let her pass, staring at

Versa with wide golden eyes.

The wolves' eyes staring at her were hardly a threat. Versa let out a snarl, knowing she had nothing to worry about. The wolves flinched as one. Being a complete anthromorph, Versa had trouble running on all fours, but she decided to anyway in case she found that that particular way of locomotion would help her keep up with Sylvie. Approaching the ground with all four paws, she dashed after her, but quickly found that running on two legs would be much more comfortable. Sylvie's arms were disproportionately long, and enabled running on all-fours more easily than Versa's lycanthrope form. With every pace, Versa's huge forepaws plodded noisily against the snow. Small splashes of flakes kicked up at her every step as the bipedal werewolf followed the hulking gray wolf in front of her, running at full speed.

Part 6: Adolphus

They hit the base of the mountain at a dead run, and this time clearing Sylvie's cliff wasn't an issue in the slightest. Sylvie continued up the mountain for a short while, then screeched to a halt beneath a large outcropping of black rocks. She stared at the top of the rocks intently, mismatched eyes focused with predatory intent and maw hanging open, panting.

Now the cliff was merely just another obstacle, nothing impossible. Versa's powerful digitigrade legs launched her off the snow from a dead run, allowing her to land easily on two sturdy paws at the clifftop. Sylvie was not much farther ahead. Versa stopped to take a look around, seeing the world through two glowing yellow eyes. Lifting her muzzle up, she sniffed the air, still smelling a bit of the blood on her pelt. Versa licked it off, growling, and jogged to where Sylvie had paused.

Sylvie was staring up at the outcropping of rocks. The snow flurried around them, and suddenly a figure appeared, as though out of nowhere. It was another werewolf -- this one smaller than both Sylvie and Versa, standing at barely 7 foot, with a hunched back and a smoke-gray pelt. Its eyes were larger than normal and saucer-like, crusted with dried tears and a watery brown.

It spoke. "Sylvie," it acknowledged the big werewolf, blinking slowly. It's voice was perfect -- as though it had come from a human mouth, not a lupine one.

Sylvie snarled so fiercely that the old werewolf actually took a step back on his shaking arthritic legs. "Now, now," he said in his cultured British accent, "There's no need to get angry. I just want to talk." His droopy eyes flickered to Versa -- and Sylvie immediately bounded in front of her, roaring to get the old wolf's attention. 'She is none of your business!' her body language read; articulation for Sylvie was difficult in this form.

The sight of another werewolf, whom Sylvie was somehow conversing with, shocked Versa at first. Instinctively, she pulled her upper lip back in a snarl, until Sylvie dashed right in front of her. Was she protecting her? The diminutive gray wolf beyond her sight did not seem a threat, but Sylvie obviously regarded him with severe defense. Versa held in her position, not sure if he was to be trusted or not.

The old wolf watched Sylvie through his brown rheumy eyes. "Sylvie, Sylvie," he said. "You have heard our Alpha's offer many a time before; it still stands."

He paused and looked behind Sylvie, ignoring her as efficiently as a horse ignores a flea. "Young lady," he said to Versa. "If I might be so bold as to ask, how do you know this she-devil?" he was referring to Sylvie.

Versa snorted a bit at being addressed as "young lady," staying behind Sylvie until she was comfortable with the other wolf, if ever. She, too, could not form words in her lupine form; at first, she lowered her head, almost stricken with a panic of how she would communicate to him. It was like playing werewolf charades. Her arms stretched out, thick handpaws pointing in the direction of Sylvie's dwelling. She was sure that the old wolf, if he was familiar with this area of the wilderness, assuming he was an acquaintance of Sylvie's, would know where she resided. A few grunts escaped Versa's muzzle, her attempt at communicating that she had been to her den: that they were, if even in a minor sense, allies.

He didn't seem surprised that Versa could not speak. "Ah. You have not yet learned how to speak -- understandable. This one," he motioned with a trembling arm to Sylvie, "has been in this form for twenty years and still cannot speak well." (A bemused chuckle followed this statement.) He regarded her for a long moment, then said politely, "May I please see your lower back, young miss?"

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The insignia? How does this old coot know? A barrier of white fangs emerged, Versa's sign of distrust. Her body language clearly hinted at "Why do you want to know? She emitted another snarl, tensing her muscles. But as Versa looked closer at the old wolf, somewhat frail and certainly smaller than both of the were-women there, she relaxed a bit.

Her feet padded around in the snow as she decided to turn around. Versa walked backwards to allow him to see the trident-like pattern emblazoned upon her lower back. From right at the base of tailbone to the small of her back was a strange emblem, glowing a bright, luminous green. It cast enough light to leave a greenish haze upon the snow. The ends of it peaked up toward her shoulderblade, encasing an entwined pattern somewhat resembling the medical caduceus.

His eyes widened, pupils growing huge upon seeing the elaborate insignia. Then, he began to speak -- and it was in Latin. "Ego teneo of vestri vomica , tener mulier. Is est vomica of vestri prosapia..." he cleared his throat and said in a low, rasping, sing-song voice: "Femina pulchra, devovet tuam lunae... ibi fuga non est. Dominatus beneficiumque noctem sequor. Ubi versipellis everberat, mors bonam... existat."

He had made it a song -- a beautiful, lilting song that was haunting in its loveliness. (Sylvie grunted in confusion.)

Never before had anything been able to calm Versa down so quickly. She was still turned away from the older wolf; his voice was incredibly fluid, and she was simply dumbfounded that this wolf could not only speak, but speak Latin. And well. As his crooning continued, Versa faced him, listening calmly. He had asked her, in Latin, if it was the family's curse. Indeed it was; when his song was finished, the huge gray werewolf leaned her head toward his direction, nodding her head. It was almost uncanny to believe that someone outside the Novak lineage would know about it.

"Yes, yes," he said thinly, "I know of your family's curse. There are many lycanthropic curses in this world -- and yours is one of the lesser-known ones." he chuckled low in his throat. "You see, I know this because --"

"ENOUGH TALK!" roared Sylvie almost incoherently, launching herself off of the ground in a flurry of snow and rippling muscles. She was on him in a second, his old eyes widened in shock as the huge werewolf rode him to the ground and went in for the kill -- the old wolf couldn't defend himself, and feebly put his thin arm in front of her gnashing teeth, wincing as they snapped through the brittle old bone like it was a toothpick.

Clearly, Sylvie intended to silence him for good.

The snap of bone perked Versa's ears up to attention, and she ran straight for not the wolf, but Sylvie. Like a dog out of hell, she started barking in rage and slashing at Sylvie in a somehow concerned manner, implying "Get off!" What if this old wolf could have important things to tell

her? She'd never know if he was dead!

Sylvie roared and flung herself around, huge hand sinking into the ruffle of fur at the back of Versa's neck. Her giant bicep bulged astoundingly under her fur as, with a thunderous grunt, she took up the younger werewolf and flung her bodily into the trees.

"Rawwwarrgh!" roared Versa as she careened through the air. The younger wolf's upper body crashed into a towering evergreen, causing a blizzard-like payload of white snow to come cascading down onto her. It was not enough to bury all seven and a half feet of her, but certainly blanketed Versa, whose head was now reeling with pain. She thought it wiser to stay buried under the snow, though her blood was boiling with rage. Versa snarled in disgust, feeling like a little child under the lightly-layered blanket of snow. Perhaps Sylvie knew much about the old wolf, and it would be better for both of them if he was eliminated.

The old man reached into his fur and removed something from a tangle -- popped the cap, and slammed it with all of the force of his frail -- but still lycanthropic -- body into Sylvie's thick neck. She grunted and continued worrying at his arm -- but her jaw's movements slowed and became groggy. She let go of his ruined arm, which was already slowly beginning to heal -- much more slowly than Sylvie's wounds did -- and stumbled back, standing at her full height of around ten feet. She reached up and into the thick fur of her mane, plucking out a tiny syringe, emptied of its contents.

Her eyes flashed and darkened, then began to glow with an unholy fury. The glow was such that the snow was illuminated with red-and-blue, mixing to a purplish raging hue on the ground and reflecting on the old werewolf's brown eyes as they widened. "That... should have..." he said thinly -- and Sylvie leapt at him, roaring.

He closed his eyes for the final blow, but instead grunted as one-thousand-something pounds of fur and muscle landed on him heavily, comatose. Sylvie was unconscious, but for how long the old were wasn't sure. The force of the fall was such that all of the snow in a ten-foot radius jumped before resettling.

"Thank god," he breathed, panting despite himself. This one never ceased to scare the living shit out of him. "Help her off of me, please," he said to Versa in the snow, feebly trying to remove himself from Sylvie's bulk.

Watching Sylvie fall on top of the wolf was like watching a monolithic statue collapse from its foundation - the motion was much the same, only this time, gravity had brought down 1,300 pounds of werewolf to the ground. Versa leapt immediately to her feet, sending a scattering

outburst of snow everywhere, and rushed to the old werewolf's aid.

In her human form, Versa was exceedingly strong.

Particularly when enraged, she could lift about 120% of her body weight. This carried over to her werewolf form, but although it was magnified, there was no way the 450-some pound younger werewolf would be able to move all of Sylvie's immense girth from a standstill.

Versa tried to psyche herself up. She knew she was strong, and tried to eliminate any doubt. The old wolf had to be getting crushed right about now, she thought. First, Versa shuffled around Sylvie's arms. Each arm probably weighed 200 pounds in itself, laden with dense muscle and fur; she picked the huge she-wolf's arm and lifted it from the snow, grunting. Much footing could not be gained due to the silky snow beneath Versa's feet, but she successfully moved it to the side, giving the old wolf a bit of room to breathe. Versa drew on her strength, inhaled in a deep breath, and after growling at the old wolf to try to push with whatever strength he had left, rushed forward, biceps and shoulders pulsing with the effort. Sylvie started to roll slightly on her side.

"Rruuugh," Versa muffed, her signal for the wolf to get out from underneath while he had the chance.

The old man took advantage of it, scrambling out from underneath Versa's bulk and scuttling onto the snow. His arm was still a wreck, but was slowly healing. "You're a heavy one," he said to the comatose Sylvie. He did a slight bow in Versa's direction. "Thank you, Miss. I am called Adolphus. You may give me your name at a later time," he said with a little smile, "seeing-as you aren't able at the moment." He stood slowly, groaning as his flattened lower half ballooned into a semblance of normality. He looked into the snow and tilted his head back and howled. It was a rich, full-throated howl -- the howl of a singer. A howl responded in the distance.

"My fellows are coming," he said to Versa. "They, too, are lycanthropes, all coming from various backgrounds -- some cursed, some who have been mauled, others who claim to have been born lycan. We will be taking this great lump," he said, smacking his dry old lips in the parching wind and looking at Sylvie, "with us. You are welcome to join us."

Adolphus' warm greeting put Versa's heart at ease. Somehow she still felt a bit uneasy about his interest in her curse. She wasn't so sure if she wanted to meet all the other lycans, for she sometimes felt a great pleasure in being "the only one," but already having met Sylvie for the purpose of meeting another were, Versa nodded in a gesture of acceptance at the smoky wolf ahead of her, letting him know that she would come.

Versa whined, a bit disgruntled, trying to figure out how they would haul Sylvie's humongous bulk from this cliff to wherever Adolphus decided to move.

Part 7: The Moon Clan

The answer became clear soon. Out of the trees poured three more werewolves. None of them was as large as Sylvie, but all were in excellent condition. As they entered, all three greeted Adolphus with politely bowed heads, and each greeted Versa differently.

The first was a medium-sized lycanthrope -- male -- with broad shoulders and a shorter muzzle than the others. He had expressive dark blue eyes and large ears, with long fur that hung almost like an Afghan hound's from his elbows and paws and tail -- like the feathering on a horse. He was a deep reddish color, with darker points, and surprisingly delicate paws. He stood at about six-foot-ten. He winked at Versa and made a low wolf-whistle under his breath as he passed her.

The second was a female lycanthrope -- thin and disgruntled-looking, with a long muzzle and slanted eyes that gave her a wicked impression. She had fur that was off-white, the points turning more yellowish and even some hints of silver and red in her tail. She scowled at Versa as she stalked past -- she was much smaller, not quite six feet tall. Her eyes were as black as night, with no color to them at all.

Lastly was a very large male lycanthrope -- perhaps eight feet tall, with broad shoulders and short ink-black fur that hugged close to his body, highlighting the impressive musculature beneath his skin. He was the only other lycanthrope there besides Sylvie who had dominant secondary tusks growing out of his mouth; smaller than Sylvie's admittedly, but something in Versa's wolfy brain told her instinctually that the secondary tusks were a very desirable and sexy trait in a male.

Whoa, where did THAT come from?!

His crystal-blue eyes surveyed Versa silently.

Adolphus said their names as they entered in order: "Duncan, Chunhua, and... Alcander. Everyone, this is a new... friend." he smiled at Versa.

The three all stood around Sylvie's bulk and in unison lifted her, their combined strength holding her effortlessly, then looked to Adolphus for orders.

A feeling of great camaraderie washed over Versa as she observed this sudden fellowship of lycanthropes. It was a bizarre experience, like perhaps if one were to meet a long-lost identical twin. Versa wanted so badly to introduce herself somehow, but for now was content with laying her eyes upon the three weres that had just emerged from the forest, trying to gauge their personalities. She was shocked that with the exception of Alcander, she was much taller than all of them. Her greenish eyes gazed at Adolphus, hailing him as the leader.

"Better make sure she doesn't wake up," he chuckled. "Chunhua!" The female werewolf took out a syringe identical to the one now lying abandoned in the snow and injected it into Sylvie's neck rather more roughly than was necessary.

"All right, to the van!" he said good-naturedly. The group began to march silently and with great precision down the slope, heading farther to the east than Versa had ever been in this particular forest.

Inside, Versa was laughing, but it translated to a snerky sort of grumble. Adolphus wasn't so bad after all... what did Sylvie have against him? Her thoughts went back to Sylvie as she watched Chunhua jab the syringe into Sylvie's neck; judging by that action, plus the scowl she had given her, Versa would not be too fond of the off-white female werewolf. No matter, she thought, I'll show her who's alpha, at least while Sylvie's unconscious... The wind started to blow harder now, and the pack of lycans drifted across the snow, carrying the fallen gray giant.

The walk took longer than it would have had the largest member of the party not been such dead weight. The group reached a clearing, and everyone stopped. A large truck had been parked there, with a smaller white van next to it.

The lycans strapped Sylvie down to the bed of the truck carefully, and then looked to Adolphus. He sighed impatiently. "Come now, two of you have to become human in order to drive the vehicles. You know I can't. Now hop to it!"

He glanced to Versa in explanation, and said, "I have lost the ability to regain my human form." his smile was strained, and there was a sadness in his watery old eyes. "T'is the curse of my own family -- we hunger for the power that comes with the transformation -- and the more we transform, the harder it is to go back. I transformed one too many times. Ahem. Very good," he said, nodding to Duncan and Chunhua, who were crouched on the ground, groaning as they transformed into their human forms.

The familiar sounds of rearranging bone and muscle filled the air, and the two stood at last, both

nude. Duncan was a short, strong-looking little Irishman, with flame-red hair and jolly dark-blue eyes. Duncan was also hung like a -- whoa, no need to look there, Versa! He winked at her again before springing shamelessly into the driver seat of the van, butt-naked. Chunhua was a small Chinese woman -- barely older than Versa herself. She stood at barely five-foot tall, with long ink-black hair and piercing dark eyes.

"Adolphus!" she snapped, accent strong. "Why are we taking HER with us?" she glared at Versa.

Adolphus' story was saddening, but Versa could certainly sympathize. She was just lucky that, to her knowledge, she would be able to return to her human form no matter how many times she transformed. The power was what she wanted, too, and she would never give that up.

Snickering in wolf form was an odd thing to witness, but Versa was certainly doing it as she turned away from Adolphus to look at the now-human Duncan, who had just entered the van's front seat. His eyes were particularly friendly, if even flirtatious, but Versa grunted, now preoccupied with Chunhua's utterance. Don't speak so fast, short stuff.

"Come, now," said Adolphus reasonably. "This young woman is our honored guest, and should be treated as such."

The older werewolf narrowed his rheumatoid-crusts eyes at Chunhua and she finally shrugged. She turned, long black hair swishing along her naked body, and got into the truck.

Adolphus headed over to the van and held open the door for Versa to get in, wrinkled old snout furrowing in a half-snarl at Duncan, a warning. Duncan stopped in mid-flirt.

Versa stared at Duncan with an incredulous glare. She could only focus on his face, twisted now into a gaze of rapture. She'd have to do this right here, right now!? Sheesh! She searched around for something to potentially conceal herself with, but figured that one, the other lycans had just reverted to their human selves with no problem, and that two, her physique wasn't half bad to begin with. Embarrassment set aside, Versa growled, tucking her head in toward her chest, sneaking slightly behind the van.

Gray fur sunk back into her pores with a quiet "shushing" sound; magically, her swollen muscles hid themselves back beneath her flesh. The muzzle and tail, with a strange taffy-like stretch, retracted inward to form Versa's familiar sharp jawline and nose. Green tint rid itself from her hair - it was now its normal dark brown. Versa could see the landscape's perspective change as she was brought back to her normal height of 5'8". She stood behind the van, and immediately

upon returning fully to her human state, let out a startled gasp of realization. Goosebumps ran up and down her skin, and she clenched her teeth, her right forearm over her chest and her left hand over her crotch.

"Great," Versa muttered, happy to speak, even if that was her exasperated response. Hesitantly, she strode to the van. So much for modesty.

In a fatherly motion, Adolphus limped over and threw a huge woolen cloak over her shoulders. It was an itchy cloak, and smelled strongly of wolf, but it defended her decency.

The ride to the large cabin was long and uneventful. Adolphus, old man that he was, fell asleep during the hour-long ride, lupine head bowing down into his thin chest. His arm had healed almost completely now. Duncan winked at Versa in the rear-view mirror as he drove.

"What's your name, gorgeous?"

The Irishman's eyes stared back at Versa through the rear-view mirror. She felt obligated to answer in between bouts of teeth-chattering.

"My name's 'I'll-kick-your-ass' for the time being," she snarled.

Her lips were drawn back in her typical expression of disgust, a little more than an unsatisfied pout. "...Though as long as you don't lay a hand on me, you can call me 'Versa'."

Duncan grinned, flashing pearly whites. "Ooh, feisty. I like it."

They arrived at a huge log cabin in another hour's drive, and apparently just in time. As soon as the van had slid through the snow-covered gravel into the driveway, Chunhua rushed up to the side of the van, tiny breasts bouncing on her athletic frame.

"She's waking," she snarled, "And Alcander can't hold her for long!"

A bellow of rage reverberated through the air, and a snarl as low in timbre as Sylvie's sung through the air as two titanic bodies clashed on the back of the flatbed truck. (Adolphus woke with a snort.)

"No! Restrain her!" he howled, brown eyes showing their whites with concern. He hobbled out of the truck even as Duncan launched himself out of the van in a flat-out run, muscles rippling over his ginger-haired human body.

Versa whipped her head around with a genuinely horrified look on her face. The door was nearly ripped from its hinges as she opened it, bounding out of the van with Adolphus' cloak waving behind her.

"Sylvie!" she screamed. "Oh please, please don't screw this up, she'll kill you all..."

Alcander had been following the truck in a lupine run the whole time, which made him the first candidate to restrain the titan with silvery fur.

The big black wolf-man was straddling the huge silver alpha, claws sunk deep into her sides. The muscles in his silky black thighs rippled and surged as he clamped them fiercely around her waist, using every ounce of his strength to hold the werewolf that had torn through her bonds like they were wet tissue paper.

"Rrrraaaarrrrgh! Sssskin, healing!" he roared, wincing as he ripped his claws from the bigger werewolf's flesh, growling in pain -- Sylvie's wounds were healing so quickly around his claws that they were actually becoming physically pinched in her body -- and would have snapped them clean off and into powder inside her body had he not removed them sooner.

"Slashing attacks!" screamed Adolphus. "Slashing only! Piercing attacks don't damage her! Chunhua, get the glazer safety rounds!"

Chunhua was already there, hefting a Desert Eagle up and taking aim at Sylvie's big head, which was thrashing around on her thick neck, bone necklace rattling.

The pit of Versa's stomach dropped as she heard the explosive click-back of the gun, watching as Chunhua fired at Sylvie, completely lacking remorse. She knew the massive she-wolf could handle herself, but she still felt awful, knowing she had no say in the matter. Versa felt rather lilliputian observing the torture of this giant.

Duncan caught her sight - "What else can we do?" she shrieked.

"Stay put," he suggested, shivering. "Those glazer safety-rounds are coated in pure silver, and filled inside with liquid quicksilver... the damage they make lasts."

Chunhua shot Sylvie. The round that came out of the huge gun was ice-blue and when the bullet hit Sylvie's neck, the shriek that ensued was very human. Sylvie jerked and thrashed, blood trickling from the huge, gaping open wide enough to set a bowling ball. Her head lolled

and she fell back, silently panting in incomprehensible pain. The dangerous silver-coated bullets were absolutely deadly -- they made her heal at a human rate.

Alcander leapt off of Sylvie as Chunhua fired, clearly caring more about his own hide than holding the other werewolf down. They took the glazer safety-rounds seriously.

Sylvie lay there, gasping like a dying fish, the wound in her neck not showing any sign of healing. Adolphus relaxed visibly. "Thank god..."

There was no way that Versa would just stand by the wayside. "What the hell is wrong you!" came tearing from her lungs, and she ran toward Chunhua, nearly ready to rip her head from her shoulders. Instead, she felt that this brutality served a purpose: after all, Sylvie would have, like she said, killed them all had the lycans allowed her to. But through clenched teeth, Versa swore that they would bear retribution if Sylvie ended up completely and irreversibly dead. The teenager bared her teeth viciously. In the short period she had known her, Sylvie had somehow inspired her. Her face flushed with the prickly burning of repressed tears, which Versa did not allow to pass beyond her eyelids.

Adolphus raised his paw-like hands in a placating gesture. "Miss Versa," he said -- ah, he must have heard her introduce herself to Duncan on the ride there. Perhaps the old man wasn't as sleepy as he'd seemed. "Please. You don't understand, she's a dire-wolf -- she's not like us. Her intelligence isn't as great, she doesn't understand the same way we do. She only knows how to kill. This is the only way we know to calm her enough to speak with her."

"You're not going to murder her, are you?" Versa asked with a lingering snarl, seeming to understand, clinging tightly to the worn-out cloak.

"Of course not!" he exclaimed soothingly, looking shocked that she'd suggested such a thing. "No, no," he laughed. "We may have the bodies of beasts, but we are all human on the inside."

Something told Versa that Sylvie wouldn't agree with that statement.

The three others, Duncan, Chunhua, and still half-wolf Alcander were working to drag Sylvie into the back. Alcander did most of the work, gritting his teeth and dragging the bloodied wreck that was the giant lycanthrope into the open forest behind the cabin -- she wouldn't fit through the front door. Her neck was steadily oozing blood into a thick blueish-red puddle that stained her light fur. Her necklace had somehow remained intact despite the blow, resting in the hollow of her abused shoulder and neck area.

"Please, daughter, come with me," said Adolphus affectionately to Versa, hobbling inside the cabin eagerly. It was chilly out there! The others looked to be too busy fixing Sylvie in the back to join them immediately.

Versa found something quirky about Adolphus' statement... wasn't that the point of being a beast? To not be human? Shaking her head, Versa narrowed her eyes, temporarily qualmed with the notion of escaping the freezing cold. She followed the old wolf inside.

It didn't take Adolphus long to send Versa to the guest room -- a small, pine-scented room with a finely furnished little wooden-post bed and charmingly home-quilted comforter. There were basic sets of clothes in the tiny closet -- it looked like maybe they were one-size-fits-all, unfortunately, but the boring grey coveralls were better than nothing!

Looking around to make sure Duncan was nowhere nearby, Versa stalked into the single bathroom and closed the heavy wooden door.

After indulging herself in a searing hot shower, feeling refreshed and ready to tackle anything -- including a pack of werewolves, if need be, she walked out into the family room. Adolphus was sitting on an old overstuffed armchair, an armchair littered with smoky shed fur. Clearly, he sat there a lot. His tail was peeking out from beneath his withered old thighs comically.

Chunhua was lounging, naked as the day she was born, in front of the fire with Duncan -- who was asleep, and surprisingly, wearing clothing. He cracked an eye at Versa and smiled a tiny bit.

"Chunhua is ... a, well, a free spirit," Adolphus said with a half-smile.

Through the picture-window Versa could see the back yard clearly. Alcander was sitting in front of a bleeding Sylvie, who was slumped silently on the snow, huge weights attached to her arms and legs. If she weren't wounded, Versa suspected that she would just haul them with her wherever she decided to go, but as it was, she was lying dead silent, maw gaping open like a dead crocodile's and eyes closed.

At least the coveralls were better than nothing, Versa thought. She glanced with a slightly warped expression of surprise at Chunhua, whom she expected would have been dressed - it was still quite cold inside the cabin. The teenager quickly turned her head the other way, fully uncomfortable, to Adolphus. "I hope Alcander is alright," she stated longingly. She had hardly a moment to meet him, as he was thrown into the dismal occupation of preventing Sylvie from killing everyone.

Versa took a moment to find a seat. There was a mahogany chair in the corner, close to the fire. She kept feeling herself drawn to the fatherly figure of Adolphus; her head turned to face him as she leaned back comfortably. It was quite a pleasure just to sit. "Is there any way," the girl asked sincerely, "that Sylvie will revert to her human form? Or are we keeping her like this?" Versa paused. The glowing embers of the fire emitted a few loud crackles. "And why are we here?"

"He will be," Adolphus said, referring to Alcander. "He is one of our pack's finest warriors --" (Chunhua glared at Adolphus jealously when this was said) "-- and it wasn't easy to acquire him. Now, first things first, before we get down to business. Miss Versa, won't your parents be missing you? If you need it, I have a telephone."

He proudly showed her his cell phone, one with extra-large buttons so his claws could touch them.

Unlike herself, Versa seemed to release an incredulous, if even rude, sigh at Adolphus' offering of the phone, just like the "as if" snorts that she heard every day and hated so much. But, she couldn't honestly imagine what calling her father would do. The imaginary conversation ran through her head: "Hi Dad, I'll be home in an hour or two. I'm just hanging out with some werewolves in the forest, and we're hoping the really big one doesn't wake up and eat us alive. Talk to you soon!" Realizing he was just trying to be courteous, she quickly muttered, "No, no thank you. My father is kind of used to me wandering off by now..." Versa's voice trailed off, seeing as how that was a sad truth.

Adolphus seemed to think this was a bit sad, too, and his eyes softened for a moment with barely-hidden sympathy. He seemed to realize that might upset her, though, and cleared his throat. "Ah, well then."

Chunhua sighed noisily and snuggled into Duncan's snoozing chest. He ignored her -- too busy watching Versa sleepily with a dreamy little half-smile on his face.

"Now, your questions. If Sylvie were to revert to human form, we could use Duncan's experience as an EMT to stabilize her condition. As it is, she's being a stubborn bitch," (he seemed to be using the term 'bitch' as one might 'woman' if they were entirely human -- simply referring to a female werewolf), "and refusing to transform. Look at her, Miss Versa -- see how still she lies? She's conserving her energy for an escape. Or to kill us. ... Probably the latter," he mumbled. "As to why we're here..."

Part 8: Explanations

He puffed out his thin chest proudly and spoke. "... That can wait. Wouldn't you like to know how I know about your family's curse? I was so rudely interrupted last time," he chuckled, looking at his arm. It was healed by now, and he had washed off the blood, but the memories were recent and strong.

Almost as if she had just been smacked across the face, Versa was suddenly brought back into a state of awareness and scrutiny. Her green eyes scanned Adolphus' wiry muzzle intently. At least he wasn't hiding his knowledge. To this day, Versa had never met any remaining family members, particularly the other females who were also lycanthropes. The maledictum versipellis detailed whereabouts to some extent, but she had never been in contact.

Hence, she was curious as to how someone outside the lineage would know. "Yes," Versa replied. "I'm very curious."

Almost reading her mind, Adolphus smiled. "No, sweet one, I am not of your family line -- otherwise I would have to be female, would I not? I am, however, a scholar of these things. Lycanthropy -- the curse of the werewolf. It is all over the world. From Beijing to Belfast to Senegal to the United States, there are werewolves. Each has their own unique story."

He settled into a gentle rhythm, the rhythm of a storyteller at work.

"Let's begin with Beijing -- the Wu clan. The ancient curse of their clan; 狼的诅咒。 “吴家庭的最坚强的战士将变成狼，当他们获得了神秘果子的接触!” he spoke rapidly in Mandarin, voice rolling elegantly off the syllables -- it had a note to it, like Versa's family curse. "The rules of her curse are as follows; whenever she wishes, she may take the form of the beast -- as long as she exists solely on a diet of fruit and pays homage to the moon goddess. Not too bad, eh?" he said with a little smile.

Adolphus truly was a wonder. Versa wondered if in his previous years, when he was human, if he was a scholar of history or linguistics. Everything he had said thus far proved his intelligence. Though she couldn't understand a word of Chinese that he had just spoken, she detected the slight lilt to his voice, and its rhythmic pattern. "indicii connicus," Versa spoke, pleased at being able to speak her own familiar tongue. "Before my mother died, she briefly mentioned that there were other werewolves, but I was very young. Perhaps I never understood there were others beyond the ones created by the ancient curse in Rome." Versa leaned back in her chair, awaiting more of Adolphus' narration.

"Etenim," he smiled. "Some say that the Roman werewolves are the forefathers of the curse; the originals. Yours is a noble line, and one of the purest. We might call you a princess amongst us."

("Princess," echoed Duncan flirtatiously from the background.)

"Duncan's story is different; he is the first of his bloodline. He simply transforms once every full moon -- and with difficulty as the moon wanes. Alcander..." the old wolf trailed off uncertainly, looking out at the huge black werewolf unceasingly watching the monolith that was Sylvie. Chunhua sat up and stared at him, and even Duncan looked uneasy.

"Well, that's his business -- you'd have to ask him yourself." said Adolphus, and everyone in the room relaxed. "I thought my own curse was a gift -- until I transformed one too many times, and now can never go back." he sighed sadly.

"That's fair warning," Versa spoke with a hint of pity, or perhaps rather empathy. If her bloodline allowed for the loss of reversion back to human form, Versa knew that it would eventually happen to her. Her appetite for power could never be sated; transforming every full moon was the only way to get the elation she truly hungered for. For a second, she glanced off into the distance, out the window, looking at the befallen Sylvie. Clearly she was a woman who also enjoyed her power... Versa knew what it was like. The subject was a grim one which she thought to change.

She leaned back into the chair, suddenly chuckling breathily. "And I'm no princess, that's for sure."

"We shall see," Adolphus said enigmatically. "Now, if you don't mind my asking, how did you run in with our 'little' Sylvie?"

Had it only been three days?

"Well," Versa started, "meeting Sylvie was my own fault. I'm here in Canada on a small vacation, which is great, since I need to get out and roam. Two nights ago, I was exploring the forest - I think I was chasing after a boar - and a massive wolf came out of the forest." She didn't feel the need to elaborate on their romp in the snow. With a deep exhale preceding, she admitted, "I'm a bit too curious sometimes." Versa's hair was neatly tucked behind her ears, her hair now almost dry.

Adolphus nodded. "You must be a very skilled fighter," he acknowledged admiringly. "I have

not once heard of her being defeated," he said, flicking his eyes to the backyard to indicate he was talking about Sylvie. "I hope you will continue to grace us with your presence for as long as possible," he admitted. "We could use the assistance. Which is why we'd like to invite you t--"

Chunhua leapt to her feet. "Adolphus! This girl knows nothing of our ways! Are you actually inviting her to our pack?!" she snarled and bristled at Versa, rage singing through her small frame. "What of the trials I had to endure?! Does this whelp get free admittance!? It is NOT FAIR!"

Duncan stood up and tried to calm Chunhua down, putting his hands on her shoulders and looking to Versa apologetically. Adolphus looked shocked at her outburst. "Chunhua..." he murmured. "I don't believe you! Sit down right this moment!"

"tu es canicula," Versa hissed and rose immediately from her chair. Anger had just overshadowed propriety, as it always did with Versa. Her biceps tensed slightly beneath the skin, flexing with every motion of her fingers. Versa met Chunhua face to face, or rather face to chest, standing a full 8 inches taller than the tiny woman.

"What is your problem with me?" A bestial snarl followed, accompanied with a quick snort of breath.

Chunhua glared up at Versa sullenly through her inkspill eyes. "You are not worthy," she said simply, baring her needle-like fangs. Adolphus hobbled to his feet, putting his old body between the two. "Ladies, please," he said. "Chunhua, you ought to be ashamed. You may go and sit with Alcander outside watching the large one."

His brown eyes left no room for argument. Chunhua sized him up, and for one horrible moment it looked as though she were going to kill Adolphus. Duncan growled thunderously behind her, though, and she sneered and stalked outside, shivering slightly with the cold.

"Miss Versa... I am so sorry," said Adolphus. "You must hate us now -- you probably think we're barbarians..."

Her nose was still scrunched, rippling wrinkles lining her cheeks and her brow. Versa growled as her eyes followed Chunhua out the door. As soon as she left, she relapsed into a moderate calm, yet was still agitated. "No..." she apologized to Adolphus, "I had no right to do that. But I honestly don't think she did, either."

"I'm sorry," he said once more.

Duncan spoke suddenly, "You have to show her you're dominant, Versa. She's acting this way because she doesn't know where you stand in the pecking order -- it makes her feel... weird."

Suddenly, Adolphus asked, "Miss Versa... can you tell the heirarchy of our pack?" he was genuinely curious to see what her instincts told her.

The answer did not come quickly. Versa thought, in some strange fashion, that perhaps she was meant to be meshed into this pack that she did not know existed until today. After all, Adolphus had mentioned the great honor of her family's bloodline. Instead, she threw the thought aside, replying clearly, "If anything, you're the leader here. Next I would say Chunhua, since she sure acts like it. And Duncan and Alcander, I'm not so sure.

Adolphus raised his furry brows. "Interesting..."

Suddenly, the sliding glass door to the back slid open. Standing there almost-nude in the afternoon light was a beautiful, beautiful man. He was about six-foot-four and black. His shoulders were broad and sculpted, and the sun shone off of his perfect dark brown shoulders like a halo. His hair was cropped short and close to his head, tiny glittering diamond earrings the only bright thing on his otherwise sinfully sexy body. Were all werewolves this handsome? He wore a pair of black silk boxers to protect his modesty.

"Alcander?" said the old werewolf questioningly.

He had a solemn expression on his exotic features, cheekbones positioned in much the same way as Sylvie's.

"Adolphus," he greeted. His voice was so deep that it made things tremble low in Versa's body. "Sylvie wants to talk."

Adolphus looked surprised. "She wants to talk? That's a first. With whom?"

Alcander looked at Versa, his chocolate eyes expressionless.

"Ah. Well. That's up to Miss Versa."

The handsome werewolf made it hard for Versa to take her eyes off of him, perhaps not so much in a childish obsession, but in a pure sense of examination. He was quite a specimen,

human or werewolf. "Uhh.." Versa stuttered. "Please. Take me outside. I'll talk to Sylvie."

Sylvie looked like shit, lying outside in a puddle of her own blood. She was now in human form, and looked almost pitiful lying there with the enormous weights pinning her now comparatively tiny arms down to the ground. She watched Versa as she came over and wrinkled her nose into a snarl at Alcander, who merely imitated the expression to her.

"Leave us," snarled Sylvie to the huge black man, eyes narrowed.

Alcander looked at Versa questioningly, not moving a muscle on Sylvie's command.

Versa didn't want to be rude, so she politely asked Alcander to leave she and Sylvie in privacy. She could only hope that what the woman needed to speak to her about was good news. Shivering, Versa approached her, her green eyes downcast at the abominable state of Sylvie. Placidly, she stood there, awaiting a reponse.

"They are not what they seem," she said -- when she spoke, more blood slowly rushed out of her wound. Her husky alto was weaker than usual. "It's a trick, Versa -- get out of here while you can. His goal is to --"

"That's enough!" hollered Adolphus suddenly. The old wolf was hobbling as quickly as he could over to them. "Silence you great lump, you have no idea what you're talking about. Now, Miss Versa, we have a surprise for you, if you'll just come with me..."

Sylvie thrashed and strained, raising her head somehow and snarling, "If I were able, old man, the snow would run red with your blood!"

Adolphus ignored her.

Suddenly Versa felt like a hostage in a movie, where the hero and the villain are both trying to convince the protagonist of their honesty. Both parties had won Versa's trust in different manners: Sylvie she knew she had faith in, and hoped it was mutual. Adolphus seemed genuinely hospitable and interested in her, behavior that Versa did not believe to be in any way malignant.

With a snarl, Versa turned to Adolphus and yelled, "Can somebody please tell me what is actually going on?," eyes alight with zeal. "There's a half-dead woman behind me at your hands, and I've been led to some godforsaken cabin in the middle of Canada." She bared her fangs. "Tell me. NOW."

Adolphus backed up, paw-hands up once more in that familiar placating gesture. His lupine features were startled. "Miss Versa, we merely wish to invite you to our pack. We have much we would offer you, here, if you would join us."

"SILENCE, MOON-CULT CLAN!" roared Sylvie, and she began to strain at her bonds. Every tanned muscle on her body stood out in relief, and her eyes rolled back into her head with the pain as she tried -- to no avail -- to break her bonds.

Alcander bounded out onto the snow and landed on Sylvie's back with a thump, weighing her down -- Chunhua and Duncan had slunk around behind Versa as silent as ghosts. Adolphus didn't seem surprised. Sylvie snarled and writhed under Alcander's weight, gasping and choking. Her body was slowly sinking into the snow like quicksand.

Versa's back was now facing Adolphus. Her hair hung over her eyes ominously. Dreadfully, she let out a breath, still witnessing the turmoil in front of her, and spat out, "What's in it for me? I'm only here for a short while, anyway."

"That's exactly it, Versa," said Adolphus encouragingly. "You're only here for a short while. Our lives are so very short -- so short. Think of what we could do with a..."

"... lengthened lifespan," finished Duncan excitedly, face flushing slightly.

Adolphus looked at Versa. "Do you know how old I am?" he asked.

"I have a home, you know," she said, ignoring his question. "I can't just up and leave - I'm in high school, getting an education. I have a boyfriend that I miss dearly. I may be a werewolf, but most of the time I'm a human. That means I can't just frolick all day long in a werewolf pack."

"Get your education; enjoy your life. Bring your boyfriend back with you -- we'll give him this, too. Come now, tell me you've dreamt of it -- the love of your life romping through the deep snow with you, knowing the power and life of the beast... for eternity."

It was quite the Faustian bargain. And she had dreamt of it... in fact, Versa often awoke during the night, sometimes sweating, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, panting with ecstasy, having been ripped from a fantasy. Having Zack with her forever in such a state would be a dream come true, yet Versa could not bring herself to bestow such an awful curse upon him, too. Unless he wanted her to...

She faced Adolphus with green eyes, not as bright as they were before. Inside, she felt cold as steel. "It's tempting," was all she said.

"DAMMIT, GIRL!" snarled Sylvie, hanging her head in frustration and upset. Alcander had lifted some of his weight off of her, but was still pretty much sitting on her to prevent her from moving.

"It's true," he said. "I have discovered how to pour my powers into the moon -- and thusly have lived nine-hundred years."

The rest of the pack looked appropriately delighted to hear this. "My pack -- the Moon Clan, we call ourselves. We are still young, but we will grow fast and strong. We will never age!"

Chunhua smiled broadly and Duncan was grinning -- even Alcander had a slight smile on his features. Sylvie mumbled something. The wolves frowned, and Adolphus, hard of hearing, said, "... what did you say?"

"It's wrong," mumbled Sylvie.

Adolphus' eyes narrowed, rheum falling off of his left lid.

"This is nature's gift to us, you senile old fool. Death is a natural part of life -- living forever is unnatural. It defies the bargain of the beast we all share, no matter our beginnings," she said. "That is why you can never change back -- Nature has shown you her teeth."

Adolphus snarled and, for the first time, showed aggression. He rushed over to Sylvie and slammed his footpaw down into the gaping wound of her neck, grinding his foot into the wound until she screamed. "You stupid, IGNORANT mutt! How could a dire-wolf like you -- brainless musclebound idiot -- HOPE to understand the complexity of the life of which I speak?!"

"Not.. AARRRRRGH! Aaaahhh, AAHH! ...stupid..." said Sylvie through the yells of pain as Adolphus continued to sink his footpaw into her wound.

The other wolves looked on silently. A small smirk played on Chunhua's lips.

Part 9: Condemning Myself

A slender but powerful hand reached out, grabbing Adolphus' shoulder. Versa tugged him back, feeling particularly brusque as his foot pulled out of the wound. "Sylvie's right," she snarled. "No matter how tempting it is, there are downsides to what we are, don't you see? I enjoy most of

my life as a human, though not always. Being a wolf forever would be like... like condemning myself." Versa turned to Sylvie once more, then back to Adolphus, glaring at him. "I was meant to die."

The old wolf stumbled back in surprise as Versa pulled him away, his footpaw stained with drying brown blood. If looks could kill, he would be dead seven times over -- Sylvie's mismatched eyes were locked on him with hate. Adolphus stared at Versa. "... What are you saying?"

His British accent was on a knife's-edge of anger. The pack stood and subtly surrounded Versa; even Alcander removed himself from Sylvie's back to loom ominously in her peripheral vision. Snow began to fall.

He paused, then said in a more gentlemanly manner, "Miss Versa, I offer you immortality with the one you love. How can you refuse?"

"It can't end up well. I love my boyfriend anyway; we are going to live life the way it was meant to be lived - with an end." On each emphasized word, her fangs gleamed in the fading light. "There are things to do before I die. Not having an end to it would make me weak," Versa paused, surprised that she had gone off on a philosophical diatribe. "And there is nothing admirable about weakness," she growled.

Sylvie mumbled something like, 'that's right' under her breath, glancing out of the corner of her eye admiringly at Versa, though the look was brief. Adolphus stared at her.

"I see. Well, if you won't join us..." Adolphus hobbled back into the cabin, from his safe vantage point looking out the window at them. He nodded assertively.

The pack moved in on Versa silently, Chunhua in the lead. "We'll eliminate you," she hissed -- then swung her leg up at Versa's face in a brutal roundhouse kick. Dusk was beginning to fall, and the snow was landing lightly on the ground, beautiful despite the tension in the air. Nature would continue on as always, unhindered by the petty arguments of man or wolf.

Just in time, Versa turned to protect her nose and eyes, but Chunhua's kick still struck her in the cheek, knocking her to the ground. Versa let out an inhuman roar, far stronger and deeper than she had ever yelled in rage. With a dusty "whump" of snow, she tumbled onto the ground, still hollering. She was sent reeling from the force of the blow. A bruise would likely appear there later.

"Urrr - RRRRRAARGH!" The cry came tearing from Versa's throat, encompassed with every angry fiber of her being, and she leapt from the ground onto Chunhua. The rage only made her stronger. Her face was truly terrifying: tapered eyebrows lowered menacingly over her blazing green eyes, thin lips peeled back in a snarl, revealing the painfully sharp teeth. Veins bulged from her neck. A wild shroud of her dark hair appeared like a hood, surrounding her face and the razor-clean line of her jaw.

Versa, without any hesitation, her inner wolf having been brought to the surface, wrapped her hands around Chunhua's fragile neck. She squeezed and squeezed, laughing her deep, wicked laugh as the woman struggled beneath her grasp.

Chunhua seemed shocked that Versa had moved so quickly, and the hands around her thin neck instantly sealed off her air supply -- which was bad for the Chinese woman, because she had just exhaled. There was no breath left in her lungs. Twitching and trembling, she flailed in Versa's iron grip.

Duncan, strangely, didn't move a muscle, but merely watched. His eyes were expressionless. Alcander, however, dipped in, huge hand catching the back of Versa's neck, taking advantage of how the green-eyed girl's focus was on the subject of her strangulation attempt, and tried to haul her off of Chunhua. Only problem was, Versa wasn't letting go, and by jerking her up, he only succeeded in making Chunhua hack and wheeze even more terribly as she was swung every which way from the movement.

Versa was livid. Her voice was utterly feral, screaming, "Get off me, get off me!" as Alcander picked her up. She weighed enough for him to hesitate, but there was no way she was letting Chunhua go. The girl was kicking and thrashing, grunting in between breaths.

Die, just die already..

Chunhua slumped in Versa's grasp, unconscious and quickly fading past that. "You'll kill her!" exclaimed Alcander in his deep bass voice. He used his other hand to thump Versa in the side, hard enough to make her think twice about clinging to Chunhua -- a warning thump that hinted at much more damage.

A raspy cough was Versa's response. "I was trying to," she said belligerently. Anger was still burning in her, and her head hurt. Still, Versa shut her mouth except to let a few last breaths escape. Her head turned to Chunhua; she almost wanted to spit on her. Chunhua was as limp as a dead fish in Versa's arms -- not breathing, but still with a pulse. Werewolves were hard to kill.

Duncan had wandered around to where Sylvie was, but that thought was lost on Alcander as he drew back his hand and struck Versa on the side of the head, hard -- an efficient strike meant to daze her, not truly hurt her. Unbeknownst to her, Alcander didn't like to hit women -- but this was different, the life of a friend was in danger. SLAM!

A "SMACK," clear as day, reverberated through the air. Chunhua went slumping to the ground in an unconscious pile, just as Versa's hands free her from the impact. A weird half-grunt, half-gasp, came from Versa, and she doubled over, hacking.

Now would be a good time to shut up.

Chunhua slumped in the snow like a rag doll, and Adolphus' voice rang out. "Kill her! She cannot have this knowledge and go free!"

Alcander looked down at Versa, muscles rippling and concentrated. His face became steely with the orders of his alpha. After a long moment, his hand trembled and shook, and transformed. Claws slid with a wet noise from his fingertips -- long, wicked white claws. He looked down at Versa, low growl emanating through his big chest.

"I'm sorry," he said thickly, and raised his hand for the blow.

She was shorter than Alcander - giving Versa just the right amount of leverage and height to send a high-powered kick to his crotch.

Alcander's hand swished through the air at Versa's forehead, claws like needles of death. SCHLUCK! Suddenly, he inhaled sharply as two things happened. Firstly, Versa's foot met his crotch. His mouth opened in an 'O' of pain and he began to double over -- but a second later the 'O' of his mouth contorted into a grimace of pain and he thrashed in the opposite direction as a greater pain took hold.

"Not so fast, big boy," came Sylvie's husky alto.

Versa looked down, and what she saw was something no one at her age should have had to. A great red hand, coated in slick new blood, was protruding from Alcander's enormous pectoral muscle on the left side. It had torn into his back and through his body -- exploding out the other side in a splattering of blood and chunks of flesh.

The feral amazoness stood behind Alcander, standing at exactly the same height. The wound

on her neck was caked in dried blood, a primitive plug to prevent herself from losing any more of her life. Her naked body gleamed in the falling darkness, and her eyes shone their unmatched tapetum lucidum. Slowly, Alcander was lifted off the ground, Sylvie's bicep trembling with the effort(-- the pain in her opposite shoulder weakened her considerably). Duncan stood behind her smirking slightly. With Chunhua unconscious and Alcander distracted by Versa, he had snuck around behind them and undone Sylvie's bonds to the weights.

Alcander was lifted into the air by his own wound, Sylvie's arm through his chest like a needle through fabric.

Versa's jaw dropped open. Sylvie's hand was still wriggling through the open wound. The look on Alcander's face was absolutely atrocious, twisted into a hideous visage of pain and utter agony. She could do nothing but stare past Sylvie and look at Duncan, almost in a gaze of gratitude. Versa looked up at Sylvie, standing bronzed and triumphant in the pale light, the girl's expression perfectly flabbergasted. She wasn't sure what to say, and took a step back.

Unfortunately, the image was broken as Sylvie groaned and pulled her arm out of Alcander's body with a gross slurping noise. "Ugh," she grunted, and then promptly fainted, hard.

She fell forward onto Alcander's back, and his eyes, already glazing over in death -- even a werewolf can't survive having their heart obliterated by another were -- looked almost pleading. The two heavy bodies landed in the snow with a loud thump, and Duncan stood there, breathing heavily and staring at them in awe.

He looked up at Versa, then back at the three on the ground. Chunhua was breathing shallowly, now, still unconscious.

"Versa... what do we do?"

"Well," Versa uttered, hardly more than a whisper. "You're an EMT, right? I think we should try to get Sylvie back on her feet." Abruptly, Versa bit at the coveralls she was covered in. She tore off a part of the sleeve with her teeth. "We could use this as a tourniquet...", referring to the gaping wound still in Sylvie's neck. "Now to avoid them," Versa said, looking at Alcander's obliterated body, and Chunhua's frame lying in a heap on the ground.

"Ah. Right," he said, taking the strip Versa had shredded off of her coveralls and tying it on Sylvie's wound. He looped it under her arm and onto her shoulder and neck partially as best he could, cinching it tight. "We have a medical kit in the cabin -- I can go get that... oh, no."

As the night fell around them, the two werewolves heard the noise of an engine starting. Adolphus was getting away.

The rumble of the van's tires against the fallen snow set Versa into action. "Duncan, we have to go after this guy!" Sylvie was still lying prone on the ground, her hand covered in crimson blood. Versa could only convince herself that Sylvie would be able to manage a few minutes in her condition - Adolphus had already put the clan through enough hell. Versa dashed off in full sprint after the van, not even thinking about where she would be, her long legs propelling her across the snow with ease.

Duncan watched her go with alarm. "Wait -- wait, don't go!"

As Versa tore around the corner of the cabin she saw the van rumbling noisily off into the distance, going much too quickly to be safe on the treacherous mountain roads. Versa's inhuman speed allowed her to catch up relatively quickly to the van.

Harried breath escaped in between her teeth; the van was just in her sights. She could see the faint silhouette of the frail old werewolf in the driver's seat. With a sudden roar of exertion, Versa took a leap of faith onto the back of the van's bumper. There was a sort of roof rack, giving her just enough holding to get a not-so-firm grip on its back.

She was slowly losing footing, trying to keep her weight steady and balanced as the van maneuvered its way through the Canadian wilderness. Versa wondered if, given she lifted her legs up high enough, she should try to launch a swift kick into the van's single back window. She hung on for dear life.

Adolphus saw her precarious position. Panting, the old wolf jerked the steering wheel to the left and right, trying to shake her off. The churning wheels sent snow flying everywhere, flinging Versa every which way -- more than once a tree nearly knocked her clean off the truck bed!

"Am I really doing-?" Versa pondered- her train of thought was cut short, as was nearly her head - as she was nearly decapitated by an incoming tree branch. The girl ducked. She suddenly was thinking back to when, with Sylvie's coaching, jumped directly up a 20 foot cliff. Now what 17-year old can do that?

The same teenager that can smash through the back window of a van barreling through the Canadian wilderness at roughly 50 or 60 miles an hour.

Versa pulled back on the roof rack, nearly falling off, at an opportune moment when the forest

cleared, swinging all of her mass into the back window. Foot hit glass, sending it shattering, and Versa dropped inside the cargo hold, small pinpricks of blood stippling her face from where microscopic shards had pierced the skin.

Once inside, she snarled, and lunged immediately for the steering wheel, not Adolphus. "STOP THE VAN!"

The startled old wolf yelped in surprise and swung the steering wheel in fear -- sending them hurtling towards the edge of one of the many precarious snow-laden cliffs. "N-No!"

Shocked, old body trembling with adrenaline he didn't know he had, Adolphus was overwhelmed. He released the steering wheel entirely and hid his head in his hands, helpless as a pup.

Versa screamed, all air escaping from her lungs, as the van flipped to its side. It skid across the snow like a runaway slapshot on ice. She and Adolphus tumbled around, banging into the steering wheel, seats, glove compartment, parking brake, and everything in between. At the speed the van was going, along with its 2-ton mass, it dug into the snow as it barrelled forward on its side. Lucky for the both of them, Canada had snow, and plenty of it. The snow accumulated in a nice berm, getting thicker, pushed upwards into a heap by the van's motion. Eventually it unearthed enough snow to stop the van's momentum - the cliff was only yards away.

There was a shocked silence.

The silence lasted for nearly five minutes. Adolphus was panting, eyes huge and rheumy, dry tongue hanging out of his mouth. He had seen his death, and seen it up-close and personal. It frightened him. He lay there, crumpled in the front seat with his hindpaws pushed against the still-intact windshield, tail curled up and between his legs.

Perhaps this was the peak of awkwardness in Versa's young life: lying in fetal position against a windshield about to collapse from the pressure of the mountain of snow outside the glass, curled up near the dashboard with an individual whom she had just almost killed. A trickle of blood was caked on the side of her mouth, and her neck was spattered with more tiny streams. She felt faint, and her right shoulderblade was throbbing from the impact of hitting the seat's headrest. Versa growled, slightly smarting from the pain. Still, she was relentless, and forced herself to move, to stretch out her muscles and free the both of them from the van.

She looked at Adolphus. Being so old, it was almost pitifully comical to see him in such a

childish state - Versa almost felt some remorse. He had not perished in the accident, and she knew they both had to escape. The van was oriented so that the windshield was partially covered, but there was enough of a view to see that the trees pointed to the left, viewing the windshield head-on: the van was on its right side. Versa grabbed the driver's side door and opened it, but could hardly manage more than a crack with the weight of the snow and forces of gravity acting upon it. The girl inched herself out of it a bit, and with her strength easily brought herself into full pull-up position, wriggling out of the door.

All she could do was look for a rock or other dense item to prop the door open, and she'd be able to pull Adolphus out.

Adolphus watched her silently. He saw her through the windshield, searching for something to pick the car up with, and sneered.

"What do you think you're doing, girl?" There was no more polite 'Miss Versa's' -- just simply cold, emotionless words that hinted at his great age far more than his arthritic limbs did.

"I'm not leaving you," she replied in haste. "But I also wasn't going to let you get away after what you did to Sylvie. Duncan's back at the cabin." A rock, about three feet at its longest point, caught Versa's eye through the snow. She sauntered to it, heaving it off the ground, and carried it back to the van. She had to climb the van to get back on top of it, but did that easily by building a snowmound. Versa wedged the massive rock in the doorjamb, keeping the hinges propped open. Adolphus' intent stare met her.

"Now give me your paw."

He stared at her thinly and shook his head. "Not today," he murmured -- eyes flicking behind her. Out of the forest shot a white blur. The werewolf flew out of the forest and delivered a high-jump kick to Versa's side, sending her reeling.

It was Chunhua! The Chinese werewolf was looking worse for the wear, but was no longer in human form. Her eyes still looked a bit glazed, and she was breathing as though she were trying to make up for the lack of oxygen before -- that is to say, gasping. She took up a strange martial art fighting stance in the snow between Versa and Adolphus, still trapped in the van, who was smirking.

"I'll destroy you for what you did to me," hissed Chunhua, the fur around her neck disguising the enormous bruises there. Her long, thin muzzle peeled back to reveal her needle teeth, so different from the thick knives that lined Sylvie's mouth. She flicked her fingertip

challengingly at Versa -- a 'come and get me' motion.

A werewolf that knows martial arts?!

Versa stood up, brutally aching, watching Chunhua beckon her. Her lips were morphing, and fast, into a lupine maw, but quickly she blurted out, "Not if I destroy you first. I should have killed you the first time." The teenager snarled. As she rose to her full height, she seemed to pulsate. Her back was teeming with muscle, straining the coveralls. Hulking with new size, Chunhua was faced with the gruesome image of a massive teenage girl, half human, half beast, staring her down. It was not pretty. Fangs emerged from Versa's gums. It didn't hurt anymore, she had undergone the transformation so much. Huge, thick tufts of fur popped from the tears in the fabric, ears aligned themselves along the top of her growing head, and a newborn tail flitted from behind her. The claws made a "schlick" noise as they burst the skin.

Versa was so eager to rip the life from the white werewolf in front of her, quite literally aroused with rage, that she leapt at her enemy before she was even fully transformed. Her eyes were still strangely human, and left Chunhua no doubt that Versa had nothing but pure, unadulterated hatred for her. The yellow murky eyes were not there to disguise the expression.

Chunhua watched her transform so effortlessly, and her ears twitched nervously. How did she show no pain when she transformed? The size was intimidating, but Chunhua centered herself -- she had fought opponents far larger than her before, and won. Her black eyes narrowed, and she raised her arms as Versa flew at her, sidestepping calmly to avoid the direct body-slam. She brought her left hand down in a swift chopping motion meant to hit Versa's back and send her plowing into the snow.

Meanwhile, Adolphus was hobbling out of the truck.

If only Versa could speak in her werewolf form; she would have unleashed a barrage of choice words for Chunhua. But now was time to walk the walk and not talk the talk, so to say. She towered over her by at least two feet, making dodging more difficult, but attacking much simpler - she felt the brunt of this observation not quite so figuratively as Chunhua's scissor chop hit Versa right where her family's insignia was now glowing a bright, luminous green.

Chunhua glanced up in time to see that Adolphus had escaped the car and was rapidly making his way down the road and into the woods. Chunhua swung around and took advantage of Versa's prone position and delivered a rude tiger-claw slam into the tattoo.

"... Damn... you...!" she grunted incoherently with each hit, pummeling the tattoo as

though it was the bane of her existence. It represented Versa's ability to turn into a werewolf. "You... don't... deserve...!"

The insignia was not quite Versa's Achilles heel, but at the moment she knew Chunhua was kicking her there viciously not only to injure her, but to degrade her. That seemed to make it psychologically worse. Versa was lying on the ground - the kicks wouldn't stop. With every blow, the larger were writhed. She was aching still, the pain having transferred over from her human form. This little werewolf was merciless, but Versa had had enough. She concentrated on channeling her pain into rage and power, suddenly feeling unbreakable. One last kick to her back, and Versa unleashed a mighty roar. Chunhua almost dodged Versa's throw - she was swift - but Versa swept up the smaller were in her huge, human-like forepaws. She'd have a little bit more fun if she tortured her before she died... Versa snorted in Chunhua's face, ignoring the claw swipes being doled out. At the peak of her anger, Versa snarled savagely, and lunged for Chunhua's throat, clamping down hard, wringing it like a dog with a chew toy.

Chunhua moved her arm to try to defend herself, but Versa's teeth were on her neck in a heartbeat. How... so fast! She couldn't breathe, couldn't think -- the pain was unbearable. The sore, recent bruises ringing her neck made her skin tender and easily broken as Versa's large teeth sunk into her skin and shook her back and forth. With each whip of her head, Chunhua's body thrashed more and more violently, in her death throes. If Versa didn't stop soon, the other werewolf would die.

SCCHHRIP! There it was. Versa's mouth filled with blood, and what was presumably Chunhua's trachea, plus a nice mouthful of offwhite fur.

Chunhua did not immediately go limp. She fixed her dark eyes briefly on Versa's unfocused green ones -- and then slowly drifted over her shoulder and into the dark night, eyes focused on the beautiful full moon. I die.. for you... she thought, dark black eyes glazing over gradually with a greyish film. Her body sagged suddenly, limp as silk in Versa's teeth.

"Versa!" came a shocked voice. Duncan had entered the clearing, eyes wide and focused on the gruesome scene before him.

Versa greeted him with a defensive snarl, notioning to stay back from her prey. She carefully dropped Chunhua's fragile body on the snowy ground, looking wide-eyed and satisfied with a fresh splash of blood on her muzzle, neck fur, and chest. Cautiously, she approached Duncan, knowing she was probably in deep shit now.

Duncan stared Chunhua's dead body. It was slumped in the snow, off-white fur stained with

blood, mouth open ungraceful in death, tongue drying out in the harsh wind already. He stared at Versa.

"She loved me," he said in a low voice. "Probably the only woman who ever will."

His dark blue eyes were accusatory and watery. "She was headstrong sometimes, but she was in love with me."

"She was deluded by Adolphus," said Sylvie. She was standing in the woods behind him, thickly muscled body leaning seemingly casually on a tree, although the sophisticated bandages on her shoulder-neck wound showed that Duncan had done his work. She had followed him, admittedly more slowly, to the scene of the crash. "It was for the best."

"No!" snapped Duncan, whipping around and snarling at Sylvie. "She could have learned! I was getting through to her, I was..."

"Don't delude yourself," Sylvie said unkindly, sneering down at him from her lofty height advantage. "Chunhua was power-hungry and greedy. You can't change people."

Duncan tensed up, sizing Sylvie up. His eyes narrowed and he was clearly trying to decide whether or not he was strong enough to take Sylvie. His eyes flicked to her wound then back to her face.

"Just try it," she said. "I dare you."

A pink tongue fluttered out of Versa's maw, licking her own muzzle clean, savoring the blood. The air was still chilly, frozen, and bluish puffs of vapor rose with every breath. Her chest heaved as she finally caught her breath. The massive wolf-girl was staring at Duncan and Sylvie, hoping that this whole ordeal could just be over with. Duncan seemed to be a decent man, and surely helped out Sylvie, but a part of Versa wanted to see him suffer for all the flirting he put her through, especially knowing that Chunhua had an eye for him. Petty, yes, but not much made sense to Versa anymore.

Duncan's shoulders slumped and he sagged forward, suddenly very tired. "I can't fight you," he said. "I can't fight anyone. She was always the fighter."

"Stop wallowing in self-pity," Sylvie said mercilessly. "I'm leaving."

She turned to stalk off into the woods, and Duncan looked surprised.

"Wait, what?! Come back! Where are you going -- none of this is resolved. Adolphus is still out there, won't you DO something about it?!"

Sylvie called over her shoulder as she walked, "Not my problem. You fix it."

Versa merely gave Duncan a growl - should she revert? Her fur was at least keeping her warm, even warmer with a raised blood pressure, knowing that Adolphus was now on the loose. She nearly killed herself in a car accident just to let him get away?

At least Chunhua was out of the way - Versa growled at the thought, licking her fangs, watching Sylvie head into the forest. Where was she going?

Duncan watched Sylvie go, arms raised helplessly. His eyes were pleading, but the big woman didn't look back once. For an instant, watching her walk into the forest, Duncan saw the silhouette of a hulking wolf limping off into the woods. He blinked and the vision was gone -- just Sylvie, naked, long hair yanked back into a swaying ponytail on the top of her head. The astounding musculature of her back rippled and glowed in the moonlight, buttocks hard enough to break steel.

Her bronzed body disappeared into the forest at last.

With Duncan left behind, Versa ran. Something in her instinct jolted her huge legs into motion, bounding after the woman in the snow. Sylvie was the one who had lived through the experiences: the drugging, the binding, the torture... obviously she knew something that Moon Clan did not want revealed: Versa had to know what Adolphus knew about her family. She felt vaguely jeopardized as she ran along the path, soft blotches of snow kicking up under her feet.

Duncan howled after them. "WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?! ARRGH, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO?!"

Part 10: Vacation's End

Sylvie didn't act surprised when Versa ducked through the trees and caught up with her. Sylvie glanced at Versa out of the corner of her eye, head tilted slightly up to look at the other's face. Without saying a word, she shrugged her arm out of its loose bandage, leaving the main tighter bandage the only thing on her body. After a moment, her clawed hand tore through the tighter bandage -- leaving her arm free and open to the snowy air. As the blood-crusted bandages fluttered to the pine needle bed that was the forest floor, it was as though Sylvie was casting off

her worries like that bandage.

Her wound was looking a tiny bit better -- hell, it looked like she would recover from the wound.

Th-thump.

Sylvie suddenly tilted her head back and howled -- a long, loud howl that was very distinctly hers. After the howl, she broke into a silent jog through the forest, heading back the way they'd come. As she ran, she began to transform -- slowly, gradually. Her arms thickened and bulged lazily, her eyes stayed calm. The moon was, admittedly, beginning to wane the slightest bit -- it wasn't as full as it was the night before.

Th-thump!

Without falling to her knees or slowing, Sylvie transformed as she ran -- body oozing naturally into the wolf form Versa had met her in -- the pure dire-wolf. Her muzzle lengthened in the wind, ears snapping forward with their characteristic gauges. Her hands turned into paws that pounded the snow with a wild abandon, almost like a puppy in her joy, and she howled again -- now a full wolf, rushing through the snow, not stopping to check if Versa was following her -- in her small lupine brain she knew that the younger would be.

These were the times that Versa wished she was not only a full were - running on all fours would have been nice. Sylvie's howl rent the air, and Versa lifted her head up, letting out her own howl to answer it. She was not far behind. Her anticipation was running high; finally Versa was truly free again from the mysterious lycan clan. The past night had been one of the most confusing of her life. She wondered what her father might be thinking right now as she ran. Surely he'd have questions when she returned: Versa would be coming home with no less than four or five bruises and wounds. She'd worry about that later, but for now, she continued down the snowy path.

The run back to Versa's cabin took about an hour and a half. The snow increased as they ran, becoming more intense and white than it was before, cold little flakes catching in the werewolves' fur and sticking like dander. Their pawprints were quickly filled in with more snow, leaving no evidence of their tracks, as the pair ran. Animals watched them past with wide, silent eyes, hoping not to be noticed.

Sylvie had an excellent sense of direction despite the blizzard -- she knew this territory like the back of her paw -- and unhesitatingly lead Versa to where the dire-wolf felt the other needed to be.

Sylvie's tongue was lolling out of her mouth by the end of the run, and the big she-wolf skidded to a halt on the edge of the trees in Versa's backyard, watching the cabin intently. The dire-wolf's great chest heaved and she opened her mouth in a cavernous yawn, nervous. She didn't like being around humans, but this girl had proven herself other than that. Now, her own pack -- her father -- wanted Versa back. Sylvie's wounded shoulder was still present in wolf-form, but it seemed even less substantial now. All of the lights were on, and Mr. Novak was staring hopefully out of one of the windows, looking for his daughter. The light from the window shone a perfect rectangle of butter yellow onto the otherwise dark snow.

The cabin came into view, and suddenly Versa was stricken with panic. How was she going to explain this to her father? Quick and painlessly, she ducked behind a tree to detransform. Panting with exertion, a completely naked Versa crouched in the snow. Her face already had taken on a bluish pallor from the cold. "Stay here," Versa yelled coldly to Sylvie.

Her borrowed coveralls were long gone - the other clothing was left at the site where she and Sylvie were both attacked by the wolf pack - and her parka was inside with her father. Nothing says hello like walking in on your father naked, bloody, and bruised - poor Mr. Novak probably thought she had been raped.

As the girl turned to leave, Sylvie darted forward and put her huge mouth around Versa's arm. Her thick teeth were resting on the thin human skin of Versa's arm, yet they did not break the skin, and were surprisingly gentle. Maybe the dire-wolf's large maw was capable of more delicacy than it looked. The meaning was clear -- 'Wait.'

The girl winced momentarily, her mind torn between her father and the huge wolf's jaws grappling her arm. Scared and confused, Versa looked up at the tiny mismatched eyes hopelessly. The dire-wolf released her arm, licking it briefly to show she didn't mean to hurt her.

Sylvie paused to exchange a look with Versa, lifting her head so that it was at eye level with the now-human girl. Mismatched blue-and-brown eyes bored into limeskin-green ones. Both sets of eyes glowed with an unholy power, and their glow meshed into a kaleidoscope of color on the snow -- a miniature aurora borealis. Sylvie, although she couldn't speak in this form, or think as strongly, for that matter, was able to communicate through her small, soulful eyes effectively.

'We'll meet again. For now, it's good-bye.'

Sylvie leaned over and snuffled Versa's hair, then dragged her ham-slice tongue over Versa's cheek. It was slobbery and rough, but hot enough to leave steam in its wake in the frigid wind.

The dire-wolf then turned around, small tail swishing, and walked off into the woods, ears perked. The behemoth that was Sylvie disappeared into the trees in a swirl of snow, and was gone -- her dinner plate-sized pawprints already filling with snow.

Versa let out a childish giggle, uncharacteristic of the hardened teenager, as Sylvie's big tongue licked her cheek. After all she had been through on this so-called "vacation," she definitely deserved it. Adolphus was left to roam free - it would be on her mind as she went to sleep tonight. If she ever returned to Canada, Versa knew that she would do whatever was in her power to find Adolphus and solve the mystery of his connection to her curse.

Versa withdrew as Sylvie gave her a definite good bye, but she had faith that she would see the she-wolf again. She was incredibly disheartened, watching her leave. The fascinating occurrence with the light show created by their eyes was wondrous. Surely Versa and Sylvie shared much more than a mutual bond, a mystery Versa would have to solve later as well.

The windows in the cabin were frosted over with condensation. Sadly, Versa hung her head, not sure of what to say upon returning to her father again. She was preparing for the worst. All she wanted right then was to return to a warm bed, maybe to see her boyfriend and spend some time in a familiar place. Longing for a familiar place, and perhaps some sanity, among other things, Versa strode to the cabin with a sense of deep reflection, shivering.

It was time to return home.

THE END