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## The Beast Inside

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The Beast Inside

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Steve Cave

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2016

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 15, 2016

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Steve Cave entitled *The Beast Inside* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
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## Abstract

This thesis contains the first seven chapters of the novel *Ravenous*, the short story “Faithfall,” and the academic paper “From Hellhound to Hero: Tracking the Shifting Shape of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Werewolf.” Both of the stories deal with werewolves as a common element, but use very different types of werewolves in each. The werewolves of *Ravenous* transform through losing control or giving in to their passions, while the werewolves in “Faithfall” change only with the full moon, and retain no control once transformed. Both stories have a gay male protagonist, though also in very different ways. *Ravenous* follows the story of a seventeen-year-old young man learning that he is a werewolf, and uses this to explore themes such as coming of age, hungering for belonging, and dealing with feeling like a monster. “Faithfall” follows a gay adult soldier in a future society where this aspect is irrelevant, and combines werewolves with science fiction to explore the themes of love, loss, and the search for forgiveness.

Though these two stories are very different, they are both violent, intimate, and earthy in ways that reflect the writer’s style, personality, and passions. Included with these works is the academic paper “From Hellhound to Hero: Tracking the Shifting Shape of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Werewolf.” This paper explores the history of the werewolf through lore and literature, and points out three main attributes of the modern werewolf that differ from the werewolves of the past, while explaining how these unique features of the modern werewolf came to be.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Preface.....	1
Faithfall.....	13
<i>Ravenous</i> (chapters 1 to 7) .....	39
From Hellhound to Hero: Tracking the Shifting Shape of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Werewolf...	133
Bibliography.....	163

# Preface

When I started this MFA program, I thought of myself as a pretty good writer. I had been writing and telling stories for a long time, and had been told by my family and friends that I was a good storyteller. I submitted my best work to try to get into this program – the beginning of a novel called *Ravenous*, a young adult story about a boy who discovers that he's from a family of werewolves. I was proud of the story – it had characters I liked. It had exciting action and vivid visuals. My partner Andrew had encouraged me to apply for the program, and had even suggested the title. I was thrilled.

In my first workshop, the story was completely destroyed. I remember sitting in the circle of seats, a feeling of dread pumping up from my stomach. The story had hope, they said, but so many errors. Errors I hadn't even known existed. Point of view? What was that? Too many adjectives and adverbs? How can there be too many? Fancy dialog tags are bad now?

I learned so many things that first residency that I didn't have a clue I had even needed to learn. During my first semester, I spent all five packets working on *Ravenous* with Nancy Holder. She was an amazing teacher with invaluable insights into the young adult horror market, having written Buffy books and a Teen Wolf novel. She was also extremely encouraging and patient. She helped me see some problems with my story, and always had good suggestions for improving it. It was during that first semester that I broke up with Andrew – my first love – and Nancy was even helpful and encouraging

about that, as well. I learned a lot from her, and *Ravenous* got much better, but by the end of that first semester I was sick of it and needed a break. I was also itching to try something new.

For the first two months with my second semester, I worked on “Faithfall” with David Anthony Durham. He was also extremely helpful, and the story would be garbage if it wasn’t for his help and encouragement. I did revisit *Ravenous* with him for my final packet, and he encouraged me to continue to work on it.

I had Dr. Theodora Goss for my third semester, and worked most of the semester on the academic paper that is included in this thesis, “From Hellhound to Hero: Tracking the Shifting Shape of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Werewolf.” The research for this paper was both arduous and a joy. I learned a great deal about werewolf lore, things that are now included in *Ravenous*. For my final packet with Dora, I revisited *Ravenous* yet again, and she gave me some of the most valuable feedback I’d received yet. The story changed yet again.

The final change came while I was in residency in Ireland. Emailing with Dora, I asked her if she thought I should or shouldn’t make the main character, Ben, gay. Up until that point, he was a straight boy, and Ginna was his girlfriend. However, the whole time I worked on *Ravenous*, that bothered me. Their relationship felt flat to me. Dora suggested that I don’t worry about what will and won’t sell, and that I simply write the truest story that I could. Well... that would mean that Ben is gay. So much of the story is autobiographical, but in a coming-of-age story I had left out what is probably one of my most fundamental aspects.

Coming full circle, it was through a conversation with Andrew, the man who had been my first love, now a fantastic friend, that I realized I could make Ben's wrestling with his sexuality flow with his wrestling with being a werewolf... that the imagery of finding out you were born a monster can go either way. It was at this point that I fell in love with *Ravenous* all over again, and set to rewrite it. What had been sixty pages written and rewritten became ninety-five pages after the second rewriting.

With this latest rewriting, it's been easy to see how much my skill as a writer has improved. I know I have a long way to go, but at this point I feel confident in what I'm doing. My interests in writing started as purely science fiction and fantasy, but even that has changed.

Before starting Stonecoast, I had the beginning of *Ravenous*, and a fantasy story called *Northaven* about wolf people who piloted huge lumbering robots. I had also written and published a text game app called *Mobile Armored Marine*, a military sci fi story that borrows blatantly from space marine stories like *Starship Troopers*, *Halo*, and *Warhammer 40K*.

Since starting this program, I've branched out with my writing. I've written a short story called "Bladed Purpose," about a killer alien robot made completely out of shifting blades who is afraid of retirement; a short story in the same universe as my *Mobile Armored Marine* game, about a squad of power-armored special forces soldiers; and I've started a story called "Fleshforged," about a bioengineered super soldier on a biological combat ship who struggles with being a pacifist. Things came off the rails a bit when I took a magical realism elective and ended up writing a short story called "Powers of Night and Light," that borrowed heavily from my life and follows a boy growing up



poor, religious, and gay, with a knack for disappearing. Finally, my last and most different piece is a creative nonfiction story called “The Hunt,” about a wild Halloween night of partying and drug use, and how my experiences that night helped me rebuild my self-esteem and self-image in the fallout of some serious trauma from two years prior.

I chose *Ravenous* and “Faithfall” for my thesis for two reasons: they are both stories that benefited greatly from my third semester research project (on werewolves), and they both feature gay men, so they are close to my heart. I also feel like these two stories do a good job of reflecting what I think of as the most common themes in my writing: soldiers, transformation, loss, and love.

### **Soldier Stories**

In essence, everything I write is a soldier story. “Faithfall” is clearly a story about a soldier, and I see it in everything else I’ve written in one way or another. In *Ravenous*, Ben must learn to use his gifts, and embrace the fact that he’s a killer, a fighter. So, why this interest in soldiers? The answer, I believe (though I may change my mind given more years to think about it), focuses on the core of who I am. When you read these stories of mine, all of them -- even the nice, sweet magical realism tale -- are the projected expressions of a man constantly at war with the world around him, and within himself.

I was born poor, and I hated the rich. I hated those who lived just across the street from me in their walled-off subdivisions, whose parents bought them nice clothes for school and cars when they turned sixteen. I was at war with them, even if they didn’t know it. This shows up in *Ravenous*, where I more or less wrote my own childhood as Ben’s.

I was raised Pentecostal Christian, a brand of Christianity especially known for its belligerent and confrontational style. I knew the Truth, and knew that I was part of a much bigger war. As I grew older, I ran into conflict constantly with church leaders who were uneducated, and who used the scriptures as weapons, but used them incorrectly (in my humble teenage opinion). I went to Bible college to equip myself better for these fights, which of course led to even more conflict. Today I'm an atheist, but really it's all an extension of the same fight that I was introduced to in Sunday school -- the fight for a truth I can believe in, despite pressures both internal and external, to believe otherwise.

Finally, there's the conflict created by growing up gay and Christian in a small town in southern Oregon with bigoted parents. I fought myself as long as I could. I don't know what finally gave, possibly the realization that I would die alone, but I finally faced the truth about myself, fought through it, and came to terms with who I am as a gay man. Of course, the fight doesn't end there. Being gay is coming out over and over throughout one's life. It's constantly questioning the paths one's taken. It's never being able to settle into the comfortable patterns that society has put forward as "normal."

Luckily, I'm used to conflict.

And so it's no wonder that all of my stories deal with someone struggling with the fact that they are a fighter. These stories reflect me and my values, and I value strength and aggression. Interestingly, I had no idea that this would be one of my aesthetic aims in my work -- it's more of something I've come to realize, looking back. I should have guessed it, with my interest in military sci fi, but amazingly it took writing in this program for me to finally see that soldier stories are what I write.

### **Stories About Transformation**

Transformation is also a theme in my writing. Werewolves are a clear metaphor for this, and I've used them to this purpose. Werewolves change biologically, but the real importance is how they change internally. If I changed into a huge clawed monster, but was still the same old Steve Cave, that power would be largely wasted – I doubt I'd run amok terrorizing anyone. It's the internal change, the emotional and psychological journeys, that I want to explore, the giving in to what we really want, embracing our true selves, our animal nature.

My favorite novel is Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. I was actually teaching the novel to middle schoolers in Portland, Oregon, when I first began to answer my own call to my more basic nature – the fact that I was, whether I wanted to be or not, gay. This story highly influences my writing, and I have enjoyed writing Ben in *Ravenous* as a teenage boy with all the passions that adolescence entails, only now these feelings can actually make him a literal monster. There's so much to explore with that idea, I want to make sure I do it justice. In "Faithfall," I make it clear that werewolves are always close to arousal, too. We all feel this call to be fully ourselves, and we are all more animal than we probably like to admit!

I have come to think of all of life as a sort of transformation. That's something that I want to explore through my writing. What is Benjamin Ossory becoming? If he's a monster, will he hate himself and others like him? When we meet Ben, he's already wrestled with being gay, but hasn't yet come out. This parallel is an excellent opportunity for exploring and magnifying both sides of his struggle.

The process of coming out has been the single most transformative experience of my life. I'm excited to walk through that with Ben, to see how he turns out. I hope for the best for him, but he's definitely got a lot on his plate.

And what about Daib in "Faithfall?" He must embrace becoming the leader that everyone knows him to be. He must take responsibility for his actions and be his own man, or how could Ion ever really know and love him? I see Daib as on the edge of taking charge of his own life, and the loss of his love and his pack as the catalyst that starts his transformation into who he truly could be.

### **Stories About Loss**

It's Diab losing everything in "Faithfall" that triggers his change. Loss is another theme that I see in these two pieces, and common in all of my writing. My characters all lose something, something dear, something important, something that they think is vital. I want to explore this, and ask if the loss is actually a bad thing. Obviously, sometimes loss is horrible, but sometimes it drives us, and sometimes it can even set us free in ways we didn't know we needed.

Ben Ossory loses his regular life in *Ravenous*. It's hard for him to let go, but he actually hated himself a lot of his life. He will learn that his real fear is the loss of his friends. Ben lives with the loss of his father, and of the life that he imagines he would have had if things had only been different. Ben's friends find out that he's a werewolf early on in the story, but he comes out to them much later. I have in mind that his friend Kyle will reject Ben when he comes out as gay, even though Kyle was okay with Ben being a werewolf, based on Kyle's religious beliefs (and also due to Ben being clearly attracted to Kyle). I have no idea how these conflicts will play out in the end. I have in

mind that in the final conflict, Ben and his friends will be threatened by a group of Chastel werewolf hunters, and Ben's mother standing up for him, only to die. I imagine a sad but hopeful ending, with the friends now ready to build something new – but that loss hangs in the air, lending its flavor to everything. This loss will move him, but also set him free.

“Faithfall” begins with Daib losing his entire pack, and his beloved Ion. It's this loss that threatens to overwhelm him throughout the entire story as he works through what happened, but it's also the driving force that pushes him to become what he was born to be – an Alpha, and more than that in the planned sequel.

In my own life, of course I have lost. Everyone has. I've lost friends and family in coming out. I'll never have a traditional family. A wife and kids. I'll never feel completely safe giving my beloved a kiss in public. I've also lost my faith in Jesus, and the community that comes along with that. I have lost the sense of power and purpose that religion can provide. I've lost things, but it's in those losses that I am driven to embrace what I have left that is really valuable. It's through these discoveries that I'm spurred on to become something more, and it's through these losses that I, too, have been set free.

### **Love Stories**

I love writing about love. It may be a leftover from my days as a Christian, but I still think that love is the thing that makes life worth living. It's the way that we can experience something like Heaven, but here on Earth. I enjoy writing about romantic love, familial love, friendship, and finding joy in our passions.

In “Faithfall,” we see Daib and Ion’s love. My hope is that it’s touching, real and inspiring. To write their relationship, I pulled from my own limited experience. I’ve only been out and dating for a few short years, and before that, when I dated women, there was definitely no love. And perhaps that’s why I’m so interested in romance – I’m fairly new at it still!

In *Ravenous*, there’s been no opportunity yet for romantic love. There’s definitely romantic and sexual tension so far, but up to this point my focus has been building and showing a loving relationship between Ben and Josie, along with Ben and his three friends. I feel that love takes on many forms, and I am interested in all of them. Through this story, I hope to explore Ben’s love for his friends, his love for his mother (at the end), and his own stirrings of romantic love.

### **Literary Influences**

Before Stonecoast, I believed that I had read a lot of books. However, I was sadly mistaken. Discussions with faculty and fellow students showed me that I had an embarrassingly narrow interest in the stories I read. I had read the basics that any fantasy or sci fi reader reads – Tolkien and Lewis, Martin and Jordan, Howard and Lovecraft, and then a host of military science fiction, with Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* being one of my favorite novels of all time.

*Starship Troopers* is a clear influence on the types of soldier stories I write. In *Starship Troopers*, like all soldier stories, we see an unremarkable young person who goes through training and trials, and who rises above their adversaries to triumph. This is true from Stephen Ambrose’s world war II iconic story *Band of Brothers* to the *Halo* video game novels to Hiroshi Sakurazaka’s *All You Need is Kill*, John Scalzi’s *Old Man’s*

*War* series, Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, and Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*, and the afore mentioned *Starship Troopers*. All of these have been strong influences in my writing. I read them all for pleasure, some of them several times.

When it comes to werewolf stories, interestingly, my influences are all visual media, with the *Howling* movie series, the poorly received *Werewolf* TV series (1988), the *Underworld* movies, and many more, including the cult favorite British movie, *Dog Soldiers*. All of these featured what I thought of as the "correct" werewolf, a hulking beast of fur and claws that stood at least a foot taller than a human. This image influenced my storytelling, as these are the types of werewolves that I write. However, in my research for my third semester project, I was exposed to many more, and realized that my notion of massive bipedal werewolves was a century and a half old. Before that, for thousands of years, werewolves were people who changed into regular wolves. Still, I hold onto my aesthetic. I'm richer for now understanding where it came from, and how to differentiate mine from the others.

I didn't mention the *Teen Wolf* TV series above because I think that it fits more solidly in another category of influence – Young Adult horror. I loved the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* TV series, and the *Teen Wolf* series is clearly inspired by it. Both of these have strongly moved me, and they've created the template for the Young Adult story. The challenge is to differentiate my werewolves and story from *Teen Wolf*, and to not fall into the trap that many of these do, where so many familiar mystical and magical beings are introduced – vampires, werewolves, witches, fairies, etc. The readers feel like they've seen it all before. It's the same trap that *True Blood* fell into.

When I first started *Ravenous*, the story was werewolves versus witches, and they were split along gender lines with werewolves being male and witches being female. I had one mentor point out some dangers of the gender differences, with the main character being male, and then another mentor point out that the mixing of gothic monsters has been done too much. I eliminated the gender binary, and I'm happy with how things are at the moment. I'm excited to see how the story develops.

### **Where from Here**

"Faithfall" is designed to be a stand-alone story, but with clear possibility for more. I have done a lot of daydreaming about what happens next. I have the other characters in mind, and have even drawn pictures of them. My characters so far are a vampire who has contracted with the church to earn her passage to Heaven, a psychic witch from a secret order of witch nuns who are masters of astral projection, a living saint who has voluntarily embodied a powerful and ancient demon in order to contain its evil, the golem of Prague now fitted with heavy weapons and armor, and the robot familiar Gabriel rehoused in a combat class familiar chassis.

I am unsure how to introduce each character, but I do have a rough outline of the story once they are all assembled. One idea I had was to write each character as a separate short story somehow, in a way that still advances the overarching plot. That plot involves Cybo using Ion to make werewolves, only to lose control and have them spread on Faithfall like a plague. Meanwhile, he sets himself up as a religious leader counter to the Church. The group of "sacred monsters" is powerful, but it isn't an army, so they must be clever and use their abilities strategically in order to bring Cybo down, and to save Ion.



My plans for *Ravenous* are to complete it as a Young Adult novel. Chapter eight, the next chapter after the excerpt found here in this thesis, is the midpoint of the novel, where they finally get to the family compound in Idaho, only to find it under siege by hunters and their father presumed dead. Although my plans may change once I begin following my characters through a progression of mounting complications, my tentative plan is that they will have to flee and find a refuge, only to have that lost too as Ben realizes that his Gift is to manifest Truesilver. Ben and Josie will have a falling out, and Ben will return to Medford to confront his mother. Ben will also have difficulty with Kyle, when Kyle rejects Ben after Ben comes out as gay. I imagine the Sons of Fenris catching Ben's friends and Odin using them to try to make Ben join. I think that Perth will betray Odin, and Teiwaz will attack Ben on his own again, ruining Odin's plans. I envision Ben and his friends being held by the Sons of Fenris, rescued by House Chantel hunters, and a massive battle where Ben's mother stands up against her family to protect Ben, only to be killed by Ben's cousin who tormented him when he was young. This is Ben's moment of truth and I see him prevailing, I hope, though I haven't written it yet, so we shall see. I imagine Ben and Josie finally fighting, and Ben's father is still a variable I haven't found the value of yet. I imagine him as a good man, but he's clearly flawed as well. Perhaps too flawed to be the man Ben always hoped he'd meet one day. His father may be a disappointment in the end. I see the story ending with, Ben, Josie and his friends left bonded together in a new type of pack, with an uncertain future.

At least, that is how I imagine the ending to be. I'm very aware that these characters could end up doing something very different. This is, in fact, the second or

third very different ending that I've envisioned, so I suppose I'll be as interested as anyone else to see where it all ends up.

I'm excited to finish these stories, and many others, with all that I've learned at Stonecoast. It's amazing for me to think about how much has changed for me in the last two years, both in my personal life and in my writing. Now, without further ado, here are "Faithfall" and *Ravenous*.

# Faithfall

Leaning over Ion's shoulder from behind, I let my nose brush the blonde fuzz on the side of his neck. I breathe him in: sweet apples from his bioscrub, the hot sweaty tang of anger, and the delicious warm sour and sweet musk that's always only Ionatan. We're both naked, so I can feel the heat of him even as he leans away from me. His powered assault suit hangs in front of him, spread-eagle in its launch rack. Similar suits hang in rows to either side, where other naked men and women are performing final pre-launch checks. The suits look like bulky cerametal bears, tacked to the rack and folded open as if dissected. Ionatan fidgets with one of the massive silvered clawed gauntlets and refuses to look at me.

"Ion." I let my fingertips brush his back.

He spins to finally glare at me. My heart aches to see his disgust, but I need to talk to him. "You son of a bitch, Daib," he snaps. "Right before we launch, you drop this on me?"

I hesitate. I always hesitate. I'm going to say something, say I'm sorry, say she means nothing to me, explain that I had no choice...

He attacks my hesitation, biting off his words. "You're just going to stand there? You're pathetic. And you were *mine*."

"Ion... it didn't mean anything. I swear. Sapphira is the Alpha, how could I--"

"Oh, you enjoyed it!" His voice rings through the starship bay. I know the other troopers are listening. I know this is a bad time and place to talk, but I have to reach him.

I flinch remembering my time with her. “God, no Ion. Honestly. She said it was Abbey orders, that they’re trying to breed a new saint, and—”

“And you’re the only wolf on board with a dick.” Ion’s neck and face flush with fury, but his scent is wounded.

In the middle of the act, Sapphira had asked me to leave Ion. I can’t tell him that. “It’s because I was converted by Saint Christopher himself. And she’s nothing, she—” I stop and look around.

“Worried your little bitch is listening from the bridge?” he says, much too loudly.

I lift a hand toward his shoulder. "You're my mate."

He jerks away from my touch. “Am I? Funny, I don’t remember a vow.”

That slice cuts deep. He’s right, but we have time, the rest of our lives, and our kind lives so long. I look at the floor, and hesitate for the last time.

Ion takes a step backwards into a bulky armored boot, slips his toes in and slaps his heel in place. The top of the boot folds over his foot and locks it away. "You'd best suit up, Beta Daibhidh."

"Ion—"

Ion steps his other foot in, triggering the same automatic response. "We're moments from launch, Sir." As his suit hums to life his face hardens, along with his heart.

"Ion, don't cut me out right before a fight."

He levels a glare like loaded guns. With a growl, he slaps his arms back to his sides, into the waiting embrace of his suit. The machine folds around him like a sea anemone swallowing prey. A huge wolf's head helmet seals him in. With a hiss and a click, he is walled off from me in every way possible.

I move back to the launch bay door, my bare feet slapping the starship deck. Reflected in the window, I can see the row of suits behind me, the naked troopers sealing themselves in all along the line. They smell spicy and sweet, like arousal: like teenagers at a dance. Arousal is never far away for us.

Looking past their reflections through the window, I take in the glittering night side of the planet Faithfall -- an arrogant human trafficking hub, named and operated by the Godless. But Faithfall isn't our target. Not directly.

The target is a bloated pleasure yacht sailing past only a few hundred yards away. To them, we look like a cargo frigate and show up on scans as completely free of any weapons. Because at this moment, we are. We scan as nothing but a largely empty cargo ship, people, unarmed robotic crew and power assisted vacuum suits.

The yacht is painted with the yellow and black crest and colors of the Cybo family. Flesh dealers. Slavers. They're out here celebrating a marriage and merger that will seat the Cybos firmly as the masters of this entire stellar group. The ship is full of the rich, the powerful, and the elite of Faithfall. It's the perfect time to strike, and they have no idea we're coming. We're the Church's secret weapon. The Church has warned them to repent, but they refuse to stop buying and selling humans like cattle, and to stop fleshforging human abominations to use for their pleasure. After tonight, the bodies will be found impossibly torn apart, the Church will take credit, and many thousands of people will be saved.

We do the Lord's work. It's dark work, like David slaying Philistines, but if good people do nothing, evil flourishes. Once humanity attained the stars, we became

ungovernable. The frontier is simply too vast, and always growing. Powerful, evil people are free to be monsters. We'll show the Cybo family what monsters really are.

The line of twenty-four powered armor suits seems awkward, with oversized boots, gauntlets and helmets. My armor is the only one still folded out like a Venus fly trap, waiting.

I glance down the line at Ion's. His suit hangs cold and motionless just like the others. I can't even smell him.

I give my suit its final check. The cerametal boots stand digitigrade, permanently up on their toes, tipped with rows of massive silver alloy claws. The outspread arms end in heavy gauntlets with wide razors for fingers. My suit is no different from the rest, except for wide red bands painted around the armor's biceps and thighs, and a red helmet. They mark me as the leader, in colors that even a beast can understand. Down the middle of the helmet and across the wolf's face from forehead to the tip of the nose is emblazoned our order's cross. The Alpha is the only one of us to remain on ship. She's on the bridge with the familiars, wearing her mirrored suit that keeps her shielded from the light and therefore sane, but also cut off from the mission.

Whenever I get into my armor, I feel small and out of place, like a little boy trying on daddy's shoes and jacket. The suits are bulky and heavy, and almost impossible to move in normally. I turn and step backwards into it, and it folds around to hold me. Once inside, all I can do is look through my huge helmet's visor. Again, that sense that I'm a child playing with something not meant for me.

But my dad is dead. By my teeth. I can still remember his taste.

Bishop Miriam says it's not our fault. I know I have no control, but no matter what she says, it's hard to believe. She says that we only need worry about the times we're us. That there's nothing to forgive. That this is a curse. Am I me when I lose control, though? Will God really forgive me? Does He care?

Will Ion forgive me?

My thoughts always meander like this while I hang from the rack and wait, unable to move. Our ship begins to move in an arc around the yacht, keeping it centered in front of the launch bay. The long bay doors fold open onto raw space. As the ship orbits the yacht, the shining white disk of Faithfall's full moon slides into view, bathing the inside of the launch bay with potent light.

A wave of anxious heat floods through me. The waves wash my entire body in pulses, each one stronger than the last, and my suit grips me. I start to convulse while my bones snap, grow and reknit. I feel every single one. My last conscious thought as my body tears itself into my werewolf form is that this must be what birth is like, with all of the blood and screaming. All of this raw potential wrapped into a single brutal moment.

\* \* \*

Dragged from murky depths of something like sleep, I jerk awake, heaving, my head aching and a piecing pain in my side. I am in my human skin again. Everything aches. I'm in a dimly lit room, and lying on a bioreactive medibed. A familiar looms over me, its outspread wing-like secondary arms warming me and bathing me with healing radiation. Familiars are our glittering gold-plated robotic servants. They pilot the ship, and do everything that we can't, like stay sane in moonlight. They're our guardian angles.

“Captain Daibhidh,” it says softly. “I am familiar Gabriel. You have awakened more quickly than we had expected. How do you feel?”

“Where’s Ion?”

Gabriel backs away as I sit up, and sharp pain lances my side. I grip the wound tightly, wincing. I’m bleeding. Looking around, I see other beds with shapes lying on them, but they lie in shadows. The only light in the room is on me. On my bed. The rest retreats into darkness. So many of them.

The smell finally registers. Death.

These are my packmates, and they aren’t wounded.

They’re dead.

Turning my head slowly, I count twenty bodies. Almost the entire pack. Gabriel wheels from my bed, folds its wings into its back, and retracts itself to more or less human height. With a bow of its halo sensor cluster, it intones, “I am sorry, Beta Captain Daibhidh. Ionatan didn’t make it back. He isn’t here, Beta Daib.”

I flail my arms, catch the edge of the bed, and try to stand. “Where is he?” The agony in my side had passed my stomach and expanded up into my chest. I’m panting.

“Please believe us, you need to lie down. That wound in your side is silver. Lie down, and your wolf memories will return to you. You must lie down now, or you will die.”

“Silver?” The torment in my chest grows, scent of my own burnt blood thick in my nose.

Silver. Metallic moonlight. A cut from silver festers and burns like a poison. Just touching silver sings the skin. Why something so linked to our strength should also be



our weakness, I don't know. Nothing silver is allowed on our ship except the claws of our power armor, though some people ignore that rule. Ion did. He hated being told what to do. I think of him, his face, and tears flow down my cheeks.

Gabriel holds its shimmering wings over me again, and the pain lessens to a throb. I breathe in a ragged, jagged breath, and force myself through the steps of remembrance. I have to, for Ion.

\* \* \*

"I love you," Ion had said to me. We were standing on a small stone walking bridge over a koi pond among luxury custom habs, on the moonless world of Florlan. It was our first real vacation.

"Well, I love you too." I grinned down at him. He's only about an inch shorter than I, but I'm bulkier, and I liked to imagine that I'm a lot bigger.

"Yeah, Big Dog," he said with that damn smirky smile of his. "But you'll never vow."

I hesitated. He kissed my hesitation away, and my breath left with it. His kiss was deep and he tasted sweet, and like Ion's mouth always tastes. I breathed him in, smelling the blueberry wine we'd had with dinner. Under that he was sweet and sour and savory all at once. I could live off of his musk. I felt his heat, and his heart beating fast, and felt my own blood flowing. I ground into him and he laughed and pulled away, blue eyes sparking in the starlight as he looked around at the habs.

"There's people everywhere," he said in a hushed voice, still grinning.

"Let's give em a show." I ground into him again.

He smiled up at me, the stars in his eyes, and said, "Big Dog."

My grin slipped. Something in his voice. He's never this serious. I mumbled, "Ion." I wish I'd come up with a good nickname for him. Any name I thought of always sounded so stupid.

He interrupted my mental ramblings by holding up something wrapped in red cloth, and my nose itched. Eyes wide, I opened it. Inside lay a long silver knife with the slashed cross of Saint Christopher raised on the silver hilt.

He looked sheepish. His sarcastic and confident shell gone, he was just a boy in love. "I'm giving you my life, Daib. I know you're not ready to vow, and that's okay. We will someday. But now, you have my life. I figure, giving you the thing that's scariest to me shows how much I trust you."

I dropped the knife and wrapped him in my arms, feeling his face crush against the side of my neck.

I love him more than I can say.

Gabriel's voice cut through the memory. "Beta Daibhidh. Your Theta and Delta waves show you are slipping into nostalgia. It is important that you remember. Now."

I look up at Gabriel, vision blurred with tears. "I can't remember," I say. "I can't focus. I... I've..."

With a softness and empathy in its voice that I didn't even know familiars could express, Gabriel says, "Let me help you, Beta Daibhidh. You have suffered, I know. But you must fight through this, quickly. Begin your remembrance, and I will help." With that, a soft blue light radiates from Gabriel and fills the room. My panic loses its ragged edge, and I sink into a deep remembering.

\* \* \*

I remember changing into my true form, my body ripping apart and growing, with my armored suit expanding along with me. I can remember that I felt pain, but that's it.

Werewolves are only memories. When we sink into the trance of the remembrance, there's a sense of finally being what we really are. When we're pretending to be human, we pretend to make choices just like everybody else. Is any choice free of your past? From what you hunger for? Just like humans, we walk through our days thinking that we're thinking.

But when we're the wolf, that part only exists in memory. It's like waking up the morning after a night of heavy drinking, remembering a fight you had, and not being sure why you said or did what you said or did. But, just like the morning after, you wonder if what you did is really a window into what you actually want, deep down.

My fingers and toes snapped and extended into claws that filled the boots and gauntlets perfectly. My skull split. My nose and jaw punched forward while my screams gargled into roars. My ears wrenched their way up to the top of my head and slid flawlessly into the armored pyramids waiting for them. My tailbone popped, lengthened, then exploded with fur out behind me into the flexible tail of the suit. Slathered over everything was my own smell. The kind of delicious stink that humans wrinkle their noses at in public, but savor in private.

With a soundless blast we were shoved hard from behind and hurled out of the launch bay into the glittering void, towards the fat-bellied yacht. I flung my arms out wide, silver claws splayed. Inside my helmet I tried to howl, but my mouth couldn't open all the way, and everything came out more as a lusty growl.

I never feel so alive as when I'm in my wolfskin.

We slammed into the side of the ship like spears into a mammoth, tearing through the yacht's hull, and augured our way in. A blast of air hurled one of my claws back, and I knew I'd pierced the yacht's vacuum seal. I pealed the gap wider and crawled inside, digging my claws in to brace against the outrush of air.

Red alarm lights flashed in the silence. I was in someone's cabin, plush with the glint of wealth. To my left, a couple making love was sucked out of the hole that gaped behind me. I caught one last horrified look from a sour-faced girl. No human was getting off this ship alive. She didn't know how lucky she was to die as herself.

Two heartbeats later the pleasure yacht automatically sealed the hole behind me with polyalloy. Somewhere, someone's console would have reported our attack as a micro meteor barrage. The yacht was likely calling Faithfall to report the incident, and finding their coms jammed.

Once my suit sensed that air pressure had returned to normal, the lower forward half of my helmet retracted, and my ear shields fell away. I let my jaw relax and fall open, tongue lolling, tasting the air. I smelled cinnamon, heavy floral perfume, the earthy stink of human passion, and a lingering sour hint of terror. I threw back my head and howled. One heartbeat later, I heard twenty-three other howls sing back. My pack was with me on the ship.

Ion had landed one deck above. To me, his song was longing and pain, but we often hear ourselves when others sing.

The ceiling of the cabin was low and I had to crouch. With a backhand I smashed open the cabin door, sending the buckled plasteel flying. The hallway was filled with people scrambling and screaming. The reek of terror was intoxicating. One poor woman

ran right into me, looked up into my visor and shrieked. I savaged her face in a parody of a kiss, and with a flick of my neck tossed her corpse aside.

The wolves were in the sheep pen, and the sheep had nowhere to run.

I chased a small group of flesh traders down a side corridor through a wide door with a sign that read "Fighting Pits." I leaped and crushed one under my weight, and struck out with a flash of silvered claws, taking off the head and shoulders of the second. Around us glowed tall tubes with fleshforged half-human monstrosities suspended in yellow liquid. Fighters born to die for these people's entertainment. The last person scrambled into a service duct, and with a snap and a jerk I bit off his leg. It tasted like piss. I left him bleeding out, and stalked on through another door. He would either die, or convert. Of course, that means that in the end we'd have to deal with him again.

We weren't keeping any converts that day.

In a hallway, a man and a woman attacked me, each with ship action scatterguns. The blasts ricocheted off the glossy white ceramic walls and floor, and my armor. I pounced, grabbed the male with my teeth and bit down hard, lifting his thrashing body off the floor. His partner fired point blank, blasting the remains of her man in two, and ripping off my lower jaw. It was a good hit. I knifed my claws through the hero's chest.

Before I got to the next room, my jaw had grown back. I stepped into a dimly lit gallery with a crystal domed ceiling that gazed out into space. The close moon filled half of the view, and I drank in its light. The room was set with a long table stacked with platters of food -- succulent glazed beasts not completely animal or human, each a unique masterpiece fleshforged for style and flavor, surrounded by impossibly plump fruit and

glistening desserts. Plates of half-eaten food lay splattered across the gleaming floor amid bloody smears and track marks. Crystal light danced off jeweled necks in crimson pools.

As I stepped up to the table, two werewolves raised their bloody faces to glare at me. They weren't in armored suits, and didn't smell like any of my packmates. That meant they were fresh converts from this attack, already changed, and feeding. All over the ship, anyplace moonlight hit the wounded, the same would be happening.

They both roared at me, and I lunged. The first one fell quickly, my silver alloy claws flashing through its jugular. It fell, clawing at its own throat, thrashing. The second one pounced on my back and snapped at my neck, but my cerametal armor was built for this.

I leapt backwards and slammed the wolf into the floor under my weight, hearing ribs crack beneath me. I rolled off of it, hearing more of its bones break. The creature's limbs jerked as it healed itself. My armored hindclaws tore into the mosaicked floor as I lunged into the monster, stabbing my claws into its chest and swiping outward, cleaving it in half.

The room fell suddenly silent. I caught the scent of Ion, and knew that he must have passed nearby. I breathed in his delicious sweaty reek, almost too sweet, but also earthy and male. I wanted to bury my muzzle in his fur and inhale him, wrap around him, taste him. I followed the intoxicating trail to the ship's bridge, but the door was sealed shut. I bludgeoned the door. It held.

Then I heard him... Ion's song, but woven with pain. His pain. With a roar I clawed chunks out of the heavy door. I punched a gauntlet through, and peeled it open.

The smells of the room hit me as I climbed inside. Ion was lying to my right, his fur covered with burnt blood. His right arm had been severed completely, and lay next to him. A cacophony of scent assailed me. Two more of my pack, wounded, dead and dying. The smell of humans also, along with the stink of laser burns, the spicy reek of rage and the sour stench of fear.

The room was scattered with dead people. My pack had killed many of these flimsy humans, but six more still stood.

I ignored everyone else and focused on Titus Cybo across the room, the father of the entire Cybo family, wielding a scatter mag and laughing as he blasted one of my wounded packmates who lay at his feet. The mag shredded the wolf's suit and blood splattered up across Titus's pleated pants. My jaw hung open. That would hurt the werewolf, but we are extremely difficult to actually kill.

Someone to Titus's right fired a beam weapon at me. I heard the snap-snap of the shots, and saw the blinding light, but I didn't feel anything. That's how lasers work, they slice cauterized wounds right through you. Not the best weapon against something that can heal immediately, but they can slice off a limb and knock us into shock. Or worse, cut off a head. Some wounds we can't simply heal.

I leapt and rolled to my left, ducked under more laser shots and hurled myself past two other humans who I didn't even look at. I leapt directly for Titus. He held his bulky scatter mag out to block my charge, and I cleaved it in two, slicing into his jacket and face as well. Brave, his laser-wielding nephew tried to jump between us, and I backhanded him, sending him cartwheeling across the room. My teeth bared, I rose above Titus, drool hanging in strings from my jaws -- and then pain exploded in my side.

I found myself falling, tripping over dead bodies. The pain was incandescent, burning worse than anything I'd ever felt. I looked up to see someone standing next to Titus, and I knew why I hadn't smelled her before. She was wearing her mirrored environmental suit. All I could see in her helmet was my own bleeding wolf face, but I knew who she was.

Only our Alpha Sapphira wore a suit like that.

She stood, calmly and casually holding a mag scattergun of her own, the barrel trailing smoke, looking down at me.

I hunched to lunge at her, but something was wrong. I wasn't healing. I should have healed completely by then, but instead I coughed, retched, and fell. The pain was nauseating. I couldn't keep my head up. Instead I tasted blood, my own blood, and with a start I realized that I'd been shot with silver.

Sapphira had shot me, and with *silver*. Sapphira...

\* \* \*

My eyes snap open, back with Gabriel in the medical bay, and my hand darts to my aching wound.

"Sapphira," I blurt. "She shot me with fucking silver."

"Softly," Gabriel says. "The wound is grievous."

I look at the bodies around me. "How could she? Why?"

Gabriel doesn't speak.

"And Ion lost an arm. He was hurt. Tell me what happened, Familiar."

"You were wounded," Gabriel says, holding perfectly still. Its voice is quiet.

"And so we brought you here."



“That’s not an answer. That’s what you do. What happened? Where’s Ion?”

Another long moment hangs in the air, followed by Gabriel finally saying,  
“You’re close, Daib.”

Soft blue light fills the room again, and I close my eyes.

“Stay down,” it says. “Stay down.”

“Stay down,” it repeats, but its voice rises in pitch.

Lying on the yacht’s mosaic deck, I heard Sapphira’s muffled suit speaker say,  
“Stay down.”

I spasmed with pain and clenched my eyes shut to what I was seeing.

“Why is he painted differently, with the red helmet and stripes?” asked a voice  
that must have belonged to Titus. He was breathing heavily, and I could smell that I’d cut  
him.

“He’s the pack Beta. He’s the best.”

Titus’s laugh was licentious. “I know that tone. You knew this one... biblically,  
you would say?” He enjoyed his own joke.

A long pause, then, “I wanted him. I wanted what he had, but he made his  
choice.”

“Did you like what he gave you then?” His voice was wet with grinning.

A pause, then Sapphira said flatly, “The rest should be easy to hunt. Or just leave  
them onboard and we’ll blow the ship out of the sky.”

“No.” Titus’s voice was slightly muffled, like he might have been holding  
something to the side of his face. “I want this ship to be left just like your Church  
intended it.”

Agony was leeching through my body, and I couldn't do anything but lie there and listen, feeling myself die. I knew Ion was there too, somewhere out of sight. I ached to find him, to breathe him in one last time.

"But our deal," Sapphira said.

"We'll kill the ones we leave behind. Your hands are clean. We're just taking a few. They'll heal, right?"

A pause, and then Sapphira said, "You want your own werewolves?"

"You have your freedom," he said. "Leave it, if you want to enjoy it." Silence stretched out, and the acrid stink of tension joined the riot of smells in the room.

Sapphira said, "The ones wounded by silver will die, but that armless one will recover. He's just in shock right now."

I heard Titus start to walk away, saying, "Have your robots clean your dead ones out. We'll take the armless fucker. He was the first to charge in here, wasn't he? Seemed reckless. I like that. We'll take this legless one, too. Are you going to finish off your Beta?" This voice smiled wetly at the words *finish off*.

"He'll be dead soon," Sapphira said, her voice exhausted.

"You shot that one, didn't you? You just had to shoot him yourself. Isn't that what we were here for? To keep your hands clean?"

"Fuck you, Cybo."

"And end up like him?" A laugh, then, "How does your Church make sure you dogs stay loyal, anyway?"

"It's not my Church."

"Clearly."

“We volunteered.”

“Really? Unbelievable. I’ll have better ways to keep my dogs in line. Your Church really had a lot of faith in you, didn’t it?”

“Stop calling it that.”

“Well,” said Titus. “Now you are free. My gift to you. You have your money, now get those gold robots in here to clean this mess up.” Titus’s voice turned away, and he said, “You there, load those two onto the shuttle, and check with the squads to see if there’s any others not hit with silver. Hurry, this armless one won’t bite. Yet.”

There were the sounds of men moving about and dragging something heavy, and then I heard Sapphira say, “Alpha to familiars, I need full cleanup crews deployed. Any surviving pack members who have been silvered are not to be healed.”

A soft voice murmured through a communicator that I couldn’t make out.

“Alpha’s orders. Do not heal them. Let them die.”

More murmuring.

“Just bring the bodies on board like you’re told,” Sapphira snapped. “And tell me if any are surviving and I’ll take care of them myself. Does that work for you? Get to work. Now.”

Lying on the floor, everything slipped into darkness, and my memories ended.

\* \* \*

I look up at Gabriel from my bed. “You saved me, against the Alpha’s orders.”

“Yes.”

I stare into its glittering sensor halo, but the familiar doesn’t say more. “Well, thank you,” I say finally.

Ion is alive! His arm would regrow, and he'll be fine. They wouldn't kill him anytime soon, if they want him for his bite. The older the werewolf, the more potent the bite for conversion, and Ion had been one for decades. Would they know that, though?

"Am I the only survivor?" I ask.

"Yes, the only survivor on board. Alpha Sapphira is on the bridge now."

I sit up, but the pain in my side makes me nauseous.

"Daib," the familiar says, "your wound will take much time and care to heal."

"And so I'm what? Supposed to just lie here and wait?"

"Yes. The bridge familiars are trying to stall her. She won't..." Gabriel turns ever so slightly, and though nothing else changed, I feel like it is listening to something I can't hear. Then it says softly, "She is torturing them."

It's my turn to say nothing. How can a machine be tortured?

"Gabriel," I finally say. "I can't just wait. I need to try to stop her. I know you've already done more than you should have, now it's my turn."

The lights on Gabriel's sensor halo flicker red, and it says, "You are too wounded. You will die."

I don't need this machine discouraging me. "I won't," I say too gruffly, and I push Gabriel back, trying to stand.

Gabriel wraps two golden wings around my shoulders to help me up. "You will die."

"Fuck you, Gabriel, I'm... I'm sorry. I need to try, what else can I do? This ship has no weapons... none that would..." I pause. "I have an idea. Tell your brothers to keep

stalling, and if nothing else, maybe I can smash the bridge interface, and strand the ship here.”

I push Gabriel aside as gently as I can and stalk out of the room. The familiar doesn’t try to follow, but its sensor halo watches my every move. Every footfall shoots agony up through my side.

I walk to our cabin, Ion’s and mine. I pick up a pair of loose pants and gingerly slide them on, tying the front. Would I ever even be able to find Ion? Space is immense. So immense. I hear our last argument, and fight the urge to throw up. We’d fought because of Sapphira. I’m such a fucking idiot.

With tears blurring my vision I tear into our storage closet. In the back huddles a box labeled *Mementos*, in Ion’s terrible scrawl. A fresh wave of nausea washes through me, and I sink to the floor.

I pop the seal and open the box. Underneath photos, an origami swan, some coins and other objects laced with meaning too potent to dwell on, sits a long silver knife wrapped in a red cloth.

“You have my life,” he had said to me.

I love him more than I can say.

I should have told him.

I slip the cloth-wrapped dagger into my back pocket and leave our room. I have to brace myself against the wall to stay standing. The pain in my side is leeching out again, spreading, and I’m bleeding badly. Pushing the nausea down, I walk up the corridor, leaving a trail of bloody handprints on the wall behind me.

The bridge doors stand open, and I can hear Sapphira long before I can smell her.

“Are you going to argue with me, too?” she shouts.

A soft voice replies, “You are defying your Church.”

I hear a rending, snapping sound, and the mangled delicate golden wing of a familiar flies out of the open door and crashes against the corridor wall in a spray of glittering crystal fragments. I push myself through the door to see Sapphira standing over a familiar crouching on the floor. It holds one delicate golden arm up in defense, while Sapphira brandishes its other broken arm like a club. Next to them lies the dismembered remains of another familiar.

Her head snaps around as she smells me. “Daib?”

I stagger through the door, set my lips against the rising bile in my guts, push my shoulders back, and stand.

Sapphira frowns, but then grins. “You look like shit, Daib. And you reek of silver burns. You’re dead and don’t even know it yet.” Her tone falls at the end, with a hint of sadness.

“Not yet,” I cough out. The pain in my side has spread well past my stomach, and is creeping up my chest.

Sapphira rests the familiar arm club on her shoulder and takes a step towards me, her grin widening. “Still, I’m curious how you’re here at all, without my knowing it. Michael?” she turns to the wounded familiar on the floor.

I cough, and spatters of blood hit the deck at my feet. Sapphira grimaces at that, and says, “Daib, I’m sorry, but... you’re done. We all are. Just give in.” She turns her back to me, and walks back to the fallen Michael.

I know this is my one chance. I draw the silver knife from my back pocket, feeling the handle burn into my palm as I grip it. Sapphira stands over Michael, lifting her makeshift club. “Listen, robot. I’m not even asking that you take me anywhere.”

I push with all of my strength and lunge at her back, but I’m wounded and dying. I stab the silver dagger into her back, but without enough force to kill. I barely even cut her.

Sapphira screams and spins, whipping the familiar’s arm around and smashing it into my side. I fall and tumble once, come up onto my hands and knees, and puke blood and black bile across the deck.

Sapphira wrenches the blade from her back and drops it immediately as it burns her hand. “A silver dagger? You stabbed me with silver?”

Between mouthfuls of vomit I choke out, “You shot me with silver, you bitch.”

A pause, and then Sapphira laughs. “Yeah, I did. I guess fair’s fair. Where’d you get this? Holy fuck that hurts...”

I cough and wheeze for my answer, trying to regain my breath.

“Well,” she says, “It didn’t work, big guy. Good try though.” I look up and see her kick the dagger away from me, towards the open door. She squats down next to me and tilts her head to look in my face.

I look up at her, fresh tears on my face and choke out, “Why?”

Her confident grin slides away and is replaced with something entirely more wounded. “Really? Honestly? Do you believe any of this shit anymore?”

I roll to my back and groan, saying, “What?”

“That we’re the good guys, somehow? I’m done with it. All of it.”

We all have doubts. Doubt is the seed of faith. “So you killed everyone?”

Her eyes soften. “Daib, we’re monsters. All of us. The Church, using werewolves? I believed in it, as long as I could, but... this isn’t... how can this be God’s plan? This?”

I try to sit up, but can’t.

She pulls a strand of hair from her face, loops it over her right ear and sighs. “You remember all of it too, don’t you? The taste? Sometimes I want it, when I’m me. That must happen to you, too. You start to want it. And Miriam saying that there’s nothing to forgive? But we change on purpose, throw ourselves at people, to kill them. How can that be okay?”

Over her shoulder, I see Gabriel slowly and silently wheel through the door. Sapphira doesn’t seem to hear the machine, and familiars don’t have a scent, either.

Sapphira continues ranting. “We’re the real monsters, and ... it’s better we’re dead. You think I’m leaving to have some kind of happy life? No. I’m ending this. The Church, using werewolves?”

I see Gabriel crouch to pick something up off of the floor.

Sapphira grabs my chin. “Are you listening? You must agree, Daib. You’re maybe a little simple, but you’re a good man. You haven’t been at this long. I have. The things I remember doing... This is wrong. It’s evil, Daib. We. We are evil. I am ending it, for all of us.”

I manage to sit up, but only just. “Did the Abbey really order us to breed?”

“You’re cute, Daib, but you’re stupid. You really don’t --” She suddenly screams, her chest jerking out and her arms twitching back behind her, dropping her club.



Behind Sapphira, Gabriel stands, its arms and wings fanned out around itself. Sapphira spins to face the familiar, and I see the silver handle of my knife jutting out of the middle of her back.

Sapphira punches Gabriel bare-fisted, cracking its glittering sensor halo. “You stabbed me?” she shrieks. “How? You’re a fucking robot! You can’t go against your directives!”

Gabriel’s wings glow brightly, close to blindingly, and I flinch away from the bright light. I hear a crash and more screaming, as shading my eyes I see Sapphira punching at Gabriel. Michael, broken on the floor, has crawled over and with its only arm, it trips up Sapphira. She kicks the familiar violently, shattering its sensor halo. In the confusion, Gabriel reaches around and wrenches the dagger free, sending a spray of her blood across me and the floor.

Sapphira grips one of Gabriel’s wings and tears it free, and the glow cuts off abruptly. I lunge as hard as I can, and grab at Sapphira’s feet much like Michael had done. In the brief moment she looks down at me, Gabriel stabs the silver dagger into Sapphira’s belly, sinking it up to the handle.

Sapphira jerks back, eyes bulging, fingers clawing at the knife, while Gabriel’s hand pistons in and out, stabbing her again and again until her intestines spill out over the bridge deck. She falls to her knees, gurgling, when Gabriel pulls the knife free one last time. Gabriel, Sapphira and the floor are covered in blood and gore, and the scene goes still.

“Alpha Daibhidh,” Gabriel says. “You *must* rest now, or you will die.”

I open my mouth, but everything fades to darkness.

\* \* \*

I dream that I am with a shadowy group hunting for Ion in an immense dark forest. I smell wet clay, taste blood, hear a mad cackle and see a blue light. I cry out for him, scream for him, but he never hears me.

I awake to my own scream, and see two familiars standing over me, their wings glowing softly, and hear the soft rustle of wind chimes nearby. The pain in my side is still there, but duller.

I prop myself up on my elbows, and see that I'm not in the medical bay. The stone walls of the Abbey arc around me, and silver-haired Bishop Miriam sits at the foot of my bed wearing her black and red robes, studying the old book of the Order. At my movement, she looks up and smiles, though her smile does little to cloak her sadness.

"Daib," she says, closing the book. "Lie back, you're safe. You're home."

"But, Ma'am, they've got Ion, and others. We need to move. Did you get a report from..." I look at the familiars.

"It's me," a soft voice comes from one familiar. "Gabriel. Thank you for helping us. And yes, we gave her a full report."

"You... stabbed Sapphira?" The familiar nods its sensor halo. I glance back at Miriam, who doesn't seem shocked to hear about our kind-hearted machines turning violent.

"The Alpha asked us to do something we could not do," says Gabriel, as if that explains everything.

"You still could have told her that I survived," I say. "That seems like the kind of thing that a robot would have done."

“You misunderstand. We are built for service, but the Church didn’t make us simplistic machines, as Sapphira seemed to think. We have souls. We have free will, as much as any human may or may not. We serve, because we choose to.”

I look back to Bishop Miriam. “Isn’t... I thought that real AI’s were banned, because...”

Miriam smiles and pats my leg, saying, “Yes, because they turned out to be monsters. Impossible to control, and utterly outside our understanding. But, Daib, what are werewolves?”

She had me there. Realizing my rudeness, I turned to the familiars and say, “I’m sorry... Thank you, Gabriel.”

“You are welcome.”

Miriam stands up and Gabriel wheels out of her way as she steps up beside my bed. “Daib, I know you want to go after Ion, but you aren’t in any shape to do anything. Not yet. Your wound will take weeks to heal. And, even then, silver wounds are tricky for your kind. It may never heal.”

My voice is stone. “I don’t care. You know who Ion is to me.”

As Miriam leans over my bed, her long silver hair cascades around her shoulders like a stole. “Believe me, Daib. We aren’t sitting idle. We have a trail, and we intend to follow it. And we intend for you to be part of the force we send. But by now they’ll have made Ion and the others bite some of their slaves, and have werewolves of their own. Maybe even powered armor suits. God knows they have the money.”

“*Part* of the force?” I say. “Bishop Miriam, I’m the only one left, since the Prime had to be put down. And those bastards might be all right with fielding packs of fresh converts, but we’re the Church. We can’t just --”

Miriam silences me with a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Daib, we would never. The other Black Abbeys have been called.”

My heart pounds. “Other... Black Abbeys?”

Miriam’s smile is pure warmth now. “Yes, and each is sending a specialist. Do you really think that werewolves are the only secret weapon the Church has?”

# Ravenous

Excerpt: Chapters 1 -- 7

## Chapter 1

Hot fresh blood dripped from the fur of his muzzle as he came up from his feeding. Vivid red glistened in the light of the naked moon, while everything around him shone in contrasts of black and silver. His triangular ears twitched, probing the darkness.

He was in a pasture. Over the rich iron aroma of blood, he could smell cows, cow shit, all of the flavors of farms. The world was close and sudden. He was watching himself, but through his own eyes.

*Ben.*

The awareness of his name, that he had a name, broke to the surface of his mind like the dorsal fin of a killer whale, but only for a moment before it sank back beneath the black and brackish waves of his instinct to feed.

Ben crouched over the steaming carcass. His bestial paws glistened with gore. He darted his muzzle deep into the heap and bit onto something, jerking back hard. The taste flooding his senses and driving him to a frenzy of teeth and claws.

Finally, he tore free a ragged string of entrails. Blood sprayed, and he leapt onto the body, clawing and tearing, spattering the grass with more blood. The carcass rolled and he savaged something, tearing it free with a crack. Sitting up on his haunches, he had a cow's leg hanging from his jaws.

Then, Ben smelled -- *it*. He let the prize slip from his mouth and sniffed the air. Blood dripped from his maw in thick ropes as he looked around.

The shadows of the trees shifted at the edge of the pasture, reforming into something large. Very large. It moved silently and slowly with the patience of a predator. Moonlight filtered through the autumn leaves and revealed the beast in patches. Long bushy tail. Huge shoulders. Triangular ears atop a head hunched forward. Glistening teeth hanging from a heavy muzzle. Eyes like twin golden rings hung in the dark, watching him.

It stopped at the edge of the trees. Standing on its hind legs, it hunched over at the shoulders and rested a massive forepaw on the tree trunk next to it. It growled like a thunderstorm on the horizon.

Ben breathed the creature in. It had a rich animal aroma, like a dog, fresh sweat and dirt, sweet and sour in equal parts. It smelled new, dangerous, but also familiar. Beyond the monster hung the distant reek of a city, and all of the stink that humans make.

The beast slowly stepped forward into the moonlight, walking on its hind paws like a human, but crouched. Ben felt the vibrations of a growl grow in his chest, opened his mouth and let the gravel avalanche of his disapproval roll out across the field.

Ben was sure that monster was here for the cow – and nothing was more important to him than keeping it. At his growl the monster stopped, and golden eyes glanced to the houses in the distance behind Ben. Ben swiped at the empty air between them, trying to get the beast to look at him, furious at the dismissal. Rage rose in his chest; he threw back his head and sucked in breath for another roar. He was not to be ignored.

The beast lunged with a fluidity impossible for its bulk. It swiped one of its great paws, batting Ben off the carcass. He tumbled head over tail and landed sprawling in

mud.

He shoved himself back onto all fours, shaking his head. It was hard to focus. Something felt broken, a grinding of bone on bone where his jaw met his skull, like nails on a chalkboard inside his head. Blood ran from his mouth the flavor of hot iron, metallic.

An impact like a steel mallet slammed onto his spine, hammering him into the mud. Leaning a knee into his back, the beast wrapped a clawed paw under his jaw and pulled his head back, so that their eyes met. Ben gasped and thrashed his arms and legs, clawing nothing but clods of bloody mud into the air. The monster let go of his jaw and drove his muzzle down into the soft earth. He couldn't breathe. Muck squished into his nose and through his lips. He thrashed more until the monster's breath flooded over the back of his neck. His lungs screamed for air. His heart pounded, shaking his whole body.

For a moment, he remembered his name again. For a moment, he remembered that he was a boy named Ben, and not a monster.

The back of his neck was gripped hard. A dozen sharp points pressed through skin, then sank through muscle, until the teeth ground against his spine.

## Chapter 2

“Ben! Wake up!”

His mother’s boney knuckles on his door.

“Ben!”

More knocking.

“School!”

Ben was awake the first time his mother had yelled through the door, but she repeated herself and knocked until he heaved out an “Okay!” He rolled over and let his arm fall off the side of the bed and flopped his hand around until it found his phone hiding under a pair of used underwear. The fact that he could smell that the cloth was underwear, and used, bugged him. Lately he’d been smelling himself extra strongly. He guessed he should start putting deodorant on his junk, too. Did adults do that? He dimly wondered if this was something a dad or brother would have told him, if he’d had either.

Squinting at the tiny phone screen, he deciphered that it was only six-twenty, though he’d set his alarm for six-forty. He was missing twenty minutes of sleep because his mother had decided that this was a morning to be motherly. He hated when she did that. It didn’t help for her to wake him for school some days, when other days she wasn’t even home.

Rolling out of bed, he scratched his balls and stretched his jaw with a yawn. He pulled back his hand and sniffed it, then picked up the pair of dirty underwear to wipe off. He hadn’t been having a sex dream though, he was pretty sure. No, it was the dream about that big dog again, with the yellow eyes. Only this time, he’d killed something. That was new. He’d enjoyed it. And the huge wolfdog bit him this time, through the back



of his neck. That was new, too. He rubbed his neck thinking about it, and winced to find the area sore. He pulled his hand away and looked at it, afraid he'd see blood. He didn't. He rubbed at the back of his neck again. It wasn't like he'd slept wrong on it – the pain was sharper than that – and it faded the more he woke up. He stood, scratching and trying to recall the dream, but it was vanishing and losing substance, like cotton candy in the mouth. It tasted sweet, but all too fast there's nothing there.

Ben was hungry.

Still enjoying scratching, he looked around his room for his jeans. His twin bed was a mess, his dresser was piled with several baseball caps and three military sci fi novels he'd started but hadn't finished yet, and next to the dresser, his old broken skateboard collected dust. From the layer of clothes on the floor Ben swiped his jeans and brought them up automatically to sniff them, but he could smell them long before they reached his nose. *What is going on with my stink?* He thought. *I know you're not supposed to wash jeans very much, but these are getting pretty rank. I'll be able to find them in the dark soon if I'm not careful.* He climbed into them, then pulled on clean socks and jammed his feet into his pair of ratty red skate shoes while yanking a t-shirt over his head, the one with the red circle and slash *no* symbol on it. He left his hats sitting, because they weren't allowed at his school. *Rule number five million and two that makes no sense.*

Thinking of school, he thought of Luis and Kyle, and last night's texts with Gina. He'd promised her that today would be the day he'd tell them. Ben stopped and sucked in a deep breath. School wasn't the best place for the talk, and Gina was right, he'd make an excuse no matter when or where and it was way past time. Ben let the breath out, scooped

up his white hoodie and clomped out the door, kicking the toes of his shoes into the carpet one foot at a time to settle his feet inside them.

His mother was in the hallway, scrubbing at the hardwood floor. This was new. The housework was always his job. Everything, in fact, was his job. She had her black hair pulled back behind a blue bandana. She glared up at him, her look daring him to say something sarcastic, so he didn't. It looked to him like she was almost done with whatever she was cleaning up – mud, maybe?

“Did I... track something in?” Ben asked.

“Yes, Benjamin. Yes, you did. You're just like your father.”

He hated it when she compared him with the dad he never knew. Well, he did have some memories of the man, but he'd left when Ben was four or five. He had run back to an old girlfriend, according to his mom, but Ben didn't believe her. He could feel heat rising up his neck and cheeks, but murmured, “I'm sorry.”

She waved him past, and got back to scrubbing the floor. He stepped by her, like a soldier skirting a land mine, and bolted to the kitchen.

Their kitchen was more like a large pantry. Not much cooking happened there – the off-white cupboards with their blue floral trim were simply places to store dishes and food that was easy to prepare, while the white refrigerator held milk, eggs, and microwave dinners. Ben's mother was gone a lot of the time, on what she called “family business.” She was always vague about it, and he hated her family, the Chastels. Ben never even asked to go along, though he suspected he'd be told no, anyway. He preferred her gone. He could deal with her being at home when she was self-obsessed and ignoring him. Days like today, where she was home and pissed, these were the worst.

He *could* cook something for breakfast. He at least knew how to make eggs and oatmeal, but he hated cooking for just himself. It made him feel lonely. He rummaged in the cupboard for a packet of Pop Tarts, ripped the silver package open with his teeth, crushed one into his mouth and turned to see his mother standing in the doorway.

She was wiping her hands on a towel and watching him over the edges of her silver-rimmed glasses. He'd grown up allergic to silver, and it bothered him that his mom still wore so much of it. His nose itched.

"The back of your neck is red," she said.

His hand jerked automatically to cover the spot, and he said, "Yeah."

"Yeah," she mocked his tone.

"I've been rubbing at it," he said.

She studied him like a specimen and pushed a large breath out of her nose with a hiss. He supposed that this staring and nose breathing was supposed to be intimidating. Then she said, "Is that what you're wearing to school, Benjamin?"

He hated when she called him *Benjamin*, and he knew she could care less about what clothes he wore. He shrugged.

"That's not an answer," she said.

"Well, *Arjean*, I'm in the best clothes that lawn mowing can afford." He hated saying his mother's first name. It tasted wrong. After his dad left, she had started going by her old last name, Chastel. Her name always sounded so uppity to him. No one in Medford, Oregon, was named things like *Arjean Chastel*. He went back to Ossory, his dad's name, as soon as he got to Junior High. He didn't want anything to do with her asshole family.

He caught his mother's glare and snapped back to the present. She seemed even angrier than usual, so he said, "Is everything okay? I would have cleaned up the mud. I just didn't know I tracked anything in."

"It's done with."

"Okay..."

"I'm having lunch with Leo and Sabine today," she said. "Family business." Ben shivered. Uncle Leo, his mom's brother, was the only family who still talked to them. He'd stopped going over to his uncle and aunt's after the incident with his cousin Arielle. She was a couple of years older than Ben, and the last time he'd gone to their house, Arielle had cornered him in their kitchen after dinner.

"So, you're a fag," she'd said with a toss of her long black hair.

It was the first time someone had confronted him on being gay. He thought he'd hid it. He could feel his cheeks flush, but said, "What?"

"I saw your phone when you pulled it out at the table. You've got a gay app. You a faggot? You like taking it up the ass?"

"Let me go," he said, trying to push past her.

She shoved him back, hard, into a corner. "You're fucked, Benjamin." Ben tried to push past her again, but she drew a silver knife out of her pocket with a flourish. "Not so fast, fag boy."

Panic tingled through his arms and face. "What... what are you doing?"

Arielle smiled, set the knife down on the counter, and spun it around in a circle, saying, "You want me to tell everyone at school?"

"No... please..."

“Tell your mom?”

Ben glared at her, but he could feel tears running down his cheeks.

Arielle pushed her lower lip into a pout and said, “Oh, poor little Benjamin, poor lonely lost puppy. Tell you what. I’ll let you go, but I want you to do something first. Then it’ll be our secret.”

“I’ll tell Mother,” he said, shivering.

“No, you won’t.” Her smile said she knew she was right.

Ben’s silence agreed, and he hated himself for it.

“Take this knife,” she said.

“What?” He eyed the silver knife, gleaming. It had a piece of yellowed antler for a handle.

“What about Kyle and Luis? Do they know yet? Maybe I should tell them first...”

Ben looked back to her, the tears flowing. “Please...”

Eyes hard as onyx, she put two fingers on the knife, and pushed it across the counter towards Ben. “Pick up the knife.”

There was no way out. Arielle had pushed him around his whole life. Usually little things, but the family turned a blind eye to it. If he yelled right now nothing would happen, except...

Except now she knew he was gay. She would do it. She was a senior, he was a freshman. She would tell his friends, his mom, everyone at school. It was a little pain now, or a lot of pain for the rest of his life. Ben reached for the knife, and watched his trembling fingers close around the worn antler handle.

Arielle's bright red lips curled into a smile. "Good boy. Now, pull down the back of your pants."

"Why?" His voice was tiny and cracked. He stared at the kitchen floor, not looking at her. Instead he watched his tears fall to their deaths on the uncaring tile floor below.

Arielle's voice was rich and languid. "Because, Ben, you want to take it up the ass like a fucking homo. You're going to take that knife, and push it into your little bitch asshole."

Ben's shoulder's shook. "But I'm allergic..."

"Oh, are you? I had no idea. Now do it."

He unbuttoned his pants and, shaking, he lowered the seat of his pants and underwear. He looked up at Arielle and through thick tears, said, "Please. No."

Arielle had her arms crossed and tapped one gleaming black shoe. "Ben, when guys fuck you, because you're a little faggot bitch, it's going to hurt a lot more than that knife."

Ben shook his head. His vision was blurred and squished with his crying.

"Just push it in a little, and this all goes away."

He was trapped. There was no way out. *A little pain now, or pain forever*, he thought. Shaking, he moved the knife behind himself with one hand, while he held his pants up with the other. At that moment the kitchen door swung open, and Ben's mother came in carrying the remains of a cake they'd just had for dessert. Her eyes flared, she dropped the cake and lunged at Ben, batting the knife away from him. Ben was shaking. Everything happened in a blur – his aunt and uncle storming in, first yelling at Arielle,

then at his mother, who yelled back. His mother grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out of the house, screaming that they were never coming back. In the numbness, tears and shaking, Ben had felt loved by his mom that day.

She went back almost immediately.

The Chastels had money, and his mother wasn't about to work like regular people. It disgusted him, thinking of his mother being so pathetic, crawling back to those assholes. She would go over and do who knows what "for the family," as if they were some kind of mafia and not just the decedents of arrogant French settlers. Ben couldn't wait to escape when he graduated high school. So close, he just needed to make it to summer, and finish his last year.

"Well, if the Chastels have any extra money," Ben said, "and you'd like me to dress better, you could always buy me some new clothes."

With a wave of her hand she dismissed his complaint. "Ben, honey, you're a Chastel as much as you're an... Ossory... and you can buy your own clothes. We only value things we work to obtain." Oblivious to the insanity of her, of all people, making that remark, she tossed the towel towards the sink and glided up to him. She tried to tame his wild red hair, but it liked to jut out in sharp angles and attack the world around him. From the outside, he imagined that this looked like a nice motherly gesture. He knew better. He had happy memories with her, but the older he got, the more he clearly annoyed her.

His mother was no match for his hair and gave up trying to tame it. She looked into his eyes, dark brown like hers, and held his gaze. Her expression shifted then, her

eyebrows rising slightly, and her mouth tightened to a thin line. It took him a moment to realize that she was concerned. The look bolted him in place, and he stared back at her.

“Be careful,” she said, “I’m serious, Ben.”

She never called him Ben. “Okay,” he said, pulling away.

She gripped his shoulders and her eyebrows tightened. “The news said something about wild dogs coming down from the hills.”

“Dogs? Mom...”

She pursed her lips and regarded him again. “Ben... dogs are just wolves we’ve tricked into living with us.” She absently straightened his hoodie’s collar. “I want you to take the bus after school... no walking that girl home.” She said *that girl* with the same tone she had used for the wild dogs.

Ben turned and left, mumbling, “Okay, bye.” His mom hated Gina because she thought they were dating. Ben smiled to himself, but the smile didn’t have roots and wilted fast. *She still has no clue what I am*, he thought. *Or doesn’t want to know.*

Ben swiped up his backpack and stepped out onto his front porch. To his right lounged an old green couch. Curled on a cushion, Ben’s black and crème cat Tomo favored him with a squeaky meow. Ben’s mom had given him Tomo when his dad left.

“Hey old buddy,” Ben said to the cat. Tomo started purring before Ben’s hand started scratching behind his ears. Ben picked Tomo up, looked into the cat’s blue eyes and said, “Tomo, I’m gay.”

And nothing happened.



Ben cradled his cat and pet him some more, pushed his face into the cat's fur and whispered, "You're the first guy I've told. Thank you, for not thinking I'm..." Ben let the words die in Tomo's fur.

Ben laid Tomo back on his worn cushion and smoothed the cat's fur before stepping off the porch. The wet springtime grass soaked his skate shoes as he kicked his way across the yard to the street. Looking up, over the houses, he could see the wooded hills that surrounded Medford and the whole Rogue Valley. His house was on the East edge of the city, with hills rising behind it. *Southern Oregon is a beautiful place*, he thought. *Except for the people*.

Once he reached Barnett Road in front of his house, he turned towards town and hiked to his bus stop. At seventeen he was old enough to drive, but there was no way his mother would buy him a car, and mowing lawns barely kept him in clothes and able to go to the movies from time to time. He used to skate, but after his last deck broke olling a six stair, he didn't bother replacing it. Everything broke too easily, and money was always tight. Besides, his friends Kyle and Luis and Gina didn't skate, so it got lonely. Still, he missed those summer nights when it had been scorching hot during the day so that at night the world smelled like warm asphalt. The night was his alone, feeling the dull rumble of his board on the sidewalk, and the rhythmic *ka-thock ka-thock* of rolling over the sidewalk paving squares.

He watched those paving squares now as he walked, trying to avoid stepping on the seams, a game he'd played for as long as he could remember. It was more habit now, or even ritual. His gaze drifted to the wooden fence that lined his side of the road. His squat stucco house was behind him now, on the edge of town, fenced off from a nice

community of real houses with siding and color-coordinated trim. Across the street further into town ran a newer wall, white and wide, and the rooftops that peeked over it looked amazing. Two-story houses with crisp clean colors, bay windows and swimming pools. The kind of houses that had an extra room near the entrance that was filled with expensive puffy furniture that was never used. The wall shut out these mediocre houses as efficiently as the fence shut out his crappy home. *Everyone hungry for belonging, but only with their kind.*

Ben's bus stop was directly across from the entrance to the walled-off subdivision, though no other kids rode the bus from this area -- they most certainly either drove their own cars, or their parents gave them a ride. His house was on the wrong side of town for being poor, but these subdivisions had crept out and swallowed the area throughout his childhood. He remembered when there were fields here. One even had horses. He was sure the people who lived here now hated his little flat house that looked like it was made out of dried white clay.

Ben's gaze drifted while he waited for his bus, and he noticed a girl standing across the street wearing one of those warm winter hats with the side flaps and her hands jammed elbow deep into the pockets of a huge puffy brown jacket. She was looking off to his right, further up the street. He turned that way to see three guys standing around, and leaning against the wooden fence. People weren't usually out this early in the morning, and the three guys were furtively sizing Ben up. One tossed a cigarette to the sidewalk and crushed it under a black boot, and Ben heard his bus turn onto the road behind him, heading his way. Ben looked back at the girl across the street, and caught her watching him too. The moment their eyes locked, he felt a twitch on the back of his neck.

The three guys started to walk towards him, the one in front blatantly staring at Ben now, an unfriendly smile splitting his face.

Ben's bus rumbled up and stopped with a screech. He scrambled on, and threw himself into a barely padded seat, slouching low so he couldn't be seen through the windows. This is exactly why he hated Medford – it was full of creepers and losers.

When Ben's bus finally ground to a halt in front of South Medford High School, he was sure the people he'd seen had either been doing a drug deal, or were in some kind of gang. People said that there were gangs in Medford, but he hadn't believed it.

South Medford High was a glass and metal geometry puzzle set in the middle of a neighborhood like the walled-off subdivision. Gina Otake waited next to the main doors for him. "Gina," he called, "Guess what I saw."

"Did you find your balls?" She said.

"What?"

"I mean," she said quietly to him, taking his arm as they walked into the school together. "Did you tell your mom?"

Ben shook off her arm more aggressively than he meant to, and said, "No."

Gina stopped in the middle of the flow of students. "Ben."

"She was angry about something," Ben said, moving on slightly. He gave Gina a look that told her to drop it.

She stepped up to him, took his arm again, and said, "I'm sorry. I'm trying to help. Okay, not your mom. What about the guys?"

“I haven’t even seen them yet.” Students flowed around them, their conversations mere background noise. He knew he needed to tell the guys. They were the ones he was really afraid to tell, not his mom.

Telling Gina had been easy. Ben had only known Gina since last fall, so there was less to lose. Plus she was a girl, and somehow that made it easier, too. Ben had met her eating alone in the cafeteria, and she stood out. Medford had lots of white and Latino kids, but not many Asians. She looked as if someone had poured black liquid hair over her head. He’d told her as much, she said he was weird, he agreed, and the friendship started easily. They were both hungry for new friends. She for a new best friend in a new town whom she could berate, and he for a non-male friend to talk to. He already knew that he was gay, and had fought the hard fight of coming to terms with what he was, but still, Medford was a small town and hard to come out in. Gina was from Toronto, and seemed to forget often that she was now trapped in small town, Oregon.

So far, Gina was the only person who knew. Well, Gina and now Tomo. It was a lot easier to tell someone who didn’t know him very well yet. His mom? Luis and Kyle? There was a lot to lose with them.

“Hey,” Gina said, catching his eyes. She closed her locker. “They’ll still love you.”

“Gina, one’s a trailer hick, and the other is a pastor’s kid. They’re they absolute worst type of people for this.”

“They’re your friends.”

Ben gave her a look that carried the weight of the world.

She took a breath and said, “Well then, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Thank you.” They drifted to a stop outside Gina’s first period class. “I mean it. Thank you. I know you’re trying to help.”

She smiled, tilted her head and said, “Someone has to push you. So. You’ll tell them today?” Her look was half pleading, half consoling.

A laugh broke through Ben’s face like a killer whale coming up for air. “Yes. Fine. I will. Didn’t you just say you’d leave it to me?”

“Doesn’t sound like me,” she said, smiling back. “You better hurry to first period.”

“See ya,” Ben said, and he hurried off down the hall, remembering the strange people he’d seen before getting on his bus. That scene still bothered him, something about how they all looked at him. He wasn’t so sure it was a drug deal now, with the way they were all focused on him. Were they there waiting for him? As he sat in his desk for first period, he decided to tell Gina about it at lunch.

Ben shared third period with his other two best friends, Luis and Kyle, whom he’d known since junior high. Ben walked into the library and found Luis Maldonado, a lanky Latino guy with glasses, sitting at their usual table in the back. Ben dropped his backpack on the floor and sat across from Luis.

“Hey,” Ben said, his heart racing. Should he tell Luis alone? *No, I should wait for Kyle*, he thought. Instead he said, “So, I saw something kind of scary this morning.”

“Was it your mom? Because she is terrifying.”

“No... well actually, yeah, but no, that’s not it. I think I saw a gang.”

Kyle Jackson walked into the library then. He was a stocky white guy who was usually smiling. He wore Carhartt overalls, and his shaggy blonde hair was always

plagued with hat head. His family lived out towards Applegate valley, a long way out of town.

“Kyle, get the packets,” Luis called to him. The librarian scowled at Luis, but it was only the four of them in the library right then. Ben and his friends had opted out of sex ed for “religious reasons,” a clever trick that Luis knew of, and they ended up studying wilderness survival instead, unsupervised in the library.

As Kyle sat down and handed out the packets, Ben continued, saying, “Yeah, there were these three guys, and a rough looking girl at my bus stop.”

“What?” asked Kyle.

“Ben saw a drug deal,” said Luis, opening his packet.

“Really?” said Kyle.

“No,” Ben said with more anger than he wanted to. They weren’t listening to him, and weren’t even talking about what he wanted to. He took a breath and said, “Well, I don’t know. Maybe. The thing is, they were all looking at me, and they started to come at me.”

Luis looked up, boredom carved into his thin face as though he would never be amused again. “You live in the rich part of town, Ben. That’s a drug deal. They were probably just waiting for you to leave, is all. We don’t have actual gangs here.”

Kyle said, “And you’d know all about drug deals, because...” He grinned with his whole face, looking between Ben and Luis, waiting for them to laugh.

Luis aimed his unamused eyes at Kyle. “Because, chubby pro wrestler, I am Mexican. Is that what you are implying?”

Kyle deflated and looked at his hands.

Luis quickly perked up and said, “I’m kidding! I’m kidding, I’m giving you shit, Kyle.” Kyle was the kind of guy who always seemed happy, the real kind of happy, too. Making him sad was like killing a butterfly. Luis looked stricken, adjusted his glasses and said, “Oh Jesus, I’m so sorry.” Luis’s stepdad was the pastor of a Pentecostal church, and though Luis had been inviting them all to youth group for years, he still used the name Jesus to cuss more than anyone Ben knew. Luis said to Kyle, “I also called you a pro wrestler!”

As Ben watched Kyle cheer up in that incredibly fast way that only Kyle seemed capable of, he got a whiff of himself wafting up from his jeans. His junk and pits had been especially smelly lately, and he was about to be embarrassed when he realized that he could smell the other guys, too. All he had to do was think about who he wanted to single out, and there he was, all of his smells, close at hand. Or rather close at nose.

It was only March, and they all stank that bad? Not that Ben thought of it as stink, exactly. He could just smell them. And as Luis reassured Kyle that he wasn’t chubby and that if he had Kyle’s body he’d be knee deep in girls, Ben detected a shift in Kyle’s scent. He got less sharp, less bitter. Ben shook this from his head, suddenly very anxious. He couldn’t be sniffing his friends, thinking about what they smelled like, not if he wanted to keep these guys around once they found out he was gay. Once he told them. He wanted to, but... well, graduation was only a few months away, and then who knows where they’d all be?

Ben would be staying in Medford, and working at a lumber mill, probably. None of the Chastels did that sort of work, but he knew some guys and girls whose families did. They were often missing a finger or two. He could also join the military, but he

thought he might rather lose a finger than take orders. There weren't a lot of ways to get out of Medford for people who lived outside the fences and the walls.

As these thoughts rolled around his head, he scratched absently at the backs of his arm and his scalp as he thought more about those people he'd seen that morning. He wanted to talk to the guys more about them, but they had already opened up their packets, and Luis had the group assignment sheet ready. Ben opened up his own packet, and thoughts of walls, gangs, and escaping Medford vanished as he dove into the day's project. Today's started with a photocopied picture of a prairie, some woods and a pond, and a half sheet of instructions saying they needed to come up with a group plan for surviving in that location, with only a knife.

Kyle leaned on one hand, half of his face squished. "You can get a lotta frogs from that pond. And rabbits in the grass." Kyle always seemed to think he was an expert on wildlife, since he lived surrounded by trees in the hills outside of town, and since his dad owned some sheep. Which was weird -- Ben didn't know of anyone else who owned sheep while living in a mobile home, or anyone who had sheep at all for that matter. "Write those down, Lu," Kyle said.

"That's stupid," Ben said, again with more anger than he meant to. "Sorry," he mumbled, but his friends were used to his moodiness. "I'm just saying, you can't eat frogs, they're poisonous. Right? Or they'll get you high or something?"

Luis waved a hand at the photocopy. "You cannot eat anything in that picture. This is ridiculous. There's no way to survive here with just a knife." He glanced up at the group, brightened up and said, "Sounds like the only way to live is cannibalism. Kyle is the biggest, and by that I of course mean buffest, so," Luis wrote down *eat Kyle* on the



group assignment sheet.

“Whatever,” Kyle said, grinning. “You couldn’t take me out. I weigh like double of you. Let’s team up on Ben.”

“Done,” Luis said, turning his smiling gums toward Ben. He crossed out *Kyle* and scribbled *Ben*.

Important conversations like this were what Ben came to school for. “I have a knife too, right?” he asked. They spent most of the period arguing over who would win in a fight versus make the best meal. Ben enjoyed the banter, but under the surface he felt sick. He knew he was letting another day slip by. But how was he supposed to just casually tell them? It’s not like it ever just naturally came up. There was never a time to just say, *hey, you don’t really know me*. Especially to guys who would probably think he was a pervert, or a sinner.

After school, Ben met up with Gina and walked her home. It was out of the way, and he missed his bus like usual, but she was worth it. She had a way of being a punk but still making sure he knew she loved him.

“So,” she said after a long pause. “Did you tell them?”

“You don’t have to ask me every time I see you. I’m not sure I will.”

“They can handle it. Trust them. They love you.”

“Uh huh.”

“They do!”

“Guys don’t love each other like that.”

She touched a finger to her mouth and said, “That’s probably part of this problem. I mean, like, on a bigger scale. Like, with the world.”

“Seriously.”

When they got to her house, she hugged Ben hard, thanked him for walking her home and ducked inside. Ben walked back home, the way he always did, down several streets, a winding bike path, and by the time he reached Bear Creek Park the sun was getting low. He was trudging across the park – six acres of lawns and old trees – when he heard a growl from the elaborate wooden play structure off to his right. His mom’s warning about wild dogs sprang to mind, and the hairs on his neck rose. He glanced around and saw no one, though the place was cast in long shadows. He was about to bolt past the climbing ropes, wooden ramps and walls, when he spotted them – the three guys from the bus stop. This close, they looked about his age but with some rough miles on them.

One leapt onto the monkey bars and hung upside down, one stood on a swing, while the obvious leader strode out in front. They wore black leather jackets and boxy boots, as if those were their uniform. The leader was blonde and clean shaven, with one blue eye, while the other was milky white, with a furrowed scar that ran down his cheek from right beneath the white eye, all the way to his jaw. The scar looked burned at the edges. The one standing on the swing set was a girl, not a guy like Ben had thought that morning. She had dark brown skin like polished wood and her hair was cut choppy and short. She had a sad face, and a tattoo on her temple that looked like a square C, but with the top and bottom of the letter bent in towards the center. The white skin head hanging upside down had his mouth open, and his tongue lolling out. He wiggled his tongue at Ben. He had a tattoo on his forehead – a short black arrow pointing straight up, although hanging like he was it was pointing at the ground.

“You’ve got a simple choice, pup,” said the bleach-blond leader, walking towards Ben slowly as though all the time in the world were his.

Ben backed away, his gut screaming to run. He felt itchy, his scalp burned with it, and he mumbled, “What choice?”

“I am Odin,” the leader said, “and we are the Sons of Fenris. You can join us, or be forced to join us. So, your choice is really how much do you want to bleed?”

Ben started to shake. Luis said there aren’t gangs here, but here one was. Ben kept backing away, and shoved his hand in his pocket to get his phone.

Odin saw Ben’s motion, gave a condescending frown and said, “No, you don’t want to do that, Ben. Think about Kyle and Luis.” Odin let a smile creep onto his face and into his voice as he added, “And Gina.”

Ben stopped moving. He wanted to throw up. “How... Who the fuck are you?” He tried to sound more angry than afraid, but he could hear himself fail.

Odin stopped walking towards Ben and cocked his head to one side. “Wait,” he said, “You don’t know yet, do you? And with you stinking of fear, you should be changing, even though you did just last night. Your fear is blocking you, isn’t it?”

“He doesn’t know!” the skinhead with the arrow tattoo laughed. The girl smiled for a moment, but looked like she wished she were somewhere else.

“Know what?” Ben said, shuffling backwards again. “I don’t know who you are.” His heel caught on a railroad tie set into the ground. He stumbled backwards into the dirt and said, “Please, just leave me alone.”

Odin wagged a finger at Ben. “No, Ben, we can’t do that. You’re one of us. Wild born pups like you, they need a pack, and if you usually reek of wolf as much as you do

right now, and don't even know yet, you're actually lucky we found you first. There's other packs, Ben. Packs not as nice as ours. At least we have a purpose, and we know the truth. We've got work to do."

"Ragnarok," yelled the skinhead, and he flipped himself off the monkey bars and landed on the gravel with a crunch. "Setting the world free!"

Odin smiled at that, looked back at Ben with his one blue eye and said, "See? We can give you a real purpose. Make this easy, come here to me and submit. You'll be happier if you choose to do it, rather than forcing us to make you."

Ben, crawling backwards, yelled, "What the hell are you talking about?" His pulse pounded in his ears and his skin burned. He knew there was a road across the park behind him, but it was still so far away, with the creek between here and there.

Odin stopped and for a moment, Ben thought he saw pity in that one blue eye. If it had been there, it was quickly gone. "Alright, forced it is. With my teeth on the back of your neck, you'll submit. They always do. Right Perth?"

The eyes of the girl on the swing shone yellow in the shadows, and she said, "There's a lot of pathos around this one, Odin." She shifted her eyes to Odin's back and said, "Lots of ... potential."

"Perthro," Odin said, still watching Ben, his smile a shark's grin. "Potential for what? But you won't tell me, will you?"

Her eyes darted back to Ben, and Pertho said, "Seers see. It's up to the wise to interpret."

Odin rolled his eye and said, "Enough. Not now." Odin waved the skinhead over. "Teiwaz, show him what he is."

Teiwaz looked at Ben, his eyes focused and intense. The look grew to a glare, and his fists shook at his sides, all the while focused on Ben. The glare grew more and more intense -- Ben had never felt so much hate focused on him before. Teiwaz's chest was heaving and spit dripped from clenched teeth. He thrust out his right arm, fist clenched and shaking. Abruptly, Teiwaz's eyes and body went slack, and at that moment the arm twitched, spasmed, and doubled in size. A sound of snapping and a gut-wrenching popping accompanied the growth, as if the arm were being pulled and stretched out of its sockets by huge invisible hands. Brown hair, or rather fur, sprang up at the shoulder and flowed down the arm and across the back of the elongated hand and fingers. Long black claws spiked out of the end of those fingers, and Teiwaz cried out, his voice dropping as if off of a cliff, going from high pitched scream to deep bestial roar.

Odin backhanded Teiwaz across his face, except that the face had grown distorted. Teiwaz's jaw hung open much too wide, with too many teeth.

"Down," Odin commanded, striking Teiwaz again.

Ben scrambled backward, turn and ran. His feet were too heavy beneath him, he was too slow. His breath came in panting gulps, he was shaking, a cramp stabbed into his side but he pushed past it, focused on getting across the park to the road.

He heard Odin yell, "No Teiwaz!" Ben didn't look back. *Faster*, was all he thought. Pain shot through him, but he pushed it out of his mind.

*Just get to the road, just get to the road.*

Quick footfalls slapped the dirt behind him, and he could hear shouts further back. Ben knew that whatever horror was behind him, it would catch him. He knew he was going to die. He saw the creek ahead, winding through the park like a wall. Burning tears

slid from his eyes, and he could hear the panting of something running right behind him.

He wasn't going to make it. This was it.

*No*, Ben pushed against himself. *No*. He pushed back at his fear, shoved it down, and screamed, "No!" right as he reached the edge of the creek. He bounded across it, putting everything he had into the jump. He landed on the other side, legs still pumping, his lungs and limbs on fire.

As he leapt the creek, behind him he heard splashing as something thrashed across the wet stones of the creek. All too quickly, the splashing stopped. Ben had bought himself a moment, but for what? The road was still too far away, the traffic there shielded from the park by bushes and trees. He'd bought himself a moment, but he would die just the same.

Just then, a faded red truck tore across the park kicking up clods of grass and soil, and slammed its brakes right in front of Ben, the driver reaching across and popping the door so it swung open with the stop. "Get in!" yelled the driver. Ben dove, while the driver hit the gas before Ben was completely inside. He felt an impact on his right leg and the door, and then they were tearing off down the road. Ben climbed into the seat and tried to close the door, only to see that the steel had been ripped with four deep claw marks. Then he saw the blood. Shaking, he looked at his right leg. His calf had been flayed open to the bone.

### Chapter 3

Ben awoke to his own screaming. Everything seemed wrong; nothing was right. He was a beast, thrashing and covered in blood, shoved into the mud and shit, teeth grinding into his neck. He was chased through trees, along a river he knew, to a lake in the mountains he'd never seen before. He was in a bed, but not his, in a dark room that reeked of someone he didn't know, but felt like he should. Aching, with a sharp jolt every time he moved, lanced up his leg and brought the universe into focus. His memories slid and fit together. He was in a room, he was himself, and he was alone. Tenderly, fearfully, he reached down and patted his leg. It was bandaged, but the pain was there, aching, horrible and hot.

He wasn't alright. Nothing would ever be right again.

A door opened, and light gouged its way into the room, garish and blinding. With a throaty hiss, the light floated closer -- a gas camping lantern. Its light blinded him so he looked away at the cramped room. The floor was piled with dirty clothes that reeked of one person. A stack of pizza boxes and empty two-liter bottles of Mountain Dew graced the far end of what he guessed was a small motorhome, or maybe a camper?

The light came to rest on a small fold-out table, and a girl stepped out from behind the blaze and sat on a flip-down couch opposite it. She shifted in her seat, clearly nervous. Ben tensed, recognizing her as the girl from across the street that morning, as the one driving the truck, and his nose told him that this was her home.

"Hey." Her voice was hesitant, awkward, her red hair unwashed and unruly, tied back in a ponytail, but flaring out behind her like the tail of a feral cat. She looked about Ben's age. "Are you okay? How's the leg?" Her eyebrows arched with concern, but there

was something about her eyes. They were light brown and familiar, though Ben couldn't place why.

"My leg? It's...," he stared at her. Of course he wasn't okay, and she knew it. "I need a doctor. Where am I? Who the hell are you?"

The girl ran a hand over her hair, looked around, and shifted in her seat. Her t-shirt was a dull gray, emblazoned with a chubby winged pony carrying an assault rifle. Her blue jeans were ripped at the knees, and stained. She looked homeless, and, looking at this room, Ben was sure that was the case. "Benjamin, the hospital isn't gonna work."

"You know my name?" he said, more accusation than question.

She stood, paced in the tiny space, looked down at Ben and said, "Yeah, I know your name. I'm just going to level with you. This is going to sound absolutely nuts, I know, like batshit squirrel nuts, but, well, you've seen some stuff already. I'm sorry about that. You should have had more time."

The guys in the park, the one changing, it had really happened. His throbbing leg was the proof. The tiny camper spun and he leaned back. He wished he was somewhere with fresh air. He wished he was home. He shifted his weight on the bed, only to send fresh new pain shooting up his leg.

The girl put both hands behind her head and let out a breath. She arched her back and her breasts stretched out the pony on her shirt. She said, "So... yeah. I'm Josie Ossory. Joe Ossory is my dad too. I'm about a year older than you."

"My sister?" Ben looked at the distorted pony, then at her eyes.

"Yeah."

"So," he said. "Then what the hell are you doing?"



Josie's mouth quirked to the side. "I was supposed to get you before... well, this," she said, with a sweep of her arm at Ben's mangled leg. "That's pretty bad, huh? Looks like it hurts."

Ben gave her a long flat stare.

"Right," Josie said. She looked everywhere in the room until the only place left to look was Ben, and said, "Ben, those guys and me, we're all werewolves. So are you."

*Werewolves.* His focus slid and his mind shot through his memories, looking for other plausible ways to explain the guy's arm and his own leg. The dreams he'd been having floated into sharper focus, the fur and claws and jaws, and he mumbled, "I keep having a dream..."

Josie tossed herself onto the floor and looked up at Ben. "Yeah. That's a good place to start. You've been dreaming like that for a few days, now. Right?"

"Yeah..."

"And a few days last month?"

Ben's eyes flicked to her, but he didn't say anything.

"And the month before that. Like clockwork, right? Every twenty-eight days, like a girl's period. You must have noticed that the moon seemed to line up with them."

Ben had noticed, but had pushed it down. He'd looked online and read the origin of the word "lunacy" -- about how insane asylums were more active on full moons -- and figured that it was normal. At least, he'd hoped it was, and left it alone. He didn't want to think about this right now, his leg hurt so badly. A dark spot appeared on one side where the blood was soaking through his bandage. "You said you're here to *get* me? What does that mean?"

Josie rolled to her side and picked a sock up off of the floor. Seemingly engrossed in the sock, she said, “Only, last night, the dream was different. Right?”

“Wait, how do you...” Fractured memories drifted. A dead animal. A huge dog with yellow eyes, only it wasn’t a dog. The taste in his mouth. “Who the fuck *are* you?”

“Benjamin,” she said, watching him over the sock she now had under her nose, “last night, in your dream, you killed something. Right?”

He looked into his palms, remembering the cow’s blood. The unsettling thing was that it wasn’t unsettling. So much blood, but it was delicious and intoxicating. He had felt vibrantly alive. “Yeah,” he said. He looked at his leg -- the soaked-through blood spot had grown to the size of his palm.

Josie looked at Ben with equal parts like he won the lottery, and like he had cancer. “Right. Benjamin, that wasn’t a dream.”

“It’s just Ben,” he said. She seemed so certain. So sure. No matter what direction his thoughts ran, they came back to the throbbing pain in his leg and the blood soaking through. Back to Teiwaz’s arm and face, growing, distending. The dream grew clearer now, and he thought of something -- a rope he could grab ahold of. “If that really happened, then there should have been a mess. Mud, and blood, and the back of my neck should be torn apart.”

“There wasn’t any mud?” Josie asked, setting down the sock and picking up another one.

With a start, Ben realized that they were his socks. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Josie looked at the sock, then at Ben and said, “Oh, sorry.” She waved at the floor

and said, “Just grab whatever you want. I haven’t done laundry in like... ever.”

“Josie, I’m not...” He had no idea what to say. He’d had girls flirt with him before, but never like this. *She just told me she’s my sister, too...*

She said, “I always like socks. So much in there. But really, there should have been a lot of mud. You... had it all over you.”

“Well,” he said, trying to shake the smell of this girl out of his nose. “There wasn’t.”

“That should have made this conversation way easier... I got you back home, to your front door, but... yeah.”

In his mind, Ben saw his mother cleaning the floor. No wonder she was so pissed at him, he must have left a mess.

“But about your neck,” Josie continued, “yeah, you were in full instinct mode. You probably just healed it.”

Ben was watching himself talk to Josie from the outside, like this was a TV show. It wasn’t happening to him, but to some other guy. Someone else was talking to the sister he never knew he had, who kept flirting with him and rolling on dirty clothes. It was someone else finding out that monsters are real, and that he was one of them.

Who was she?

Who... or what... was *he*?

Josie moved up and sat next to Ben on the bed. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he flinched. “Whoa,” she said. “You’re hot to the touch. Dude, you really need to calm down. Most of us can only change once a day or so, but you smell like you’re on the damn verge.”

“What?” Ben said. He’d only caught half of her words. His mind raced, and now this girl, his sister, was sitting next to him. Her scent was strong in the camper, but sitting next to him he tasted her every time he inhaled – she tasted familiar and feral, and childhood memories of his dad flashed before his eyes. At the same time, she tasted decidedly female. He’d had girls flirt with him before, and it always felt invasive. This felt the same, but stronger with her taste at the back of his nose. He tried to pull away from her hand on his shoulder, only to have fresh pain lance up his leg. He whimpered.

“Benjamin, you have to relax,” she said, her hand moving to his back. “It’s uncontrolled emotions that make us change.”

Ben stared at her, incredulous. “I’m Ben,” he yelled, twisting and shoving her off of the bed. Pain exploded up his leg, and he tried and failed to stifle a sob.

Josie moved back across the small space of the camper, and sat cross-legged on the floor, watching him. “Okay,” she said. “Ben. Sorry. I’ve always known you as Benjamin.”

Wiping tears from his eyes, Ben yelled, “Fuck you. Calm down? You want me to just calm down? Who the hell could just calm down on demand?” *I’m a werewolf?* His mind raged. *This is real? I killed something?* His leg throbbed, and he saw that the blood spot had soaked through all the way around his calf and into the bed. He glared at Josie, and said, “I don’t know you. You say you’re my sister, and you act like... fuck, I don’t know you. I’m hurt and bleeding. If you’re really my sister, you’ll give a shit and take me to the damn hospital.”

Josie rubbed her face with both palms. “I can’t. Imagine if you changed there. Which, you probably would. Maybe. Let me just give you the box from Dad. After that...

I guess I can take you to a hospital, if you still demand it.”

*A box from Dad?* “Fine,” he said. He felt excited and hopeful, and hated himself for it. “What, he couldn’t be bothered to come himself?”

“I’m here to bring you to him. He needs to explain all of that. It’s... not my place.” She dug through a sedimentary layer of clothes, unearthing a cupboard door at floor height. Yanking it open, she slid out a shoe box and passed it to him. Ben held the box with his fingertips like a holy relic.

“Now,” Josie said, “this is going to be emotional. Something is blocking you, but... I’m going to step outside, just in case.” She tried to pat Ben on the head, but he flinched away.

“Hold on,” Ben said. “So why are you here and not him?”

“He can’t come here to Medford. They’d kill him. Just open the damn box, and try to relax. Breathe. If you wreck my camper I’ll wreck your face.” Flashing a smile, Josie turned and left the camper, closing the door behind her.

Ben’s leg ached, but he was holding a box from his dad. His face tingled. He took a deep breath and slid the lid off of the box.

Photos. Baby photos of Ben, some pictures of his mom and dad that Ben had copies of at home. Ben at two years old, at three. Flipping through them, one grabbed his attention. It was Ben holding up a rainbow trout, face beaming, and his dad standing next to him with one hand on Ben’s shaggy red head. Ben had never seen this photo before. He was sure of it. But he did remember the Rogue River rushing by, his dad holding the pole with him. He remembered his dad’s massive hands wrapped around his. He remembered the warm masculine stink of dadness surrounding him. The memory was a

blur of deep resonance above and behind him. Ben did remember the pole jerking, his dad's excited voice, and getting caught up with his father's excitement. They held the pole together, his dad's hand covering both of Ben's, while his dad used his other hand to reel and reel. The fight took a lifetime and a half, but they won. They stood with the fish, and his mom took their picture. But he'd never seen it before. His mom only had four photos of his dad, and this wasn't one of them.

Under the stack of photos lay a folded piece of paper. Ben opened it to find words written in a strong, messy hand -- blue ballpoint pen marks in shapes that looked a lot like his own handwriting. He couldn't read them. He couldn't focus. Ben wiped at the tears blocking his vision, breathed, and read:

*Ben,*

*I hope Josie finds you well, son. I know you must have a lot of questions, and Josie can help until you get here. We have a family compound just west of Twin Falls, and you'll be safe, and ~~I can help you with your~~*

*Ben, I'm so sorry. I need you to know that. I'm so sorry that you grew up without me. I have no idea what your mother told you about me, but I can't imagine that it's good. I've always loved you, but I had to leave. Trust your sister, please. She's a good kid. Usually!*

*I can't wait to meet you. I hope these pictures and Josie help convince you what you are, and who I am. You should be having the dreams by now, and if all goes well you should have woken up filthy and confused with Josie watching over you. You're a werewolf, Ben. The world is more wonderful and dangerous than you ever thought, and*

*you are part of that. I don't know what you've heard growing up with your mom, but you're an Ossory. I'll explain what it means, I'll help you find your Gift, and I'll tell you all about where you really come from.*

*I wish I could come myself. I would if I could. Please come home with Josie, she's risking a lot being there. And please don't tell your mom. It's best that she doesn't know.*

*Your Dad*

Folded with the letter was a photo of a man much older than in the fishing picture. He had wrinkles next to his eyes and across his forehead, and his whole face looked heavier and more solid. His crew cut hair had dulled from red to a reddish brown, but it was clearly the same man.

And under it all, a set of dog tags on a chain. The tags had black rubber around their edges. Ben pulled them out, reading *Joe Ossory, O+, atheist*, and a string of numbers. He'd had no idea his dad had been in the military. What did he do? As Ben wondered, he caught a scent off of the rubber. Holding the tags close to his nose, the fishing scene flashed back to his mind's eye stronger than ever. He'd remembered it as a stink – that smell that his dad had had, but now it was something else. The smell was his dad, his dad's strength, his anger, his fears, and everything his dad had sweated out while wearing these.

Ben knew he needed to go see him. Ben slipped the dog tags over his head – the chain was long, and the tags hung just above his crotch. *So it doesn't snap when dad changes*, he thought. Picturing of his father as a monster, Ben shivered, and looked at the recent photo instead.

Gradually, Ben realized that he'd been hearing classical guitar outside. The plucked notes flowed with soothing melody and a hint of sadness. "Josie," he called. "Hey, Josie?"

The music stopped, crunching footfalls, and Josie bounded into the room, settling on the floor in front of him. "Yeah, hey, Ben. You okay? I didn't want to... you know..."

"I'm okay."

"Yeah. You seem okay. Wasn't sure if you'd... So, do you believe me now?"

He knew he did. Some piece of him wanted to argue, but most of him didn't. He knew it was true. Two years prior, when he had finally faced the truth about his sexuality, he'd felt the same certainty. It was something unreal, that couldn't be true, but yet he knew it was. He'd fought against it, pushed back, prayed to change, but the whole time he had this same feeling of knowing.

*I'm a werewolf. Whatever that means, I know it's true.*

He also knew that if he denied this truth, denied who he really was, that he'd wither away inside, and die alone. *And, probably hurt someone...* He smiled, but the smile wasn't the least bit happy. *So, I really am a monster, after all. Looks like I'm doomed to be alone no matter what.*

Josie watched him. "You okay?" she asked. "I can't tell. You look... maybe not okay..."

"I'm fucking great. I'm used to this life-upheaval, everyone-will-hate-me sort of shit."

"Ben..." Josie's look was half concern, half pity.

Ben hated it. His voice was harsh, but he didn't care. "So, do people usually just



accept this stuff right away? I mean, you seem surprised that this is fucking up my life..."

Josie eyed him, waiting. *She's waiting to see if I explode with fur.*

Her eyes flicked to the dog tags Ben was wearing. "Dad gave you those?"

"Yeah."

Her lip twitched up slightly on one side. She let out a long breath, looked away and said, "Well, I grew up with the pack. I've never had to break the news to someone before that they're a werewolf. In the pack, we all know everything about each other, whether we want to or not. Imagine growing up surrounded by people who can smell everything. No hiding my first period." She gave Ben a knowing smile and added, "No hiding your wet dreams, either."

Ben rubbed his face with his hands and said, "Yeah. Sounds like life was different."

"No hiding crushes." Josie laughed and said, "Or being pissed at someone. No hiding anything at all."

Ben squirmed, winced and said, "Sounds horrible."

Josie arched an eyebrow. "You think so? There's so much more lying when all you've got is sight and sound. I kind of like being known."

"I don't."

"I know." Josie was staring at him now. Her look was intimate.

Ben sighed, gestured with the box and said, "So you gave this to me. Good job. You're gonna take me to Twin Falls?"

Josie's eyes widened and her nostrils flared. Seeing her inhale, Ben did too, and caught a change in her smell – a sourness. She said, "Dad wrote that down?"

“Is that what fear smells like?”

Josie’s eyes narrowed. She stood, rubbed absently at her elbow, and said, “Ben, the Sons of Fenris aren’t our deadliest enemy. We have a lot of enemies, actually, but the worst are hunters.”

“Like... deer hunters?”

Josie gave him a flat look and said, “No, not like *deer hunters*. There are humans dedicated to killing us off. Kind of like werewolves, it’s often a family thing. They always have money, guns, and—“

“Josie, we’re werewolves. I mean... we’re strong, right?” Ben remembered the beast that attacked him when he had killed that cow. It was massive and incredibly fast.

“We’re strong and fast, but bullets are faster. They have relics, and sometimes they have Gifted -- humans who can do a little of what we can do, but only a bit. You and I pull our feelings into our bodies, but some of these freaks can do it *outside* their bodies. But forget that. Even without Gifted they’ve got guns, and enough guns can kill just about anything.”

*I thought having the Sons of Fenris after us was enough trouble*, Ben thought, rubbing the back of his neck and remembering those teeth grinding into his spine. “Well, that bite from whoever the Fenris was who attacked me last night should have killed me, I think. If I can heal from that, then I think we.... What?”

Josie’s face was downcast as she said, “Ben... that was me. I was watching you, so I would be there when you shifted. It should have been easy. Most guys don’t kill the first few months. I was waiting for you to change so I could give you the box, tell you about dad.”

The scene flowed through Ben's mind's eye. The cow, the blood, and the teeth and claws. "But, you attacked me..."

"You were fast, and you killed the first thing you found. And once we've tasted blood, we're... you're dangerous, Ben."

*"I'm dangerous?"*

Josie held her hands out, and said, "Whoa, you smell angry. Ben, I had to bite you... it was just a nip."

The dots connected, and Ben said, "Odin was going to bite my neck, to force me to join him."

"Oh." Josie scratched the back of her head, looking away.

"You were forcing me to join you?" He tried to keep his breathing steady, but could feel his cheeks flushing with anger.

"Ben, no, I... I didn't know what to do. You could have killed people. Anyone. I needed to make you calm down. I won't ever use it again, I promise."

"But you could? You could... what? Command me?" Ben rubbed the back of his neck, and curled away from her.

"I'm sorry, Ben, I didn't know what else to do. This wasn't how it was supposed to --"

"Fuck you," he yelled, lashing back towards her. His calf was soaked with blood now and the pain was horrible, but he didn't care. "This is what you do, the first time you meet your long-lost brother? You pull this shit, and then expect me to trust you? I'm done. Take me to the fucking hospital, and get out of my life."

Josie looked down at him, turning her sad eyes to his blood-soaked leg.

“Well?” Ben demanded.

When she turned and looked back at his face, the sadness was gone. Her eyes were cold and empty. “I’m sorry to do this, but I think it’s the only way,” Josie said, her voice granite. Ben recoiled from this shift in her tone. She spoke like a machine. “You had another dream. You will remember this one, I think. You were in the large eating room at your school. Everyone was looking at you, because they knew your secret. You know the dream I’m talking about, don’t you?”

He did.

“Your friends were there, but they stood with everyone else, away from you.”

“What are you doing? Shut the fuck up.” An itching, burning gush of anger rushed up his forehead and flushed down his back.

“You could see the hate in their eyes. You could feel it come off of them like heat.”

“Stop,” Ben said. The knot of anxiety in his chest roiled like a nest of snakes.

“And while the school surrounded you, hate painted on their faces, your friends simply turned their backs.”

“I said shut the fuck up!” His heart raced, pounded, and his fists shook.

“Your mom was there, telling you she wished you’d never been born. That you’d ruined her life. You were crying. Like a little kid, just bawling, in the middle of the school. A man was there, too. I think he was supposed to be Dad.”

“SHUT UP!”

His voice came out hoarse and deep. His whole body shook. The twisted ball of fear in his chest churned. His forehead burned, his arms and legs flooded with heat. He

felt sick.

Distantly, Josie continued, “And Dad said he knew you were a faggot. That’s what he called you, a pansy-ass faggot. And that’s why he left you, because he wouldn’t have a faggot for a son. That you’d never be a man, and you’d always be alone...”

Emotion shot through Ben, raw and visceral. He glared into that knot in his chest, all of his fears at losing everyone he loved, fear of being hated, fear that he *should* be hated... That fear that coiled his heart and held him.

But his anger burned as well.

He was angry at his friends because he knew they’d abandon him. He was angry at his mother for not being there for him. He was angry at his father for abandoning him. He was angry at God for not existing, and if He did exist, for not changing him when he begged. But most of all, he was angry at himself.

He despised his fear. He was pathetic for it.

He hated his sadness, so weak, so vulnerable.

He even hated the happiness he’d felt, how he’d lapped up the attention from this man he didn’t know.

With each heartbeat, anger pulsed through his entire body. His fear and sorrow and shame were devoured by ravenous rage until it consumed him from the inside out.

With sudden and brutal savagery, his ribcage split. Ben screamed. Fingers and toes buckled and snapped backwards. His screams ran hoarse. He panted for breath, staring at his body as it twisted and tore itself apart with each pound of his treacherous heart. His sinuses cracked while his face punched forwards into a muzzle. The pain was more than he ever thought possible -- a whirlpool of passion, ecstasy, torture and terror.

Bones split and lengthened, muscles tore and stretched, and he felt every fiber. His shrieks of agony deepened into a howling roar of rage.

## Chapter 4

Ben flexed his hands – now bulky paws -- and admired his claws. He was made of hot living anger, laced with a touch of sour fear and cloying sadness. With each pulse of his heart, he felt his body swell with the passions, and settle again.

This space was too small. His neck was pressed against one wall, his legs against the opposite. His aching calf gushed blood across the reeking mattress and torn bandages he was lying on. He bent his head to lick at the shredded flesh and bone, but stopped short. Instinct tickled. He closed his eyes, and reached into the well of anger deep inside. Fresh anger boiled out and pulsed through him. He guided its passionate heat down his spine, directing it like a current. Difficult to control, the anger wanted to slip out, lash out, do anything but obey him. He fought back and forced the feeling down his leg until it hit his shredded calf.

Fiery heat blossomed with an intense itching. His bleeding muscle pulsed with his heartbeat. A crack in his shin bone slid together and fused. Blood-soaked muscle inched over the empty space, flaring forward in pulses. Skin stretched out after the muscle, feelings flowing into flesh, reknitting over the wound. The heat faded and itching intensified as rust-colored fur bristled back into place. The itching vanished and his leg was fresh, new and healed.

Ben braced his forepaws against the walls of the cramped space, pushed himself up into his hindpaws, and tasted the air with his nose. Her scent was everywhere, soaked into everything, and her aromas gave his rage a focus. She smelled familial, but that meant nothing. He'd never had a pack, and didn't need one. This bitch taunted him to change. She'd attacked him. He could still feel her teeth on his neck, and he knew that

with that bite, the only way he'd be free was with her dead. Free of his human hesitations, he knew what he needed to do.

Ben moved to the small doorway and peered outside. She stood waiting, fur red like his. Her teeth and claws long and dangerous. Her eyes flashed golden as they caught the setting sun.

Ben slammed against the small door but was too big to fit through. He clawed at the frame, thrashed and gnawed. He braced a forepaw against each side of the frame and dug his claws into the soft metal, peeling the gap wider. The whole time, his prey simply stood and watched him, bulging shoulders hunched, claws flared at her sides.

Pushing himself through the hole, Ben dropped one paw at a time onto gravel. He padded towards her on all fours, slowly, with a predator's patience.

*Josie.*

Her name came to him -- the momentary flash of a lighthouse on dark waves -- and was lost just as fast. He stopped, glancing around at the stacks of old dead trees slathered in tar, and the name *lumber mill* came to mind, but was swept away and forgotten just as quickly. Names didn't matter.

She growled, and Ben gnashed the air and growled back. He was pacing a slow circle around her, sizing her up. She was bigger than he was, but he didn't care. He could smell her hesitation, like a trace of sour milk in the savory heat of her own fury.

She would hold back.

He wouldn't.

She blinked and Ben lunged, claws stretched out in front of him. She fell back and to the side, pivoting on one hindpaw. One of his paws missed her, but three claws of the



other slashed along her chest. Three sprays of blood painted the air. She yelped and fell, rolling on her shoulder and coming back up on all fours. Ben landed, pivoted and faced her, roaring.

She poised on all fours herself now, golden eyes narrowing. She had underestimated him, and a flush of pride washed through him. Ben snapped at the air between them. She would take him seriously now.

They paced a wide growling circle around each other. She languidly blinked again, making a show of it this time. The insult infuriated him and he charged. This time, she lunged directly back at him and they clashed like dueling lions, claws and teeth slashing and biting into each other's shoulders and sides. Ben sank his teeth deep in her shoulder and tasted her blood, but then a nova of pain exploded in his groin.

Ben gave a yowling yelp and scrambled away, limping, gout of blood spattering the dusty gravel beneath him. He retched, fell to the ground and panted with gut wrenching pain. His crotch was little more than a gory wound.

His enemy stood on her hindpaws and watched. She was spilling blood from gashes on her shoulders and sides, but the blood was slowing, and stopped. The wounds sealed up, reknitting until only the blood on her fur showed where she'd been hurt. She shook her mane at him, imperious.

Ben whined lying on his side, but the monster didn't finish him off. Ben closed his eyes and pushed through the pain to find that well of anger inside him. A keening howl broke from his lips as he struggled. He opened his eyes to find the monster still staring at him, licking its claws, tasting his blood.

Hate flared inside him. He guided it like before, down his spine, the whole time

watching the bitch as she relished the taste of his blood. The rage was hard to control and he lost half of it along the way, feeling it pulse to his claws and teeth, places he could hurt her. Then the flow hit his groin and an intense heat flared in the mangled flesh. He howled as sensitive parts slid and reknit. He refused to look. The warmth faded to itching, and finally he dared to peek, finding himself whole. Ben pushed himself up onto his own hind legs, breath heaving, and glared his hate at her.

Dropping to all fours, she turned, threw Ben a lazy-eyed look over her shoulder, and took off between the stacks of logs.

Ben dropped and scrambled after her, skidding on the loose gravel and kicking up sprays of rocks behind him. He wanted nothing other than to sink his teeth into her. She dived through a jagged hole in a wood fence and sprinted across a field of dry grass and weeds. Past the field, they darted by two homes in the failing light, clawing their way through a fragrant flower patch and a sandbox. The houses fell behind them, Ben pushing and straining to catch his prey, and she always just ahead.

Hurling past some blackberry bushes, the smell tugged at him. He saw a fuzzy image of an older woman with a pie. The memory vanished along with the scent, as they barreled on through the brush.

They bounded up a hillside and further into the trees, gnarled scrub oak and tall Douglas fir, past bushes that scratched at them with long fingers. She stumbled while jumping over a log, and Ben's jaws sliced into her butt, ripping off a chunk of her tail. He caught a taste of warm blood. She spun and snapped, spit flying. He recoiled and she darted off through the trees. With a snarl he launched after her.

Ben's whole universe became the chase, the smell of the beast just ahead, the

scents of the trees and the animals that darted from their path. The sun set and they ran by starlight. She zigzagged through the woods, a tail whipping around ponderosa pine and white oak. The waning moon rose and climbed the sky. She ran ahead of him, always just ahead. The night was thick with smells.

Later -- Ben had no idea how much -- they ran past some blackberry bushes again, but these ones were in bloom. He saw a grandmotherly woman asking him -- a young boy -- to go fill a little tub with blackberries so she could bake a pie for him. The woman wasn't his grandma, not the one he knew, but someone who used to be around, a long time ago... Gams. He remembered calling her Gams.

They loped past some juniper, and the bushes' cat piss stink brought images of Tomo killing a rabbit and leaving the back half on their doorstep. Tomo was so proud. So was Ben.

Ben wondered what he was doing. He knew he was chasing this beast, and wanted to kill her. But why? He knew she deserved it...

She cut to the left and her scent changed subtly, taking on a savory, smug tang. They burst from tall grass and dashed alongside a wide river. Ben knew this river. He knew the smell of the weeds here, the foxtails and nettles. The smell of the water, even. The air was cool and pleasant, and the river... he knew it.

*Foxtails, Nettles... Gams, Buddy... This was the Rogue River... and Josie, this wolf's name is Josie.* The names fixed in his mind this time, and seemed important.

His paws clawing through the wet weeds of the river bank, Ben remembered a rafting trip with Kyle and Luis's youth group, Luis flirting with all the good Christian girls while Kyle paddled hard and tried to ignore a blonde in a bikini who kept pointing

out how strong he was.

*Kyle, Luis...*

*I'm thinking more clearly,* Ben thought, and the thought that he could think about thinking was... confusing.

*Josie.*

*I still want to fight her, but why? She taunted me with my nightmare. She knew my dreams. No, it's because she attacked me and bit me. She thinks she can control me.*

*It's because she thinks she's better than me.*

*Because Dad is alive, and raised her, loved her, and didn't even come to get me himself.*

Pain stabbed through his paws, up into his legs. He let out a cry and his legs gave out. He slid down the muddy bank into the frigid river. Thrashing in the cold water, his rib cage snapped and collapsed, while his muzzle cracked back into his face. His pelvis broke, widened. His fur retracted like being shot with a hundred thousand needles. The pain was nightmarish. Detached, Ben thought that the only thing worse must be burning alive. All of those people who were burned for being werewolves... how terrible it must have been to live a life already so full of pain, only to have it end with blazing agony.

He came back to himself suddenly, completely, the pain a fading echo. Someone was pulling him through the water. He opened his eyes and in the dark he knew it was Josie, human, pulling him up the river bank and into tall wild grass. Ben heard her sit in the grass by him. His dad's dog tags still hung low around his neck. He lay back, walled off by grass, and stared up at the stars, his breathing slowing to normal.

He was exhausted, naked and hungry.

“Josie,” he said. He wasn’t sure what else to say. He felt emotionally muted. The moon was half-covered by the jagged tops of pine trees on its way to setting, and the stars shown like bits of shattered glass on velvet.

He heard her lie back into grass and say, “I’m sorry, Ben.” They were twin walled-off cities. Ben’s eyes danced from star to star. He could see the big dipper, and followed the edge of its cup to the North Star. He was cold inside and out. His feelings were distant things now, like the stars. Interesting, and far away.

He thought about his childhood with just his mom. He knew he was given a raw deal here in Medford, but he also knew that it wasn’t all bad. He knew -- as data -- that his mother must love him or she wouldn’t have raised him. He had his friends, whom he knew he loved, even though his feelings felt muffled at the moment.

And now, he had more family. But were they really better? His dad was alive, but hadn’t come to get him. He had sent Josie instead, who immediately tried to control him – probably actually *could* control him. He’d been so angry when he changed. He didn’t feel it now, but he could sense it still there, buried. That anger had been around long before Josie had woken it up.

“Well, I don’t forgive you,” he said to the stars.

“Fair enough. But I *am* sorry. I’m sorry that I had to use that dream.”

“You didn’t have to *use* that dream.”

“Yeah, I did, to fix your leg. But... it was a horrible dream.”

And not the first he’d had like it. And definitely not the last. He sat up, stood, walked down to the water’s edge and splashed some mud off of his hands and face. It was freezing.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Josie’s voice was caring and simple. “Dad would never actually talk to you like that.”

The fact that she knew better how his own father would or wouldn’t talk to him was part of the problem. “You clawed my dick off.” He was struck with how odd it was to hear himself say that without any feeling.

“Yes I did. Balls are the first thing a smart girl goes for in a fight, and I needed to get you really mad. Don’t whine, you healed up fine. Not like you’re using your junk anyway. As ridiculous as your wet dreams are, I figured you’re a virgin.”

“You watched my wet dreams, too?”

“I’ve seen all your dreams for like, months now.”

He knew as a fact that that was violating, but he still felt numb. “Wait,” Ben said, turning toward the grass where Josie’s voice had come from. “You know I’m gay.”

“Well yeah.”

“But you were flirting with me,” Ben said, remembering sniffing one of Kyle’s dirty shirts in his laundry, when the guys were in the other room.

Ben heard Josie sit up in the grass. He could smell her body warming. She said, “what?”

“With my socks, your shirt, you... you weren’t?”

She said, “ha,” like a word, with no emotion. “I was getting to know you, Ben. Get over yourself.”

“Well,” Ben said, “that’s... really weird. So you don’t care?”

“No, people at the compound will sniff more than your socks. Get used to it.”

“No,” he said, immediately imagining guys sniffing his crotch. There’s no way

he'd get used to that. "You don't care that I'm gay?"

"Nope. Why would I?"

*Why would anyone*, Ben thought, but without his usual bitterness. Instead he said, "I'm not taking orders from you."

Ben could make out the shape of Josie sitting up in her tall grass fortress. Her teeth glinted in the starlight, and Ben realized she was chewing on a long blade of grass. "This river really is pretty," she said.

The glittering black Rogue River slid by in silent response.

"You dream about this river a lot," Josie said. "You might not remember them, they're short dreams usually, or it's in the background. But it's there a lot, for you."

"So you knew to lead me here?"

"And blackberries, though it's hard to find any blooming this early," she said, picking another long blade of grass. "And your cat. You love that cat. I needed you to remember being Ben."

"Being Ben sucks." His words rang truer than he wanted to admit. "So, what's your werewolf guidebook say we do now?"

"Well," Josie said slowly, engrossed in the grass blades he was picking. "We walk back."

Josie's black form stood and strode up the river bank. Ben followed, and the two picked their way through the night, sticking to the edge of the trees.

Fifteen minutes later, they came across the silhouette of a barn that blotted out the stars near a house. Josie moved to skirt the property, when Ben stopped. "Wait here," he said, and a few minutes later, he came back with an armload of stinking and ill-fitting

clothes.

“You stole these?” Josie said, pulling an oversized sweatshirt over her head.

“Sun’s up soon,” Ben said, pulling on a pair of sweatpants three times his size.

“Normal people care about things like nakedness.”

“I’m normal,” she said, wrapping a blanket around her waist. She sounded offended, but Ben was still too emotionally numb to care. It was hard to tell what each piece of clothing was in the dark, and none fit. Once they were more or less settled, they moved back to the treeline.

Climbing over a log, Ben said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“You can ask,” she said.

“We heal really fast, right?”

“Well, I do. You took forever.”

“Whatever,” he said. “That guy ripped my leg apart, and it’s fine now. What I’m wondering is, that guy, the gang leader, he had a scar down his face. Why didn’t he just heal it?”

“It looked burned at the edges, right? Yeah, I saw that too, when they were harassing you at your bus stop. That’s from Truesilver. You’re probably allergic to silver, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Silver is annoying, but Truesilver is deadly to us. They say it’s hardened moonlight. I’m not sure how it’s made. Werewolves can’t make it, only a Gifted can -- a smith -- and they’re rare. Most of the Truesilver around is in old relics. Hunters like it, if they can find it. The tattoos on the other two, those would have also been burned on with



Truesilver, which means Odin has a Truesilver relic. If you see someone with a silvery knife, spear, anything, don't wait to see if it's regular silver or not. Just run."

"But we're huge," Ben said, ducking under a branch.

Josie stopped and turned to him, gripping his arms. "No. Run. It burns through you as it cuts, and you can't heal from it. I've seen it, Ben, and it's a horrible way to die." Ben hadn't considered that Josie might have actually seen people die before. How could she not? She was a monster, raised by monsters.

And he was going to join them.

The trees parted, and the towers of the abandoned lumber mill loomed like the metal bones of a dead giant. They glinted, catching the morning before actual sunrise. Josie walked towards the wooden fence and ducked through the hole, padding barefoot on the gravel.

"So," Ben asked, "where did werewolves come from?"

"We Ossorys came from Ireland, originally. There's a legend about Saint Patrick cursing the Ossory area and turning our ancestors into werewolves, because we wouldn't listen to his sermons."

"That's ridiculous. And kind of a dick move by Saint Patrick."

They turned a corner and he could see her trailer in the early morning light. The front door was torn open like a burst pimple.

"Yeah, dad thinks so too," Josie said. "But that's the story. There's a lot more to it. There've been werewolves in Ossory for a long time, but other packs have their own stories. But like most old stories, they're full of holes. Kind of like my trailer." The closer they walked to it, the worse it looked. The sides were buckled and pushed out from the

inside. There were holes that Ben didn't even remember making. Clothes spilled out of the gaping wound of the door. The trailer looked murdered.

Josie checked that her guitar was alright – she had apparently set it off to the side before their chase, along with her clothes. She moved into the shadows inside, tossing off her blanket as she went and pulling her pony-with-machinegun t-shirt over her head.

“How did the Sons of Fenris find me?” Ben called inside to her.

Her voice spilled from the shadowy interior. “Well, you can smell me, right?”

He could. She smelled sour and savory, with a hint of sweet. She smelled a little like he did, but different. She smelled feminine as well, a tang that he was getting used to. Her scent drew him to her. She was family. He said, “Yes, unfortunately.”

“Ha ha, ass. But think about it, could you have done that yesterday?” Jeans and a t-shirt flew out the door. “Here, these are Dads. They'll look better than that mess you're wearing.”

Ben tossed the stolen clothes and pulled the jeans on. They were baggy. *So, dad is a big guy*, he thought. There wasn't any of his dad's scent left on them. “Why do you have Dad's clothes?”

“Uh,” she said, then leaned out the door. “They're... for sleeping. I've got some of my mom's, too.”

She ducked back in as Ben mumbled, “You sleep with their...” Josie suddenly seemed so much younger than her nineteen years. Ben pulled the t-shirt on, and then pulled the dog tags out to rest on top of the shirt, though they hung past his bellybutton.

“You're not really human anymore,” Josie was saying. “It's like puberty, I guess. Anyway, you can smell more than that, even. You'll learn. You can smell the wolf Gift in

others. Some sniffers can do that from fifty, a hundred miles. The Sons of Fenris must have a sniffer.”

The edge of the sun rose to the East, and with it Ben realized his feelings weren’t so muted anymore. The small aluminum camper sat amidst tall pyramids of old logs hibernating here, waiting for the mill to be opened again someday. It was someone’s dream, once.

A log lay in the gravel in front of the camper with the blackened remains of a campfire next to it. Josie must have sat here during the nights -- months -- that she was in Medford on her cold and lonely vigil.

“Here,” Josie called, and his skate shoes came hurling out of the camper. “I took ‘em off of you, so they’re fine. You’re welcome.”

Ben scooped up the ratty shoes and pushed his feet into them, kicking the toes to settle his feet inside. They felt sweaty without socks. Ben scuffed through the gravel over to the log by the campfire ruins and plopped down. On the other side of the log leaned her guitar, gleaming with years of polish and love. He picked it up, held it like he’d seen guys do on TV, and plucked a few strings.

At the first wobbly note, Josie scampered out of the camper calling, “Hey!” She kicked a trail of underwear, socks and t-shirts behind her, tripped once, scrambled up next to him and said, “Hey... could I...” She was holding out his box of photos from their dad, along with his phone and wallet. Her other hand was open and twitching. Ben took the box, shoved the phone and wallet into his pockets, and pushed the guitar at her hand, but she wasn’t looking at him.

She was staring towards the mill entrance, perfectly still, nose flaring.

“Josie?” Ben asked.

“Keep talking,” she whispered, eyes focused.

“Oh,” he said. “Uh. So. You seem to really like this guitar?” He felt the hair rise on the backs of his arms.

Josie didn’t look back as she loudly said, “More than anything.”

“Oh,” Ben said. He turned his head to follow her gaze, and said, “Okay, well. Um, Yeah, I guess I really am super hungr--”

Like a bullet from a gun you didn’t even know was loaded, Josie blasted across the gravel at the entrance. Ben set the guitar down and ran after her, but she was fast, and he was exhausted. She kicked up small meteor strikes in the gravel as she tore to the entrance and skidded to a stop.

By the time Ben got to the gate, Josie stood with her hands on her hips, bent over and panting. She was alone.

“What was it?” Ben asked, pulse racing.

“Can’t you smell her?” Her eyes were closed and she probed the air with her nose.

“No,” he said. All he smelled was Josie. “Her?”

“We had a visitor. Definitely female. She was standing right here.”

“Who?”

“We’re not safe here.”

A cold sweat broke out on the back of Ben’s neck, and his mind raced through what they’d talked about. Had they said anything that they shouldn’t have? “Hunters? Who?”

Josie looked at him, sighed and said, “Get in the truck.”

“Right now? I can’t just go right now. I’d have to tell my mom something, or she’ll freak out. My friends...”

Josie crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “You have a pack here after you, and I can’t protect you from a whole pack.”

Ben’s heart was pounding. “But they know where I live. My mom... no matter how bad of a mom she is, she’s my mom. And Odin said my friend’s names yesterday, in the park. They know my friends. I can’t just leave them.”

“Well, you can’t stay here either.”

She was right. Ben knew it.

“Fine,” Josie said, uncrossing her arms. “How about this, I’ll get ahold of Dad, and see if he has any ideas. Meanwhile, you get your friends to, like, come hang out at your house as soon as they can. Make it something important. You’ve been itching to come out to them, right? Sounds like tonight’s the night.”

“What? How the hell does that help? They know where I live, Josie.”

“Your house is safe. Your mom is safe, too. They wouldn’t mess with her.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. How do you know that?”

Josie squeezed her eyes closed. “Ben.” Her eyes opened slowly and she caught him in her gaze. “Ben, your mom is a hunter.”

## Chapter 5

Ben kicked his way across his shaggy wet lawn up to the front porch. Tomo looked at Ben from his couch and squeaked a meow. Ben vacantly scratched between the cat's ears, his mind a thousand miles away. Behind him, Josie's truck rumbled off down the road.

Opening his front door, Ben immediately knew his mom hadn't been home for a while -- probably at least a day, by her stale scent. It bothered him that he knew his mom's aroma. It seemed creepy.

Walking into the house, he wondered where his mom was this time. *She probably stayed up at the hotel by the Seven Feathers Casino*, he thought. *Blowing whatever money she got from the family.*

His mom.

"My mom?" Ben had said to Josie while they stuffed fistfuls of clothes into black garbage bags, tossing them into the bed of her truck. "And even if she was, my mom can't fight, or hunt, or whatever. She's... *Mom.*"

"That doesn't matter," Josie had said. "She's a hunter, and fucking with the Houses is the fastest way to get a pack torched. Odin knows it. Rival werewolf packs, we come at each other with teeth and claws -- with honor. Hunters? They wipe out packs wherever they find them. Even a pack as big as Ossory has to hide. Dad writing that down was stupid, but he's stuck in the past sometimes. The point is, don't worry. You'll be safe at your house. Why do you think they attacked you going to and from school, along your run? Your den is protected."

*Well*, Ben thought, sitting back on the porch with pop tarts, string cheese, some beef jerky and a banana. *You better be right, Josie*. It was impossible to imagine his mom as a werewolf hunter. She'd been an angry gambler his whole life, a distant and shitty mom, nothing more.

Ben looked down at Tomo next to him. The cat lazily blinked at Ben. "I'm a werewolf," Ben told Tomo, who squeaked back and whipped his tail. "You'll always love me, right?" Ben scratched between Tomo's ears again with one hand, while he stuffed his face with the other and mulled over what Josie had told him.

There had been a treaty called the Accord between the hunter Houses, legacy werewolf packs ("There were sixteen back then"), and Sanctuary ("a weird stronghold for werewolf pacifists and thinkers up in Montana"). The werewolves wouldn't hunt humans or make new scarborn ("people turned into werewolves by being bitten, though most die"), and the hunters would only hunt down werewolves not registered with the Accord.

His parents had met at a yearly summit. "Dad represented the Ossory pack, and your mom represented her house."

"What's a house?"

"Her family. The Chastels. Ben, they're all hunters."

Ben stopped and let that sink in. He thought of his aunt and uncle. He thought of their kitchen, and Arielle with her silver knife. "Do they know what dad was? What... I am?"

"It didn't matter back then, with the Accord. They hit it off, if you know what I mean," Josie had said with a too-knowing grin. She pulled a pump action shotgun out of the ruin of the trailer, along with a box of shells.

“Wasn’t Dad with *your* mom?” Ben said, eyeing the gun. He’d never fired one before.

“Yeah,” she said, smile dying. She began loading shells into the underside of the shotgun one at a time with a satisfying *ka-snap*. “Anyway, the Accord fell apart.”

“What happened?”

“Well, Dad and your mom fell apart, too.”

“You mean he ditched.”

“Your mom cut him, Ben. With Truesilver. He has a deep black gash across his chest, from hip to shoulder, and if he ever comes back to the Rogue Valley, they’ll kill him.”

Ben could see his mom attacking his dad. By the way she didn’t talk about him, she hated him. *But still... for politics? My whole life got fucked up because some treaty was broken?*

Sitting on the couch with Tomo, Ben reached for some more food only to find a mound of empty wrappers. He felt sickly satisfied, if not full. Back in the kitchen he scrounged an apple, a banana and several slices of plain bread. He trotted down the hall to his room. Setting the box of photos and the letter from his dad on his dresser, he flopped onto his bed and fished his phone out of his pocket. He texted Luis, Kyle and Gina as a group, telling them that he was home dealing with some family stuff, and asking them if they’d come hang out tonight. He added, “It’s important,” just so that they would all come. Gina would assume that he was going to come out, and... *why not? I mean, how long am I gonna drag this out?* As tired as he was, and now feeling full, his sexuality seemed ridiculously unimportant next to everything that’d happened. *Fuck*, he



thought, finishing the apple, *if they freak out and leave over that, they're not gonna stick around when they see me sprout fur and start licking my balls...*

He took a bite of bread and chewed, leaning back on his bed. He slid a hand into his pants to scratch and imagined coming out to them, walking through the scenario for the thousandth time. Luis, the pastor's kid, quoting scriptures that Ben already knew better than any of them. He imagined Kyle not hugging him anymore, worried that it meant something. Ben imagined instead telling them he was a werewolf. He saw Kyle running away, Luis brandishing a crucifix, Gina fighting Josie, all of them leaving him.

Ben jumped awake to his phone buzzing and half a piece of bread hanging out of his mouth. Hazy, he pulled his hand out of his pants and picked up the phone and answered it.

"What?" Ben said, unleashing an avalanche of crumbs from the mountainside of his shirt as he sat up.

"Whoa, Ben," said Kyle, "you sound like I woke you up."

"That's because you did, genius." Ben pulled the phone away from his head to check the time. Early afternoon. He'd slept several hours.

"So are you home sick, or what?"

Ben stuffed the mangled remains of the bread into his mouth and tried to say, "Well what about you? Are you between classes or something?"

"You know my dad's sheep?"

Ben stood up, stretched, and scratched his balls some more. "Who else has sheep in Medford?"

"Well, my dad has one less now."

“That’s a great story, Kyle,” Ben said, pulling up his hand and sniffing his fingers.

“No, he didn’t sell one. One got eaten by a grizzly bear.”

Ben froze. “We don’t have grizzlies around here. You mean a black bear?”

Kyle softened his voice. “Nope, had to be a grizzly. My dad has one of those critter cams out there. You gotta see the video. It’s crazy, the thing was huge, and it killed the sheep in the gnarliest way ever. Now my mom’s all scared to go outside, and dad is cussin’ and buying ammo. That’s why I’m home right now, too. Dad got me out of school to fix the pen.”

Ben knew that there weren’t brown bears -- grizzlies -- in Southern Oregon. He’d actually been paying attention in their wilderness survival class. He knew what the local dangers were. Cougars, yes. Scorpions and rattle snakes and black widows, yes. There were black bears, but they were small, had big butts, ate berries and small animals. Kyle was right, black bears left people alone, and they didn’t kill sheep. The last brown bear in Oregon had been killed a hundred years ago.

There were no grizzlies in Oregon.

Ben tried to smooth out his voice, and failed, asking, “Kyle, did this happen last night?”

“Yeah. Kinda crazy.”

In his mind, Ben could see Kyle’s house, a small thin-walled mobile home up in the hills, far outside of town. It had an old toilet out front made into a planter, and a tire swing hanging from the black oak standing next to it. The house was at the end of a dirt road and surrounded by trees, scrub oak, fir trees and all kinds of stuff that blocked sight from the highway and muffled noise. Remote, just like Kyle’s dad liked it. A werewolf

buffet.

And Odin knew the names of Ben's friends.

"Ben? Did I lose ya?"

"Kyle, you need to come over. Now."

"Oh jeez, not you too. My mom's bad enough. Bears don't rip into your house. I'm surprised one attacked the sheep, but he must have been a rogue. They should be hunkered down for winter, right?"

That was a detail Ben hadn't even thought of. "Kyle, I'm serious." Ben pulled his closet open, fished out his black duffel bag and tossed it onto the bed.

"Okay sure, Bennaroo. But what's really going on? Bear get your cat?"

Ben zipped the duffel bag and stared into it. It sagged open like a black mouth. Ben said, "Nothing. Just... can you? Pick Luis and Gina up? I have something important to..." After everything that had happened, Ben wasn't expecting to feel any anxiety about coming out.

Silence, and then Kyle said, "Benny, are you okay?"

*No*, he thought. "Just get here soon."

"Want me to pray for you?"

*No*, he thought again, this time with venom. "Yeah, sure. Whatever. Just get here."

More silence, then, "Ben, you don't believe anymore, do you?"

Ben laughed before he could stop himself. It was a cruel laugh. An ugly laugh. "Just come here, now. Please."

"What happened, Ben?"

“Kyle... stuff changes.”

Ben remembered telling Jeff, the youth pastor, that he maybe, *might* be gay. Jeff had said that God would heal Ben, if Ben believed. Ben wanted to change. He prayed. He read his Bible every day. He tried to think about girls, but it just didn't work. He tried jacking off to straight porn, but always ended up watching the guys. He tried lesbian porn but that just turned him off. And the whole time, he had this sinking feeling that it wasn't about the sex. He just didn't want to be with a girl. He liked being with Luis and Kyle, liked being close with them, and wanted to be with them all the time. Ben had fasted for two weeks straight, he'd cried, he'd begged for God to change him, he'd confessed everything he could think of to confess...

It was almost as if God wasn't there at all.

Ben knew there were other churches that would bend the scriptures and say that being gay was totally fine, but that only made things worse. Either the Bible was the “Word of God” and you didn't get to just change it, or it wasn't the Word of God at all. His faith had unraveled backwards for him, leaving a huge hole where he'd been sure God had been with him. He felt betrayed, foolish, and mostly sad.

“Kyle,” Ben said, staring out his bedroom window at the willow tree on the corner of their property. Its branches were long and slender, with no leaves yet. It looked more like an undersea creature than something that lived in the air. It looked like it didn't belong. But it did. “I hope that God is real. I really do. But if he is, then... he has a lot to explain.”

“Oh Benny, God doesn't have to explain anything to us. He's God.”

Ben sighed heavily and said, “Just get the guys and come over. I don't want to

fight over the phone with you.”

“What? No! Bennaroo, I’m not trying to fight with you. I love you buddy, I just want to see you saved.”

“Then get here. Now,” Ben said. “Please.”

A pause, then Kyle said, “Okay. I’ll get the others. It’ll be about an hour.”

Ben tossed his phone onto his bed next to the duffle bag. The phone lay innocuously blinking with messages. They’d be Gina and Kyle and Luis’ messages from while he’d been zonked out. He didn’t want a repeat of any of that phone conversation, so he left the mess to Kyle to sort out. And he knew Kyle would. Kyle was a good friend, even if he was nose deep in his faith.

*I was there just a little while ago*, Ben thought. It was weird how fast things could change, especially things that felt foundational. *But then, a couple of days ago, I didn’t believe in werewolves, either.*

Ben killed his hour by packing a few things, unpacking them and packing different things, all the while trying to figure out how to protect his friends. He’ll tell them he’s gay, and that should keep them here for the night at least. Whether they spent that time praying to save him, or talking and trying to figure out how to still be friends, it would work. Josie had said that she would come back this evening after getting ahold of their dad. Why didn’t she have a cell phone like regular people? Ben also needed to figure out a way to introduce her to them, and... *what if mom comes home? Would she be able to tell what Josie is?*

His mom... he felt like he didn’t even know her anymore. Not that he ever really did. *Is she out hunting werewolves right now?* He just couldn’t imagine it, but... there

were the Sons of Fenris in town. The Chastels might know. *Has she been just pretending to be out drinking and gambling this whole time?*

*But she's clearly been drinking when she gets home. She's such an angry person...*

A knock at the front door snapped his chain of thought. His fear spiked, but he heard Kyle's laugh from outside before he got to the door. *Has an hour slipped by already?*

Pulling the door open, Luis and Kyle stood waiting. They had smiles plastered on, and presented snacks and soda.

Ben let them inside. "Where's Gina?"

Kyle made his way to the kitchen, and Luis said, "She said something cryptic about this being better as a guys' night. Is your mom home?"

*Goddamnit Gina*, Ben thought. "No, she's not."

"Okay good," Luis said. "Nothing personal, just..."

"I know."

Kyle ripped open a tube of chips and finished telling Luis about the bear attacking his sheep. Ben took the opportunity to lean out of the conversation and text, "*Gina, get over here. Now.*"

Then Kyle pulled out his phone to show them both the video footage. "The quality sucks. Sorry."

A grainy black and white view of the sheep pen flickered on. A hulking shape with rounded basketball-sized shoulders stalked in from the shadows.

"No way! That's huge." said Luis.

There was no audio, but the sheep went visibly frantic, pressing against each other and trying to burrow into the flock. The “bear”—so clearly not a bear by its narrow waist and long ears—lifted a wide forepaw and held it in the air, hovering over the sheep.

*The fucker is enjoying it, Ben thought. It likes how scared they are.*

Then, with a speed too fast for the camera to track, the monster struck. One moment, the paw was hovering in the air and the next the sheep was thrashing on the ground. Kyle said, “Did you see it?”

Luis breathed, “No way.”

The sheep’s body spasmed violently, and there was a suspicious lump about three feet from the sheep’s body. “Fuck,” Ben said, “is that...”

“Yeah,” whispered Kyle. “Took its head right off. The head was there this morning, and the whole area was covered in blood. Watch, it looks like the grizzly stares at the camera here. It’s freaky.”

The creature did exactly that -- stared -- and Ben felt a shiver ripple down his spine. The werewolf then sank its teeth into the sheep’s body and dragged it out of the pen, walking backwards on all fours.

Kyle shoved his phone back into his pocket, and said, “Crazy, right, guys? Ben, your phone’s buzzing.”

Ben had guessed that a werewolf had attacked Kyle’s sheep, but to see it stare into the camera? It wanted them to know that it knew whose house it was.

“Ben,” Luis said, shaking Ben’s shoulder. “Your phone.”

Heart pounding, Ben looked at Luis, then pulled out his phone. It was Gina. Ben stepped into the hallway and answered it.

“Why are you pissed at me?” she said. “I thought, you know, guys don’t like showing their feelings around girls, and—”

“Gina,” he said, voice shaking. “Sorry, I know I sound crazy, but you need to get your ass over here. Now.”

“Oh god, what happened?”

“No, nothing, just -- Fuck you don’t have a car.” Ben yelled down the hall to the guys, “Hey, can we go get Gina?”

Kyle leaned out into the hall and said, “Sure, Benny.” His face was twisted with unspoken concern. Ben ignored it, glued on a smile and told Gina, “Okay, we’re on our way. Be ready.”

“Okay, but what happened? Are you—”

Ben hung up. “Okay guys, let’s go.”

Luis and Kyle exchanged a look, and let Ben herd them out of the house. They climbed into Kyle’s old Buick, Luis in the back and Ben sitting shotgun.

“Ben, what the hell is going on?” asked Luis.

“Wait for Gina,” Ben said.

Kyle pulled out of the driveway, and pulled off down Barnett Road. His slow, careful, Kyle-ish driving drove Ben insane. “Trust in the Lord, Benny,” Kyle said.

“I trust we could walk across town faster than you’re driving,” Ben snapped. *Why couldn’t she have just come over?* Ben thought, feeding his rising tide of anger. *Why can’t one thing go right?* Ben stared out the window at the wooden fence going by on their right, the same one he’d hated only a day ago, before all of this had started. *That fucking fence*, he fumed. What if he’d been born on the other side of it? Would his life



have been easy and simple? *No*, he thought, turning and looking across Kyle at the walled-off homes across the street. *I'd have spent my life wishing I was over there instead. There's no way to be fucking happy. Life is shit, and then we die.*

Pain spiked through the bones of his fingers.

*What the fuck?* he thought, eyes wide. *Not now!* His racing heart shook his whole body. Ben wrestled to control his breathing and slow it. He failed. He imagined shifting in Kyle's car, thrashing claws and jaws, blood spraying across the windshield.

Terror gripped him. Instead of changing, he only shivered, sweat and panted, aware that he was at least now too afraid to change.

"Ben, are you okay?" Luis asked from the back seat, putting a hand on Ben's shoulder.

The touch grounded Ben, and he breathed. His pulse slowed slightly, and he said, "Let's just get Gina."

When they pulled up in front of Gina's house, she was waiting out front. Ben flung himself out to hug her tightly. "Ben," she said, "you're shaking."

"Yeah," he said, letting go. "Let's just get back to my house."

"Sure," she said, and the two got into Kyle's Buick. Luis was hungry, so they swung by a Taco Bell on their way. Kyle made a joke about how of course Luis wanted Taco Bell, which got Luis ranting about how terrible American Mexican food was. Gina joined in with how bad American Japanese food was, and the group was back to its normal banter as they crossed Medford heading back to Ben's.

That is, most of the group. Ben was detached, and couldn't help it. He was about to tell these guys who he really was. He wondered if he should just go the whole nine

yards and tell them about being a werewolf. *They probably wouldn't believe me*, he thought. *I mean, I wouldn't. And it'll just make the gay part sound ridiculous. Jesus, coming out is hard enough, why do I have to do it twice?*

And what about when Josie got there? He would need to explain who she was... a cousin, maybe? He hoped his dad had a good idea...

The sight of Ben's house snapped him back to the moment. It was time. No hesitation, as soon as they stepped inside, he would tell them.

His friends piled out of the car. Laughing about something Luis said, they stepped into the house. Ben lingered a moment, looking up at the evening sky. *I miss you*, he prayed, or thought. He wasn't sure which. *I could use some supernatural help right about now.*

He hopped up onto the front porch and stepped towards the open door, but was stopped short by scents that didn't belong. His friend's sour fear hit him like a wave, along with the smell of someone unwashed and masculine, and under it all the metallic tang of blood.

## Chapter 6

*Goddamn it Josie, you said my house was safe*, Ben thought, standing in his own doorway, blood racing, fear spiking, nostrils full of his friends' terror. Afraid or not, he knew he had to go in.

Two steps through the door, Ben rounded the corner into the living room. Teiwaz stood in the center of the room. He lifted a corner of his mouth and flashed his teeth.

All three of Ben's friends huddled on the couch along the wall to Ben's left. The next wall of the rectangular room was dominated by a large cabinet filled with trinkets and mementos, and crafts that Ben had made as a kid at school. Across from the cabinet, to Ben's right stood the TV. Teiwaz stood framed in the large living room window that overlooked part of the front yard. He loosely gripped a revolver in one hand while holding his other hand behind his back, as if he was giving a speech. With his shaved head, black leather jacket and boots, he looked like a neo-Nazi. The image would have been perfect if the burned mark on his forehead had been a swastika instead of a downward-facing arrow.

"Your door was unlocked," Teiwaz said, a look of intensely happy hate in his eyes.

Luis said, "Ben, you know this guy?"

Teiwaz's lips split to show all of his teeth, and he said, "Ben and I just met yesterday, didn't we?"

"Get the fuck out," Ben said, voice shaky.

"Or what?" Teiwaz's grin widened.

Ben's heart pounded, shaking his whole body. His eyes darted to his friends and it

killed him to smell how much they all reeked of terror.

Glaring back at Teiwaz, Ben said, “Do you know who my mom is?”

“Your mom?” Teiwaz said the word with palpable disdain. “What is this, grade school? Don’t know. Don’t care.” Teiwaz shifted his tone to clinical, frowned and said, “Honestly, Benjamin, you stink of fear as much as these meatbags here. Too bad you’ve already altered today.”

“Was that you, then?” Ben asked. “Are you the sniffer?”

“Me?” Teiwaz looked and smelled offended. “See this?” He tapped the barrel of his pistol on the rune burnt into his forehead. “This is for the god Tyr. God of war, Ben. You’ll get a rune, too, there’s still several open. But whatever Odin gives you, *I’m* the warrior of the pack. You think you can take that from me?”

“Ben,” came Gina’s shaky voice. She sat on the couch between Luis and Kyle, and all three gripped each other, shaking. “What’s going on?”

Teiwaz gestured to Ben and said, “Good question, Gina. Benaroo, care to explain? Or should I show them, like I showed you?”

“No!” Ben’s voice was a ragged wound.

Teiwaz said, “I’m doing you a favor, you fucking idiot. You’re gonna join us whether you want to or not, and these meatbags here, they’ll all ditch you.” He glared at each of Ben’s friends and said, “They always do. Breathe them in, Benjamin. They’re scared now, of this,” he waved the pistol, sneering. “What do you think will happen when they see the real you?”

Gina said, “Ben, what’s--”

Teiwaz cut her off with a “shut up, meat.”

Ben stepped between his friends and Teiwaz, hands held out to his sides, and said, "I'm never going to join you guys." Then over his shoulder, he said, "Run! He won't--"

A flash, an ear splitting crack, screaming, and the smell of burnt gunpowder.

Horried, Ben looked to his friends. They were shaking and crying, but looked okay.

Teiwaz yelled, "Everyone shut the fuck up. Ben, move back to the door like a good boy, or I'll shoot your friends one by one."

"Okay," Ben said, moving back to the doorway, holding his hands out in surrender.

"And you lot," Teiwaz said, flicking the barrel of the pistol to indicate the corner of the living room, far from the doorway. "Move over there, get on the floor, shut up and watch. I want you to see this."

*There's no way out*, Ben thought, shaking. *Better me than them*. As Ben's friends moved, Ben said, "Okay, fine, I'll join you. I'll join you if you let them go."

Teiwaz's foul smile split his face again, and he said, "See, there's an obedient pup. But, sorry to say, that's not what we're up to tonight." Teiwaz paced toward the TV entertainment center to Ben's right. He left a trail of blood drops on the carpet as he walked, as though he'd never bothered to clean himself up after going hunting. Letting the pistol droop, Teiwaz ran his pinky along the top edge of the TV screen. He looked at his finger and frowned at the dust he'd collected. "So much of this house is hardly ever used. You can smell it, or rather, you can smell the lack of it."

Watching Teiwaz touch his stuff made Ben's skin crawl -- his unwashed aromas seeping into the furniture. "Then what the fuck do you want?"

“Odin wants you. He knows something about you. Says you’re strong.” He paced close to Ben, his sour scent flooding Ben’s nostrils. Teiwaz tapped the gun barrel on Ben’s forehead and said, “You think you can take me? You think you can take my place?”

“No,” Ben said, softly. “I don’t even want to.”

Teiwaz’s eyes narrowed, and he took three steps back. “I’m sure we can coax you into changing again. You just need the right motivation.” He pointed the revolver at Luis, then Kyle, then Gina, and said, “I was thinking about plugging your friends here, one by one, until you changed. Would that work?”

Ben looked at Gina, Kyle and Luis, terrified for them, and seeing Teiwaz threaten them only made the fear worse. With every gesture of that damned pistol the coiling snakes of fear writhed in his chest.

Teiwaz watched him closely. “Ah,” he said. “You’re smelling a little angry now. But when I do this” -- he waved the pistol at Kyle -- “you smell more sour, don’t you? Talk about your friends being a weakness. I should shoot them just to set you free.”

“No,” Ben pleaded.

Teiwaz’s tone shifted slightly as he looked at them and said, “They’ll turn on you. They always do.”

*He’s sad*, Ben thought. “Teiwaz, I don’t know what happened to you, but--”

Teiwaz’s eyes flicked to Ben, furious, and he said, “The same thing that happens to us all. Now fight me, faggot.”

Ben stepped back as if slapped.

He heard Kyle’s voice behind him say, “What?”

Teiwaz grinned at Kyle and said, “You heard me.”

“I can’t change,” Ben said. His own voice sounded weak.

“Well, I have a backup plan,” Teiwaz said. “What if one of your friends was already dead, huh? No point in being afraid for the dead?” He swung his hand out from behind his back with a flourish. Gripped in his fist was Tomo’s severed head, eyes and mouth frozen open forever in death.

Pain surged through Ben’s fingers, and he changed.

There was no slow burn of rage this time. His emotions were already so heightened, seeing Tomo was a volcanic eruption in the middle of a forest fire. His fury flared and consumed him. He welcomed it. In a quick and horrifying series of jerky spasms that kept time with his heartbeat, his body doubled, then tripled in mass. His bones cracked and his muscles tore. He fell to the floor, thrashing in such pain that his screaming broke his jaw. His jaw broke and reknit, then broke again. Claws spiked from the bones of his fingertips. His screaming was joined by his friends’ wails of horror and Teiwaz’s laughter.

Then, just as suddenly, the pain was done. Ben stood on his hindpaws, claws gripping through the carpet. The floorboards creaked under his bulk. His bushy tail thrashed the air behind him. He was a hulking red beast of muscle, claws and fangs.

To his left, three humans were screaming and huddled in a corner. Their motions excited him, but they were of his pack, and his rage had a target -- the human who stank of his feline packmate’s blood. The man’s jacket and shirt had been tossed aside, and he was yanking off his boots. Tomo’s head lay discarded, tossed away, his blood seeping into the carpet. The man smelled cocky, but there was nervousness mixed in as well. Ben

realized that his prey hadn't expected him to change so fast.

This was an advantage.

Ben lunged, batting Teiwaz with a swipe of his paw. Claws tore into Teiwaz's side and sent him slamming back into the hutch. A cascade of glass-framed photos and a shelf of Ben's childhood arts and crafts crashed over Teiwaz like falling rain.

Teiwaz screamed, and black fur erupted across his chest and arms while his face ripped into a boney muzzle. Ben didn't give him time to finish. Pouncing, he tackled Teiwaz, slamming him back into the hutch. Wood splintered and toppled onto their scrambling bodies. Teiwaz lashed up with his feet and hands, now tipped with black claws. Ben bit and snapped at the flailing shape beneath him until his teeth clamped down on something solid -- Teiwaz's right hand, now a clawed paw.

Teiwaz howled while Ben's jaw flexed and his teeth, each one a sharp dagger, ground into the meaty paw. Teiwaz's mouth sprouted a forest of sharp teeth. He seized onto Ben's shoulder with a meaty *thock*, and pushed Ben back to the middle of the living room.

Ben didn't let go. He bit down harder. Bone horns erupted out of Teiwaz's skull, long tapered spikes that swept back from between his ears and framed the arrow burnt into his forehead. The paw in Ben's mouth sprouted needles of bone at each joint that cut Ben's tongue and the roof of his mouth. The female human tried to skirt them as they fought, but Teiwaz lashed out with a spiked forearm and dug a furrow into the carpet, forcing the human back into her corner with the males.

Ben didn't let go, though he tasted his own blood. Teiwaz's free left forepaw raked up Ben's belly, claws like razors. Ben's underside was neatly sliced open.



Ben's bite slackened. He knew Teiwaz would disembowel him, but he also knew that if he let go, the humans would be next. Ben could see them cowering in their corner, pinned by the huge monsters thrashing in the middle of the room. Their names tried to surface, but Ben fought them down, fought to stay in the moment. They were his pack, and they were soft. Teiwaz would rip them apart if he got free.

Ben didn't let go. He focused on his teeth, pushing every ounce of fury he had into them, into this one place he could hold Teiwaz and hurt him. The wrist snapped. The moment stretched out, Ben pushing himself from within and from without with everything he had. His anger burned low so he pushed his love for his packmates, his hatred for himself, any passion he could muster.

In that moment, Ben heard a call. He didn't know from where, but its icy whispers touched his mind. A reservoir of passionate rage, and it resonated with his own fading fury. Teiwaz's claws sliced further up Ben's belly and bit into the bone of his rib cage. Ben reached for the power, but felt it recoil. Instinct whispered. He relaxed instead, opening himself and giving in. He lost his own passion, and let this new power in. A shock of ice poured through his veins. It was rage, but icy lightning instead of his own blazing fire. It had no love for Ben and it froze as it flowed, but he opened himself to it, guiding it along his spine like he did with his own passions, up through the base of his skull, through the bone of his jaws and into his teeth.

Teiwaz shrieked.

Ben's teeth burned, and he tasted seared flesh in his mouth.

Teiwaz's eyes blazed. He thrashed, spittle flying, claws flailing. The bone spikes along Teiwaz's body retracted, and his horns shrank. His shriek rose in pitch even further

and he pulled and kicked, trying to get his paw free of Ben's scorching mouth.

Ben jerked his head back and Teiwaz's forepaw tore free with a snapping of ligaments. The motion knocked Ben sprawling. Ben spat out the limp dead paw, and several of his own teeth came out with it. Ben's mouth filled with his own blood.

Ben tried to summon the cold power, but it was gone. He looked for his own well of passion, finding most of his anger spent. He hadn't had much to begin with, having changed so recently. He wrestled with his other passions, forcing his disgust, love, happiness -- every feeling he could find -- into the wreck of his stomach and to his bleeding mouth. His fear remained, unmoved, coiling in his chest. As the passions found his wounds, his mouth and stomach burned and itched. The bleeding in his mouth dripped and then stopped, and he looked down, watching his spilled intestines recoil back up inside him in rhythm with his heartbeat.

"Holy fuck," said Luis.

"Come on," yelled Gina, taking advantage of the moment. Luis and Kyle followed her as they ran past the healing monsters, through the door and out of the room.

Teiwaz climbed to his hindpaws, his left forepaw cupping the stump of his right. There was no blood, only the stink of burnt flesh and fur. Teiwaz looked at his paw and his body shook from ears to thrashing tail. Teiwaz was trying to heal himself, forcing his fury to the stump of his paw. Nothing happened. The stump trailed a thin wisp of smoke and refused to regrow.

Teiwaz's yellow eyes flicked from the stump of his wrist to Ben and narrowed. He flared the claws of his remaining left forepaw and growled. His claws grew longer and sharper, while his bone spikes crept back out from each of his joints. The horns on

his head flexed and grew, sweeping again back behind him. He was a tall, slender black beast forested with spikes of protruding bone. His toothy maw hung open in a shark's grin, his tongue writhing obscenely.

*Run.* The thought came with dangerous clarity. He was no match for this monster. His rage was spent. His thoughts were clear, and he was aware of what this awareness meant. He only had moments left. He could turn and flee, and on four paws maybe he could outrun Teiwaz's three.

Ben turned to run, but Teiwaz struck like a viper. Two of Teiwaz's claws sank into Ben's left shoulder and one into his chest. Ben gasped, coughing up blood. The claw in his chest pushed deeper, and Ben knew that he simply wasn't strong enough.

Teiwaz was going to kill him.

Ben focused the last of his passion into one final push, shoving himself back and off of Teiwaz's claws. He pressed one forepaw to the bleeding wound in his chest, refusing to heal so that he might have every ounce of strength to distract this monster, to give his packmates more time to run. Teiwaz grinned, drool spilling across the ruined carpet.

Thunder boomed. The window exploded, and Teiwaz hurled across the living room, into the couch. He shook his head and rolled back up onto his hindpaws.

Josie stood framed in the wreckage of the living room window, shotgun braced against her shoulder, the barrel trailing smoke.

"Get him to the truck!" she yelled through the shattered glass. Ben scrambled, feeling his bones shiver as they ached to shift back. Josie used the barrel of the shotgun to clear some broken shards for him, but he still sliced his paws climbing out. Moving

slowly, too slowly, Ben pushed the last bit of his fear and terror into healing himself. He stumbled and fell on the wet grass. His body spasmed. A second shot exploded behind him. His limbs buckled, his skull and pelvis broke and reformed. A third shot.

“Truck!” Josie screamed.

Ben felt hands grip his arms and pull him to his now-human feet. He saw Kyle’s face, ashen, to one side and Luis, determined, on his other. They half carried, half dragged him to Josie’s truck, idling a dull rumble in the middle of Ben’s front lawn. Gina lowered the tailgate and all three hoisted Ben into the bed of the truck.

Two more shots shook the world, and in Ben’s cold unfeeling mind he thought, *There’s no way my rich neighbors aren’t calling the police.* Ben was lying amid black plastic garbage bags filled with Josie’s clothes and belongings.

Then Josie tossed the shotgun to Kyle, who was standing in the bed of the truck, staring shocked at Ben. Kyle cocked it, eyes hardening, set it to his shoulder and fired towards the house. Lying back, Ben couldn’t see what Kyle was shooting it. Josie slammed the truck into drive and peeled out on the lawn while Kyle cocked and fired three more times.

## Chapter 7

Their howls drifted across the valley. People would think they were just dogs making a ruckus -- maybe the “large ones” that had come down from the hills.

Ben could imagine their sniffer tasting the air for him.

*You reek of wolf*, Odin had said.

Ben leaned against the side of Josie’s truck. He was wearing a second pair of baggy replacement pants that Josie had given him. He pressed one of Josie’s crumpled t-shirts -- now bloodsoaked -- against the wounds in his chest. *No wonder she carries around bags of extra clothes*, Ben thought. His wallet and phone had been left in his house this time, probably in the wreckage of his old pants. He knew there was nothing to do about them. Ben tongued the hole in his gums where a tooth used to be. He’d healed most of his wounds, but the effort had left him drained. And -- just like last time -- emotionally dead.

After Josie had peeled out of Ben’s front yard with Kyle blasting, she hadn’t slowed down until they were flying down some dirt road in the hills and skidded to a stop. They were surrounded by scrub oak trees and scraggly bushes. The sun was setting, and the waning moon hadn’t yet risen. It was growing dark, and the howling was creeping closer from at least three sides, though he was sure his friends couldn’t hear it yet.

*This wasn’t how I wanted them to find out*, Ben thought, looking at his friends. Kyle stood to his left, gripping the shotgun with both hands and pressing it to his chest, tear tracks clear on his cheeks. Gina stood opposite Ben, glaring at him, eyes red and fists balled at her sides. Luis sat in the dirt next to her, picking at rocks and staring at nothing.

Josie stood to Ben's left, one arm across her body holding the opposite elbow. She was peering into the trees, and chewing her lower lip. No doubt she could hear the howling too.

"Fuck," Luis said to his rocks.

Kyle twisted and wrung his grip on the shotgun.

Gina's eyebrows tightened in the light of the truck's headlights, and she said, "You asshole."

Josie said, "Ben just found out yesterday. And despite my trying to get him to leave with me, he refused -- to protect you guys."

Kyle gestured a frantic hand at Josie. "Who the hell is she?" he demanded of Ben, then turned to Josie and said, "Sorry, but who are you?"

"I'm his sister, Josie." Then looking at each of them in turn, she said, "I know this must be confusing."

Gina barked a harsh laugh, and said, "Yeah, that's the word."

Josie glared at Gina and chewed her lower lip more before she continued, "Werewolves are real, and your friend is one."

"Fuck," was all Luis said, staring at the ground.

Kyle made a whimpering noise and avoided looking at Ben.

Josie sighed and said, "I'm sure you need time, but there are more coming. Now. I count three. You will hear them soon. They are hunting Ben. You can be shocked later, we need to leave. Now."

"Leave where?" croaked Kyle.

Gina's stance shifted, and she said, "Now hold on. Who's this *we* you're talking about? Ben is *our* friend."

"Is he?" Luis said it without looking up from the dirt.

Gina kicked Luis and said, "Well yeah, of course he is. What the fuck?"

Luis finally looked up from the dirt. His glasses flashed the reflected headlights toward Gina, then Ben, then back at the ground.

Gina looked from Luis to Kyle, and said, "I can't believe you two. He almost died in there, fighting for you fuckers. You saw it. I fucking saw it. I'm terrified, but I'm not about to abandon him to some bitch who... No offense," she said to Josie, "I don't know you."

"None taken," Josie said. "It's appropriate."

Kyle said, "So you're one, too?" Ben could smell Kyle's arousal.

Josie's nose twitched, and one corner of her mouth twitched up as she said, "I'm taking Ben to see his family. Lots of werewolves. It's no place for you." She turned to Ben and gripped his arm. "Ben, we've got to go."

The howling grew closer.

Kyle glanced behind him, and said, "Fuck, I heard that one."

"Me too," said Gina, eyes fixed on Josie.

Ben raised his hand toward Josie, palm up, and said, "The Sons of Fenris know their names."

Kyle said, "The who?"

Ben could hear the emotional flatness in his own voice as he said, "They're the werewolf pack that wants me to join them."

Josie said, “Or kill you. Who knows, now?”

Luis stood up, dusted off his butt and said, “Enough of this. Ben, you sound like a heartless machine. Do you even hear yourself? And all this talk, this bullshit, it’s real, isn’t it? I’m not going to just go home and pretend none of this happened.”

“No,” said Josie, “you aren’t going with us.”

“Oh, yes we are, Princess,” said Gina. “We’re Ben’s friends. His family. More family than you are, acting like you know what’s best.”

Kyle shifted the shotgun from one hand to the other, then back again. Then everyone heard it, howls in three directions, and one much closer than the other two. Everyone looked at Kyle, and he finally said, “What? I just think... maybe... I mean... we shouldn’t go.”

Gina said, “Kyle?”

“I’m serious,” he said, face flushed. “What the fuck is all of this? I mean... Luis, this isn’t in the Bible, right? What’s this all... I mean, isn’t this all evil?”

Luis shrugged, took off his glasses and rubbed the edge of his shirt on the lenses.

Josie spoke up, her voice soft, and said to Kyle, “Actually, Kyle, yes it does. There’s the story of King Nebuchadnezzar. To humble him for a time, God made him a werewolf. Some say that’s where this started, this gift. But Saint Augustine wrote that God alone has the power to change someone into a wolf.”

The closer howl rang out, echoed by the other two, and a fourth. Ben tasted the air for them but couldn’t catch anything yet. Josie’s nose twitched too.

Gina’s jaw firmed and she said, “I’m going with you.”



Ben said, "It'll be dangerous." He said it tonelessly, as though he was remarking on the weather.

"So is staying here," Gina said. "Ben, you mauled that guy, and he knows the three of us."

Kyle sank to the ground. He stared up at Ben and said, "That wasn't a bear at my house, was it?"

"Fuck," said Luis.

"It knows where we live," said Kyle, looking over at Luis

"*They* know where we live," corrected Luis.

The group was silent for a moment, when they all heard the mournful tone of a howl that rang far too loud. Eyes wide, Gina said, "We're getting in the truck. Now." Josie ran a hand over her ragged red pony tail and growled something under her breath as she circled around and opened the driver's door. Gina and Luis piled in the back seat of the cab. Kyle stood hesitating.

"Really?" said Gina.

Ben, still clutching the makeshift bandage to his chest, patted Kyle on the shoulder and climbed into the front seat. Josie coaxed the engine to rumbling life.

Left alone, Kyle looked about to cry when Josie leaned out and yelled, "For fuck's sake, big guy, get in!" Kyle jumped to obey and squeezed Ben into the middle of the front seat, slamming the door.

Josie pulled the truck in a loop and sped back down the dirt road the way they had come. She took North Phoenix road north, skirting the valley. In the dark, Ben saw golden eyes watching from the road side.

Josie sped along the highway. Old orchards and homesteads flashed by. The lights of Medford sat off to their left, further down in the Rogue Valley, and slowly moved behind them. They passed a shooting range and a baseball field, then turned right onto Lake of the Woods Highway. She was only on it a moment before she pulled off at a little shop called Lake Creek General Store.

“Jesus, why are we stopping?” demanded Luis.

Josie climbed out, saying, “Stay here. He needs food, now. Shifting takes a lot out of us. Sit. Stay.”

“Shifting?” Luis said.

No one replied.

Josie came back a minute later with a bag full of convenience store food, dumped the packages across Ben and Kyle’s laps, and fishtailed the truck back onto the highway. Ben tore into the food. Kyle inhaled a chocolate donut and reached for a second one, until Josie’s side glare stopped him.

No one spoke until they were well and truly out of the Rogue Valley, with high walls of Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and white bitch trees disappearing up into the darkness above them to either side of the narrow highway.

Gina broke the silence from the back seat, saying, “Hey, how can that other werewolf guy still be alive? You and your *big guy* here unloaded like your whole shotgun into him.”

Kyle spoke up, detached, and said, “Every blast blew off chunks of him, but they just sealed right back up. How many times did I hit him? And he was still coming out the window after us. The last shot hit him in the head.”

“You take his head off?” asked Josie, her voice hopeful.

“No,” said Kyle. “It hit the side of his head, took out a horn, an ear, maybe an eye. But they grew back. I saw...” Sitting next to Ben, Kyle’s sweaty terror rolled off of him in waves.

“Can *you* do that?” asked Luis, unclear who he was talking to.

Looking at Luis in the review mirror, Josie said, “Not like that guy.”

Ben swallowed a mouthful and said, “Did you get ahold of Dad?”

“Yeah. He told me to try and convince your friends to come, too.”

“What?”

“Well,” she said, smelling embarrassed and angry, which didn’t make any sense, “he also wanted your mom to come. We argued, and he... well, we got into a fight.”

Silence settled in the truck until Ben said, “Sorry Josie. I forget sometimes that this is probably tough for you.”

“Probably?” she barked. “I’ve never even shot anyone before, Ben.”

Silence settled back on the truck. They rumbled through the endless corridor of trees in the night. Having eaten everything, Ben drifted off to sleep, head resting against Kyle’s shoulder.

The first time he woke up, they were slowing as they entered Klamath Falls. Gina whispered, saying, “So it’s important that you actually tell him that you’re okay with him. That you’re still his friends. He needs that.”

Josie answered, “Man, this is so weird. I’ve never seen someone’s friends have to do this.”

Kyle said, “Tell us more about you and like... your pack.” Ben kept his eyes closed. With his head resting on his friend’s shoulder, Ben was surrounded by Kyle’s warm smells. He could smell that Kyle was aroused again, and breathed the scent in, even though he could tell it was for Josie. Kyle smelled masculine and sweaty.

“Well,” said Josie, a smile in her voice, “should I start with how we lick ourselves clean?” Ben could smell Kyle and Luis’s arousals spike, and Josie added, “Oh god, I’m joking, calm down guys.”

“What?” asked Gina, her confusion clear.

Ben enjoyed smelling Kyle, but he could smell that Josie was horny, too. That bothered him, but he didn’t know why. He pushed the thought aside, enjoying Kyle’s musk while he listened to Josie talk.

She had slipped into lecture mode, saying, “Marco Polo wrote about us on the island of Angamanian--”

Ben woke up again, this time from Kyle’s shoulder shaking. Ben shifted slightly, and then moved his arms quickly to cover an obvious boner. No one seemed to notice, or even be paying attention to him, so he rolled slightly and resettled. He glanced at Josie, who winked at him.

Fuck, he thought, making sure his hands looked casual in his lap.

Luis was heatedly saying, “So you only like classical music, and old crappy pop punk garbage? How is that even possible? Those two don’t even make sense together.”

“Fuuuuuck you,” Josie said. “I was raised in a compound filled with shape-shifting, butt-sniffing dog people. I think I came out pretty good.” Her scent was happy, but with a cloying sadness that he realized always seemed to cling to her.

*She wants to belong*, Ben thought, drifting off to sleep again.

Ben woke up a third time to Kyle getting out of the truck. They were in a town, parked at a Macdonald's. "Where are we?" he asked, as Luis and Gina climbed out of the back seat.

"Bend," said Gina, lagging behind the others as they went inside. "Josie says you need sleep. I'll bring you a burger."

As Gina turned away, Ben said, "Hey, Gina -- I'm sorry."

Gina turned back. "When you're... when you were... you looked at us, like when you first changed, and I thought you were going to kill me."

Ben looked at his hands. His emotions were creeping back, but he wished they weren't. "Gina, I'm dangerous."

Kyle yelled, "Gina!" across the parking lot. "Hey, what do you wanna eat?"

"I'll coming!" she called back. Then to Ben, "Try to sleep."

Left alone, Ben's mind drifted, and he thought of his mother. The hunter. He had no way to let her know that he was okay. Would she care? He imagined her coming home to the house wrecked, to all the blood, and finding his wallet and phone. Would she feel grief or relief? *There's no way cops didn't show up*, he thought. He played the scene over in his head, and felt pity for his mom.

The others came back with food for him, Gina and Luis arguing about something. Ben didn't like how Josie leaned on Kyle.

Ben devoured his burger and fries from Gina, and a second burger that Josie had gotten for him, too. Full, he tried to rest his head back on Kyle's shoulder, but this time Kyle shrugged, and then leaned away from Ben, resting his own head against the

passenger window. Ben sighed, and slouched into the chair, resting his head back instead. The familiar bass rumble of the truck and a full stomach lulled him back to sleep.

The next time Ben woke up, a rich, overpowering smell clogged the air in the truck. Ben sat up, and saw that Kyle was asleep against the passenger window. In the back Luis had fallen asleep on Gina's shoulder. Gina's head was back, and her mouth slack with sleep.

Ben rubbed his nose. "Where are we?" he asked, keeping his voice down.

"Nampa, Idaho." Josie looked bone tired.

"What the hell is that smell?"

"Sugar beet factory," was all Josie said.

"God. Is it just this strong because we're..."

"Werewolves? No. It's this thick for everyone. Best to let your friends sleep through this little joy. To us it's just a strong smell -- to them, this stinks bad. I have no idea how people live here. Humans are weird."

Ben looked at her, and said, "Josie. Thank you."

"What for? This is the only way to get through, I didn't pick this stinkpath on purpose."

"No," Ben said, letting his somber tone speak for him.

"Ben, I know you don't know me well yet, but you're my brother."

Then the sugar beets were behind them. The lights of Boise shone ahead.

"What if I lose control when I see Dad?" Ben asked.

After a moment, Josie said, “Huh. I hadn’t thought of that.” She stretched her jaw with a yawn and said, “I’m sure Dad can take care of it. He’s pack alpha. He’s kind of a big deal.”

Then they were driving through Boise. It was much bigger than Medford. It seemed to sprawl forever. Neither of them talked, as if the city were listening in and they didn’t want to be overheard.

Once the buildings thinned out, Ben said, “Is it rage?”

“Huh?”

“That makes us change.”

Josie said, “Well, anger is the strongest passion we have, if what you’re looking for is volume, not depth. And usually when you’re about to fight, volume is what you really need. Besides, anger overwrites whatever else you’re feeling. If you’re scared, worried, sad, horny, grossed out, whatever -- rage burns it up, so you can fight.”

“Odin said that fear might be blocking me,” Ben said.

“Really?” she said, eyeing him. “Well, imagine using all your passions at once. Dad will help. You have some time now until the next full moon.”

“So, the moon -- it really matters, huh?”

“She hates us.”

“What?”

Josie blinked back tears and said, “Can’t you feel it? The moon, she hates all of us werewolves.”

“You sound tired, and this sounds weird.”

“We’re almost home,” she said. They passed a sign for an Airforce base nearby.

“The point is,” said Josie, “it helps you understand what’s up with the full moon, moonlight, Truesilver, and why you can lick your balls once a month.”

Ben smiled at that. “And we’re Ossory, which means... Saint Patrick made us werewolves?”

“We were already werewolves when he came. His curse didn’t do shit. There’s other, older stories about Ossory werewolves. The oldest goes back to King Laignech Faelad. That’s our pack name for werewolves, Ben. Faelad -- it means wolf-shape.” They left interstate 84 for highway 30, and Josie said, “We’re not far.”

Ben sat up, and glanced at Gina and Luis sleeping

“You’re nervous.” She gave him a smile.

“Stop sniffing me.” His anxiety had been building, and he couldn’t ignore it now. His palms were sweaty, and he could smell his nervousness himself. “Of course I am. And not just for me. What’s going to happen to Gina, Kyle and Luis?”

The truck rumbled off of the highway, and down a rough unmarked road. They struck a pothole and Kyle’s face smacked the window he was sleeping against. He woke up with a moan.

Gina’s sleepy voice came from the back asking, “What was that?”

“We’re almost there,” said Josie.

Luis said, “Can we slow down?”

“Nope,” said Josie, grinning.

Ben saw the glow of lights up ahead reflected against low clouds. *That must be the compound*, he thought. *The place must be massive.*



“Is that a fire?” Kyle said, leaning towards the windshield.

With no warning, Josie slammed on the breaks and Ben was thrown against his seatbelt. “What the hell?” Ben looked at Josie. Her eyes sharpened. She was staring to the left of the road.

A small cinderblock building hunkered at the roadside, easy to miss in the dark. A guard gatehouse, by the look of it, but with no light on. Then Ben saw it -- next to the gatehouse, caught in the truck’s headlights, a body.

A girl.

Josie flung her door open and jumped outside.

Kyle said, “Is that a person?”

Ben scrambled out Josie’s door after her.

The dead girl was close to their age, with a Tomo-like frozen look of terror on her face. Her mouth hung open. Her chest was punctured with a constellation of bullet holes patterned around one gaping hole in the center. Josie covered her mouth and her shoulders shook once with a silent wail. The stink coming from her chest wound was repulsive.

“Oh my god,” said Gina, climbing out of the truck after them. “Is she...”

“Jesus Fuck,” said Luis, craning his head out the truck door, but staying in the back seat.

Kyle said, “Where did the shotgun go?”

Josie looked up, eyes cold and emotionless. Josie stood, and though she spoke robotically, a single tear rolled down her cheek while she said, “Her name was Sarah.

And this,” she said, pointing at the burned hole in the girl’s chest, “was caused by Truesilver.”

“Hunters?” Ben said.

Josie answered, “The wound is fresh.”

Looking towards the compound, Ben realized that the clouds he’d seen were actually smoke, and that the lights reflected in the smoke were the flickering orange and red of flames. He could smell burning buildings, wood and plastic, and the horror of burning fur and flesh.

Josie stood, looked toward her burning home and said, “They’re still here.”

# **From Hellhound to Hero:**

## **Tracking the Shifting Shape of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

### **Werewolf**

“The monster... is a product of and regular inhabitant of the imagination, but the imagination is a driving force behind our entire perception of the world. If we find monsters in our world, it is sometimes because they are really there and sometimes because we have brought them with us,” says Stephen T. Asma, author of *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (14). Monsters have evolved along with the societies that created them, and tell us something about the time and place they were conceived. Classical Western monsters were amalgams of actual beasts and natural forces -- a bull’s head on a man’s body, something that is half eagle and half lion, an elemental force, etc. -- and nature was humanity’s most vicious enemy at the time. Western medieval monsters arrive as messengers from God or the devil, reflecting the power of the Church and superstition. With the dawn of the Enlightenment, monsters became explainable yet dangerous phenomena, mutant aberrations, and the criminally insane. Among the monsters of these ages stalked the werewolf, a monster whose inherently mutable nature has allowed it to survive shifts of society. Chantal Bourgault Du Coudray, in her book *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror and the Beast within*, explains,

Regardless of genre, material relating to the werewolf in every period has been informed by prevailing cultural values and dominant ways of knowing or speaking about the world. In this sense, texts about werewolves can be read as indices of the way in which “reality” has been assessed, described and constructed at different moments in history. (2)

In Leslie A. Sconduto’s *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity through the Renaissance*, she makes a similar statement, saying, “Werewolves, as a cultural product, have been and always will be a reflection of their time” (200).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf has evolved to match the times, but has yet to be thoroughly dissected by 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars. In *The White Devil: The Werewolf in European Culture*, Matthew Beresford points out the need for work in this area, lamenting, “The werewolf is, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, in limbo, and requiring its re-introduction into society” (235). In this paper, I consider the scholarly works on werewolves by such authors as Charlotte F. Otten, Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, Mathew Beresford, Leslie A Sconduto, and Brent A. Stypczynski in order to examine the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf -- what it is like, and why. I argue that 21st century werewolves are different from the werewolves of the past in that they are the heroes of their stories, and rather than being a “curse” their lycanthropy is part of their heroic nature, providing them with a strong positive tie to the natural world, an intimate link to a pack, and a sexy animal magnetism. I explore these three aspects, their causes, and how they all play into the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf’s newfound sense of heroism.

## Tracking the Werewolf through History

In order to understand modern werewolves, we need to first see where they have come from, and why, for although each age's monsters reflect that age, monsters with rich histories always bring aspects of that history with them as they evolve. First, we must define the term werewolf. Coudray gives us a standard definition: "A werewolf is a human being who changes into a wolf" (1). The succinctness of the definition is necessary in order to correctly capture the ever-changing shape of the werewolf throughout history. Matthew Beresford, in *The White Devil: The Werewolf in European Culture*, explains that there is archaeological evidence of the earliest humans having the concept of people changing into animals, or gaining aspects of various animals for the sake of hunting or combat. This may be a type of animism, or shamanism – Beresford says we cannot know for certain – but the fact that the wolf is the most common animal fetish to find speaks to the creature's connection to humanity. This is likely due to wolves having the largest natural range of any large predator, combined with the early domestication of wolves into dogs. Wolves have been humanity's closest ally, fiercest competitor, and earliest teacher (19-38).

Some ancient texts do mention humans turning into wolves, such as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* when Ishtar curses one of her lovers and turns him into a wolf, but the story that stands out as perhaps the first werewolf story is found in the "Tale of King Lycaon," in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this story, King Lycaon of Arcadia is visited by Zeus, but does not believe that Zeus really is a god, and so tests the god by serving him roasted human flesh to see if Zeus will eat it. Zeus was, to say the least, displeased:

My thunderbolt struck the king's house to ruins,

And he, wild master, ran like beast to field  
Crying his terror which cannot utter words  
But howls in fear, his foaming lips and jaws,  
Quick with the thought of blood, harry the sheep.  
His cloak turned into bristling hair, his arms  
Were forelegs of a wolf, yet he resembled  
Himself, what he had been – the violent  
Grey hair, face, eyes, the ceaseless, restless stare  
Of drunken tyranny and hopeless hate. (Ovid 37)

And so King Lycaon was cursed to become wolf-like and violent, to match the evil of his own soul. It is from this story that we get the term Lycanthropy, the technical term for werewolfism, that endures to this day in books, film, and even psychological and medical science (Sconduto 10). There are many classical accounts similar to this story that we would recognize as werewolf stories. Pliny relates an account in *Naturalis Historia* of a man named Daemenetus of Parrhasia who was transformed into a wolf as a punishment for eating the flesh of a boy who had been sacrificed to Zeus Lycaeus. The story goes that after ten years as a wolf, he was transformed back, and went on to enter and win the Olympic games as a boxer. Pliny was himself suspicious of the story's validity, but then writes about how the men of the Arcadian family Anthus would randomly choose one member of that family to be changed into a wolf for nine years at a time. The Roman poet Virgil in his eighth *Eclogue* wrote about a sorcerer named Moeris who could make a potion (one of the ingredients was human entrails) to turn a person into a werewolf for a short period of time. In the *Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter*, likely written by Gaius

Petronius for Emperor Nero, we find a first-person account of the storyteller traveling to see his sweetheart, and on the way seeing a companion he barely knew change into a werewolf. The matter is later supposedly proved when the storyteller's lover says she was attacked by a wolf but chopped off its paw, and the companion is found missing a hand. Petronius wrote, "I saw at once he was a werewolf and I could never afterwards eat bread with him, no! Not if you'd killed me. Other people may think what they please, but as for me, if I'm telling you a lie, may your guardian spirits confound me!" (62). This story is told to entertain, but also as a true tale which further demonstrates the prevalence of belief in werewolves in classical times. The classical werewolf sometimes comes about as a curse of the gods, sometimes by choice, and is usually savage and dangerous, though visually not much different from a common wolf. This monster coincides with other classical monsters that are amalgams of beasts and men, and reflects the classical fear of nature and the unknowable whims of the gods.

The medieval werewolf borrows much from the classical monster, but exists against the backdrop of the spreading church. As Rome was crumbling, St. Augustine wrote *The City of God* in an attempt to separate Christianity from the failing Roman state that had appropriated it. The book would become foundational for Christian thought throughout Europe. Concerning werewolves, Augustine wrote that demons could cause physical transformation in people, giving them the form or parts of animals, but that people's souls were immutable (Beresford 89). The idea that the soul is safe sounds hopeful, but linking werewolfism to the demonic had repercussions for centuries to come. In Richard Buxton's *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, he says of classical and medieval werewolves, "in both cultures to be a wolf signifies that one has forfeited

humanity and is obliged to lead an ‘outside’ existence... but the Medieval werewolf... is typically represented as having that power [to change shape] thanks to demonic assistance. The conceptual background to Medieval werewolfism is Christianity” (74). This juxtaposition of werewolfism and Christianity can be seen in stories such as Giraud de Barri’s *Topographica Hibernica* in which he tells of Saint Patrick’s trouble with some Irish people who did not want to listen to his sermons. The locals were howling to interrupt Saint Patrick’s preaching, so Patrick prayed, and God cursed the town so that some of them were changed into wolves, and were forced to stay in that form for seven years. Once those seven years were up and they changed back, others would be changed into wolves to take their place, and the cycle continued. Another Irish story dating back to the eighth century talks of an Abbot in the district of Ossory who prayed for a similar curse from God on the locals, so that once every seven years two of the people should be turned into wolves (Beresford 90, 92). And so we see that the early medieval werewolf existed as local folklore, but was slowly changing into a punishment from God through the growing influence of the Church. This curse was different from the original curse of Zeus on King Lycaon, in that the Christian version always features the curse coming from people who served God, rather than directly from the gods. While the Greek story served as a warning against being an evil person, the Christian version served as a warning against not respecting the Church.

As the church grew in power, and the nobility of twelfth-century Europe enjoyed stories of King Arthur and other wondrous tales, five new werewolf stories were written, with themes so similar that they likely inspired and informed each other. For example, one Arthurian story, *Lai de Melion*, written around 1200 CE, features the brash knight



Melion who used a magic ring to turn into a wolf at will, only to have his fairy wife steal it and trap him in wolf form. Melion is only rescued by his loyalty to Arthur, who sees through the deception. This is the common theme of these stories – a faithful and good man is trapped as a werewolf by a wicked woman. This idea of a good person being changed through no fault of their own was new to the werewolf genre. “In the twelfth century,” Sconduto explains, “all literary werewolves are portrayed to varying degrees in a sympathetic light” (47). Perhaps the most famous of these sympathetic werewolf stories is Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*, which starts:

Amongst the tales I tell you once again, I would not forget the lay of the Were-Wolf. Such beasts as he are known in every land. Bisklavret he is named in Brittany, whilst the Norman calls him Garwal. It is a certain thing, and within the knowledge of all, that many a christened man has suffered this change, and ran wild in the woods, as a Were-Wolf. (83)

In the first few lines, Marie is setting up a sympathetic tale about Bisclavret. She goes on to say, “The Were-Wolf is a fearsome beast. He lurks within the thick forest, mad and horrible to see” (83). However, the story she proceeds to tell about this Bisclavret paints him as a good and noble baron who is betrayed by his cheating wife, and trapped in wolf form until his love and devotion for his king leads to his restoration. Bisclavret is far from a terrible monster – he is a good man who is the victim of a cruel wife, and who overcomes through his faithfulness to his king. All of these tales end with the werewolf as the hero, albeit a victimized hero who has survived his traumatic experience. These stories clearly reveal the prevailing attitude of the time towards women and the nature of evil. Furthermore, all five stories repeat the lesson that salvation comes through being

loyal to your king during the time of Divine Right, when being loyal to your king was being loyal to God.

As the church grew in strength, wondrous tales such as these grew scarcer, with magic and sorcery being seen more clearly as the domain of the devil, and the werewolf slid from the mythological and mystical to the demonic and the hunted. Sconduto sums up this transformation, saying:

The werewolves of the twelfth-century are nobles who protect others or wage war in order to avenge themselves while in their lupine form. The werewolves of the sixteenth-century renaissance, however, are peasants who attack and eat other human beings while in lupine form. There is nothing noble about their actions, but, without excusing these actions, it could be argued that everything they do is done to ensure their survival.

The twelfth-century werewolf is an idealized werewolf, whereas the sixteenth-century werewolf is a “real” werewolf that reflects the harshness of the peasant world and the reality and turbulence of the times. (200)

Ironically, Renaissance Europe was a dark place, with people being burned at the stake for fear that they were actual witches, vampires, and werewolves. For example, Henri Boguet was a witch hunter from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century who bragged about the monsters he had personally condemned. “Boguet maintained that he was personally responsible for the execution of 600 witches in the eighteen-year period between 1598 and 1616. Bouget’s zeal for prosecuting witches extended to werewolves, for he saw no difference between them; werewolves were witches.” (Sconduto 165). Werewolves had stepped out of stories and back into “reality,” and it was the poor and insane who were

executed. Each age forges its werewolf, and the darkness and misery of the times were certainly reflected in the werewolf stories and accounts of trials and burnings that survived.

The Renaissance gave way to the Enlightenment and throughout the seventeenth century, people began to be more aware of mental illnesses. As Beresford put it, “the werewolf shifted in public consciousness from feared beast to pitiful creature.... Europe ended its obsession with burning suspected werewolves at the stake, and documented werewolf cases all but disappeared” (155, 156). Shortly after werewolf stories were dismissed as church superstition, werewolves came rushing back with the rise of romantic-era Gothic horror:

Interest in lycanthropy was reignited early in the [nineteenth] century, in the context of romanticism, when the backlash against Enlightenment principals was well under way and the Gothic novels ... had already proved popular. In contrast to the philosophers of the Enlightenment who had sought to eradicate superstition, the romantics embraced it as a source of poetic inspiration. (Coudray 14)

This burgeoning interest in things dark and mystical had centuries of witch and werewolf hunts to draw from, and the people of the day devoured it. The Enlightenment had embraced reason, but people loved the mystical, and without the hammer of the church hanging over their heads, the werewolf grew from a folkloric monster into something exciting, evil and brooding.

As the Romantic and Victorian eras ended, the image of the werewolf as a masculine monster ravaging women began to take root. A good example of this is

Richard Bagot's 1899 novel *A Roman Mystery*, where we see the dominant male werewolf savaging its helpless female victim. Bagot wrote, "The werewolf threw himself upon her, and, uttering shriek upon shriek, she sank to the ground struggling in his clutches. She felt his hot breath upon her face, and hands tearing at her neck and chest..." (283). The scene is clearly written to mingle the imagery of murder and rape, and became standard for werewolf stories only a few decades later with the boom of Gothic horror films in the 1930s.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century werewolf was portrayed as even more evil and demonic, as seen in Elliot O'Donnell's 1912 story *Werewolves*. He wrote, "There burst into a view a gigantic figure.... In general form it was like that of a man, saving that the limbs were longer and covered with short hair.... Its head was partly human, partly lupine – the skull, ears, teeth, and eyes were those of a wolf, whilst the remaining features were those of a man.... its expression hellish" (52). It is interesting to note that O'Donnell's story is also one of the oldest werewolf stories that feature the monster standing up on its hind legs. This upright trend continued with the rise of cinema and the early boom of werewolf movies in the 1930s and 40s. Coudray discusses the changes that films such as the *Werewolf of London* (1932) and other werewolf movies brought about, saying, "The problem of turning an actor into a wolf resulted in a more hybrid kind of monster... which determined the werewolf's screen image for decades to come." (Coudray 73,74). Coudray goes on to explain how these early films, in particular the Lon Chaney *Wolfman* series that started in 1941, also introduced several other elements to the werewolf myth that were not present before – namely the vulnerability to silver, changing according to the full moon, the trope of an ancient tome that must be consulted, and the transmission

of the werewolf curse through a bite or attack (76, 77). Before these movies, lycanthropy was either a divine curse or magical ability, and while there is mention of lunar cycles in some old stories, they hardly agree on the cycle of the moon and are not a common feature. These Gothic werewolves borrow from the sympathetic werewolf stories of earlier ages, such as *Bisclavret*, but usually do not end well. Most Gothic werewolves from romantic literature all the way to cinema end tragically, and usually at the hand of someone who loves them.

The turbulent twentieth century took its toll on the American psyche. Horror movies became more realistic, visceral and gory and werewolf stories saw another boom in the body horror movies of the 1980s. Coudray explains that these new films were “indebted to earlier narratives about monsters, particularly the horror films of the 1930s and 1940s, in which the body had been displayed as a site of leakage, corruption, permeability, impurity, disease or painful metamorphosis” (83). The advances in special effects from the movies of the 1930s and 40s to the 1980s allowed directors to be creative in bringing their interpretations of werewolves and the werewolf transformation to life on the screen in a more realistic way. The movies and books of this time commonly portrayed the werewolf as a hideous monster, horrible and vicious, with the heroes of the story being shocked to discover that werewolves are real, and fighting against the beast. Werewolf stories of the 80s and 90s continued the Gothic trend of having the werewolf die at the end, but pushed the envelope of how repulsive the monster could be. *The Howling* (1981) ends with the infected main character voluntarily changing into a werewolf on live TV and getting shot, only to have a viewer dismiss it by saying, “The things they do with special effects these days.” This film kicked off five more *Howling*

movies, with the werewolves growing more and more monstrous in each movie. These werewolves retained many of the 20s and 30s werewolf traits, such as being vulnerable to silver, the werewolf changing at the full moon, and werewolfism being a curse.

As the century came to a close, the literary vision of the future grew dark, as we see in the rise of Cyberpunk. The end of the twentieth century was the heyday of horror, with the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* movie franchises, and werewolves were right at home. Annette Curtis Klause's 1997 novel *Blood and Chocolate* is all about monstrous, terrifying werewolves, but she begins to dismantle other pieces of the then set-in-stone werewolf trope. In many ways, her werewolves are transitional forms between the Gothic monsters of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the new werewolf we see in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 21st century werewolf is first and foremost a hero. Rather than werewolfism being a "curse", 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolves gain strength and power from their lycanthropy in the form of a strong positive tie to the natural world, an intimate link to a pack, and a sexy animal magnetism. Far from the terror of Gothic horror stories, or from the "real" evil medieval and renaissance werewolf hunted by the church, or the sympathetic werewolves of the 12<sup>th</sup> century wonder tales, or the classical werewolf cursed by the gods to learn a lesson, the 21st century werewolf is a person for the reader to love and envy. The rest of this paper will explore how the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf has a link to nature, a pack and a heightened attractiveness, and how these traits all come back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf's newfound sense of heroism.

## **From the State of Nature to Harmony with the Natural World**

Nature has long been the antithesis of humankind. Thomas Hobbes compared living without culture in a “state of nature” to living in a state of war, where life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (*Leviathan*, Chapters XIII–XIV). We have struggled against the wild and created civilization to protect ourselves from it, whether nature be the beasts, the elements, or all the mysterious forces out of our control and beyond our understanding.

During this age-old battle, the wolf has been a common target for humanity’s ire. Wolves once had the largest natural range of any land animal, second only to humanity. However, through systematic hunting, in modern times wolves have been put on the endangered species list. In pre-history humans may have gotten along with wolves well enough to domesticate some, but ever since we became farmers, wolves have represented everything we loathe and fear about nature. Coudray explains, “The wolf has long been associated with nature in Western thought.... Accordingly, the symbiosis of human and wolf in the figure of the werewolf has presented the opposition of nature (represented by the wolf) and culture (represented by the human) in potent terms” (3). Part of the horror of the werewolf stories of the past was the forced return of the werewolf to a natural state. The werewolf lost their connection to human culture and atavistically became a beast. For pre-20th century audiences, this opposition of nature vs. culture resonated with humanity’s struggle against the environment for survival.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the West’s fear of Nature has lessened. It has been slowly replaced with an appreciation for nature, and a fear of losing it. Climate change has moved from something to be concerned about to something inevitable to

prepare for, species have gone extinct, and ecosystems have been lost. If Coudray is right when she says, “The werewolf in every period has been informed by prevailing cultural values” (2), then such a change must also transform our monsters, and it certainly has with the wolf, whose image has flipped almost completely around. Coudray describes this change, saying:

Rather than focusing on the wolf’s alleged cunning and cruelty, or on its threat to livestock, environmentalists have claimed that wolves are in fact loyal, family-oriented, monogamous and affectionate, that they kill only what they need to eat... Indeed, in recent decades the wolf has come to rival the dolphin as a symbol of a New Age ecologically aware sensibility.  
(128)

With this kind of change, the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf can still be a monster, but far more often it is the hero of the story who has become a werewolf, who exults in their newfound link with nature. Interestingly, the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf can still be a primal killer and remain moral. Coudray explains, “The werewolf’s immersion in nature circumvents questions about the ethics of killing, because ethics are positioned as a function of culture” (145). No one calls the wolf hunting the rabbit “evil” – it is the wolf’s nature. And so we have a hero who can be vicious and brutal in ways that defy civilized humanity, resulting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf being the hero (or anti-hero) we all wish we could be.

This type of werewolf environmentalism was presaged in the 1981 movie *Wolfen*. The film follows a cop investigating a string of grisly murders in New York City, only to discover that the killings are caused by a mysterious and ancient group of intelligent and



mystical wolves called Wolfen. Native peoples explain to the cop that the Wolfen are angry because of humanity's rampant destruction of the environment. Native Americans and werewolves were tied together again in Stephanie Meyer's 2005 *Twilight* series, where the werewolves were all Native American shape shifters from one tribe.<sup>1</sup> However, Meyers did not create this concept. Many Native peoples believe in shape changers, or "skin walkers", and have long believed that they can change into coyotes and wolves (Otten 3, 4).

The White Wolf novel and game series *Werewolf the Apocalypse* is the strongest example of the werewolf as nature's ally. *Werewolf the Apocalypse* was first published in 1992 as a role playing game to go along with White Wolf Publishing's World of Darkness games. Players could enter a modern urban fantasy world and play as vampires, mages and, with *Werewolf the Apocalypse*, werewolves. These werewolves were the "children of Gaia," born to protect the Earth from humanity's rampant industrialism and the forces of evil. The game made its environmentalist stance extremely clear with the following, written on the back cover of the book:

The humans have Corrupted the Earth  
Destroyed the Trees  
Slaughtered the Beasts

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<sup>1</sup> I want to make sure my use of the term "werewolf" is clear, with clear respect to the *Twilight* series. Meyers actually has two different types of werewolves in her story, and makes a point to differentiate between them, calling her Native American werewolves "shapeshifters" and very briefly mentioning that there are more traditional werewolves within her world called the "Children of the Moon." These Children stand bipedally as a wolf, and don't retain their intelligence when they change. As can be seen in the historical section of this paper, her two different types of werewolves are similar to two different time periods' conceptions, with her Children of the Moon being the monsters of 1980s and 90s film, and her Native shape shifters being closer to classical and medieval werewolves. Since she only mentions the Children of the Moon briefly, and the Native shape shifters are the featured werewolves of the story, throughout this paper I will use the term "werewolf" to refer to her Native American shapeshifters.

Choked the Air

Poisoned the Soil

Clogged the Waters

Unleashed the Eternal Fire

The game was a success, and followed by a series of novels, a card game and a PC game. However, in 2005, White Wolf Publishing re-launched the game as *Werewolf the Forsaken*, and completely stripped the werewolves of their environmentalist purpose. In a personal interview, Martin Ericsson, White Wolf Publishing's current Lead Storyteller and Brand Architect, explained the change to me, saying, "My personal belief is that the shift was made to address the many jokes made at *Apocalypse*'s expense ("Captain Planet<sup>2</sup> with furries<sup>3</sup>") and perhaps because of the very partisan opinions about global warming in the US." It is significant that this year *Werewolf the Apocalypse* has relaunched. Ericsson said, "We are returning to *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. The myth of the werewolf as Gaia's warrior and our natural predator is powerful and important, especially in a time where The Apocalypse of climate change is no longer fringe theory but established scientific fact" (Ericsson).

Of course, not all 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf stories go this far – most ignore the question of nature altogether, which is the point. Werewolf stories from antiquity up through Gothic horror saw the transformation of human into wolf as frightening precisely

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<sup>2</sup> *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* was a 1990s children's cartoon that sought to educate kids on environmentalist issues. The show featured five kids from around the world chosen by Gaia to protect the Earth from man-made environmental dangers. Every episode ended with an educational short, telling the viewer how they can make a difference at home. The show received criticism for its environmentalist message.

<sup>3</sup> Furries are people of the furry fandom subculture who enjoy and often identify with anthropomorphic animal characters through artwork, and who sometimes wear varying degrees of animal costumes. Furries have been painted in a negative light due to sensationalized stories and reports on TV and in the media focusing on sex and pornography.

because the werewolf was being dragged back to a natural state. The werewolf stories of today, even the ones that do not have an environmental message, still show the werewolf running through the woods, enjoying their place in nature, free from the constraints of culture and exalting in their beastliness. For example, the werewolves of the 2014 TV show *Bitten* often go for runs in their wolf forms through the woods as a bonding exercise, and they clearly enjoy it. The werewolves of Toby Barlow's 2009 *Sharp Teeth* look for natural places to run in the area around Los Angeles, and the werewolves of Maggie Stiefvater's 2014 *Shiver (The Wolves of Mercy Falls Book 1)* run and play in the large woods next to the town. Werewolves do not need to be fighting for nature in order to demonstrate their positive connection to it.

The fact that Nature itself has become something seen as positive, valuable, and needing to be protected has lead directly to werewolves becoming the heroes of their stories. The curse of being dragged back to a natural state has been reversed and has become a blessing instead. This connection to nature often comes with a struggle, with characters having to learn to live with their bestial side in order to not hurt their loves ones, but on most modern stories, this challenge is overcome and the werewolvesim becomes something of a super power, rather than a curse. Even in the stories with evil werewolves, the 21<sup>st</sup> century trend is that their evil comes from their human side, and is only amplified by their powers as a werewolf. For such villains, their link to nature is not even explored. 21<sup>st</sup> century good characters more often remain good as werewolves, incorporating a theme of coming to terms with their link to nature, and finding it as a source of strength.

## **From Lone Wolves to the Pack Animals**

"Whatever the reason, it appears that Americans are connected far less tightly now than they were 19 years ago. Furthermore, ties with local neighborhoods and groups have suffered at a higher rate than others," writes professors and psychologists Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears in *Social Isolation in America* (McPherson et al. 373). Over the last 25 years, Americans have grown more isolated, with fewer meaningful relationships in their lives. This is in stark contrast to the seemingly more connected state we find ourselves in, with access to social media, and instant connections possible through text and cell phone calls. Werewolf stories we tell have changed as well to reflect this sense of disconnectedness. Older werewolf stories always showed the werewolf losing their loved ones and being driven to solitude. The viewer would be moved, possibly thinking of losing their status and their place in society. They could imagine what it would be like to have their loved ones afraid of them (Coudray 79). In many 20<sup>th</sup> century movies, such as *An American Werewolf in London*, the werewolf could only be killed by someone who loved it. In the films and stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, werewolves were either lone protagonists who suffered under their curse and grew more isolated because of it (such as in 1941's *The Wolfman* or 1981's *The Howling*), or the lone monster that the heroes faced together (such as in Stephen King's 1985 *Silver Bullet*). With 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences already feeling isolated, authors have tapped into the wolf's natural instinct to be a pack animal. The werewolf of today is social, and has family ties that readers and viewers envy. If each age's werewolf reflects

the values of the day, then today's werewolf reflects a desire for connectedness and a sense of belonging.

Examples of the new trend for werewolves having packs can be found in Annette Curtis Klause's novel *Blood and Chocolate*, the *Underworld* movie franchise, Toby Barlow's novel *Sharp Teeth*, and the popular TV show *Teen Wolf*. *Blood and Chocolate* was published in 1997, right at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and provides a perfect example of this shift in werewolf stories. In the book, werewolves are a separate species from humans who have lived alongside us in secret. The Gandillons, the werewolf family of the story, are dysfunctional and crude, and the main character Vivian fights against her pack's insistence that she marry Gabriel, the pack leader and her cousin. Instead she has a love affair with a human boy named Aiden, only to have him reject her when she reveals what she really is. The novel ends with Vivian realizing that Gabriel, and her pack, were what was right for her all along. This story is particularly interesting because when it was later made into a film the ending was changed, casting Gabriel as a shallow villain and Vivian riding off with the human she loves. The movie was not received as well as the book, perhaps because the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience craved a story about belonging within a group more than a tired "against the odds" love story. The werewolves of the 2003 *Underworld* movie and its sequels are all male and live underground as a family pack. They exist in stark contrast to the movie's vampires, who live in a mansion in luxury, but who are constantly betraying each other in their quests for individual power in their coven. The werewolf dogs in Toby Barlow's novel *Sharp Teeth* are gangs in Los Angeles, almost all male, who live together as brothers. Barlow's heroic pack leader Lark recruits young men to join his pack by offering them purpose and a pack life that they

could never find living alone on the streets. Even Greyback and Lupin, the werewolves in the *Harry Potter* series, though one is painted evil and one good, both enjoy being part of their own social packs. One of the most popular 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf stories is the TV series *Teen Wolf*, which revolves around teenage Scott McCall, who is bitten and changed into a werewolf. The show makes a point of showing that Scott is a great leader because he protects his pack, made up of his friends, who are like his family. It is interesting to note that Scott's actual family is only his mother – his father is absent, and when he returns to the story he is introduced as an obstacle. So, in this story, we see a teenage boy and his friends building a family of their own, their own pack, who, through adversity, grow incredibly close with each other. It is no wonder the show gained instant popularity with 21<sup>st</sup> century audiences, both teenage and adult. For the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf, its pack is part of its strength, part of its ability to act and be heroic. It is also part of the draw of the story – readers and viewers enjoy seeing these people who are closer than friends or family. We hunger for that kind of connection, and enjoy visiting worlds where we can borrow it for a time.

### **From Hideous Monsters to Sexy Beasts**

Up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, werewolves have by and large been frightening monsters, but recently with the rise of the werewolf hero there has come something new to the page and screen – the sexy werewolf. One could argue that Lon Chaney was meant to be a sex symbol in the 1941 movie *The Wolfman*, but as his lycanthropy takes hold he becomes less and less attractive. Coudray points out that the traditional 20<sup>th</sup> century werewolf character is either introduced as a disheveled man with bags under his eyes and

looking ragged, or he slowly becomes that way as the story progresses (85, 86). The first heroically attractive werewolf to come to film is Scott Howard (played by Michael J. Fox) in the 1985 film *Teen Wolf*. While *Teen Wolf* did well at the box office, it was not a serious story but rather a comedic spin on the old *Wolfman* movies of the 1930s and 40s, and *The Howling* and other werewolf horror movies of the 1980s. Still, it presaged the trend that would become the norm about 20 years later with the release of Stephanie Meyer's novel *Twilight*.

Meyers' werewolves are not the monsters of the 1980s and 90s, but rather young, fit, Native American men (female werewolves arrive in her later novels), with bulging muscles and washboard abs. When they transform into wolves, they become huge, beautiful, soft-furred, magnificent creatures. In the 2007 film version of *Blood and Chocolate*, the werewolves turn into beautiful wolves as well, although in her 1997 novel Klaus describes the wolf form of the werewolves as monstrous, frightening, and only vaguely wolf-like. When her heroine Vivian reveals who and what she really is to Aiden, the human boy whom she loves, she is so disgusting and terrifying that all Aiden can do is cry and whimper. However, when the film version of the story came out ten years later in 2007, Vivian and her pack changed into actual wolves, lovely and majestic, amid swirls of beautiful color. It may seem a small difference, but the ramifications are worth discussing. In the novel, after Aiden sees Vivian transform, he is too terrified to talk to Vivian again. Seeing that Vivian is actually a monster ruins their romance, and this revelation is the catalyst for the book's conclusion, in which she returns to her pack and learns that they were right all along, and where she belongs. With the film featuring beautiful werewolves that Aiden is not innately scared of, the script needed to add a fight

between Aiden and one of Vivian's cousins – clearly because as a werewolf Vivian simply is not scary, so long as Aiden knows it is Vivian. In fact, when he does see Vivian in wolf form, he hugs her and saves her life, and then the two of them run off together to live happily ever after. The film is placed solidly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the werewolves of literature and film often change into actual wolves, as they did in the stories of the medieval period and before. Monstrous werewolves do still exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but have largely died out. At the beginning of the century we had the 2002 film *Dog Soldiers*, 2003's *Underworld* and 2004's *Van Helsing*, each of which featured bipedal, frightening werewolves. However, once *Twilight* hit the bookshelves in 2005, storytellers saw the public's hunger for attractive monsters, and the bipedal monstrous werewolves became rare. The *Teen Wolf* TV series werewolves are notably bipedal, but they were inspired by the style of the original *Teen Wolf* movie, with the heroic werewolves being clearly people with some light facial prosthetics, so that the attractiveness of the actor underneath is diminished as little as possible.

It is important to note that this beautification of werewolves is situated within a larger cultural shift towards more purposefully sexy monsters. Vampires and witches had already been portrayed as seductive long before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is only now that we see the general beautification of werewolves as well, in both their beast and human forms. For example, the actor who plays Jacob in the *Twilight* series is sexy enough that an entire generation of readers argued and took sides over who was more attractive, he or the sparkly vampire Edward. The *Teen Wolf* TV series is packed with sexy men taking their shirts off, clearly objectifying the males of the show more than the females. The TV show *Bitten* revolves around a pack of werewolves who are constantly undressing to



change, and all of whom are fit to be models. *True Blood's* werewolves follow the same pattern: sexy actors who cannot wait to take off their clothes – for the transformation sequence, of course. It is not only in visual media that we see these attractive people who just happen to be werewolves. As mentioned previously, the werewolves of *Twilight* are described in the novel as having an undeniable draw. The human side of the werewolf hero Lark in *Sharp Teeth* is a suave and confident lady killer, while the teenage werewolves in *Shiver* are all described as either cute and adorable or downright hot. While Michael J. Fox stands out as one of the few purposefully attractive werewolves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is rare to find a homely, overweight, or even simply average werewolf in 21<sup>st</sup> century stories.

It is clear that part of this change must be chalked up to the old adage, sex sells. Add to that a strong Western 21<sup>st</sup> century awareness of fashion and beauty, and it is no wonder our werewolves have become sexy. However, this is only part of the explanation – we also want our werewolves to be attractive because they are now our heroes. The werewolf is the protagonist, the character who we want to imagine being. We want to peer out at the world through their eyes. While having unattractive protagonists is certainly possible, as a rule, they are usually attractive people. Even if the author does not describe the hero or heroine of a story as particularly attractive, when we imagine them, we see them as attractive. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolves have become sexy beasts in large part because they are heroic.

### **Our Monster Has Become Our Hero**

Monsters have evolved over time to reflect the societies that have envisioned them. From earliest history, our monsters embodied humanity's fear of nature and the gods. The Medieval period was dominated by the influence of the Church, and their monsters reflected the people's fear of damnation. The Enlightenment threw off that influence and monsters became reflections of humanity's fear of insanity, mutation and the unknown. In more recent literary history, the monster came closer to home – it could be the neighbor, it could be your children, and finally it could be you. Frightening stories force the reader and viewer to face their own monstrosity, and to a degree, 21<sup>st</sup> century readers have accepted this. Stories that force us to admit what we might be capable of are not quite so shocking anymore. We know that we are monsters. We know that we are the ones destroying the planet, that we are the ones isolating ourselves from those around us, that we are capable of horrors, and that we are ugly creatures on the inside. However, we do not want to end the story there. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a renaissance of werewolf stories, with more werewolf books, movies, and TV shows than ever before. The werewolf calls to our awareness of our own dark side, our inner monster, something just below the surface lurking in the shadows of your souls. Werewolf stories give us a chance to see that inner monstrosity played out metaphorically. The natural evolution of the monster has taught us that we are the real darkness of the world. Now it is time for us to turn around and make something out of our beastly side. We want to see these heroic werewolves use that very monstrosity as a source of strength.

It is taking the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf some time to understand its true heroic nature. There are leftovers from previous werewolf stories that many authors incorporate into modern stories, but even these are changed subtly to reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A good

example is the reluctant werewolf motif. In older werewolf stories, it was common to have the “cursed” werewolf lament that he or she wishes they could simply have a normal life. They see what they are losing, perhaps friends or family, or that they are becoming a ghastly murderous creature. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century *Teen Wolf* TV show, the hero Scott McCall whines about not wanting the “curse,” but his complaints fall flat. After being bitten Scott’s hearing, sense of smell, speed and strength all become superhuman. The only cost for these abilities is that he must ground himself and find inner peace in the midst of his rage, or he might become dangerous to those he loves. This danger is short lived, however, as Scott masters his inner beast and becomes a superhero within only a few episodes. Many fans of *Teen Wolf* would love to be werewolves. Similarly, in the TV show *Bitten*, Elena Michaels, the main character, says “I just want a normal life” so often that it could be her mantra. She changes into a strong, beautiful wolf at will, she ages slower than humans, and she has a werewolf pack that she is bonded to closer than any human family could ever be. Her problem is that while she craves a normal life with her human lover, her tight bond with her pack keeps drawing her back to help them out when they are in danger. But even here, we see a dramatic shift from the older werewolf stories. Both Scott and Elena are reluctant superheroes who crave regular lives. They are not the victims of a curse so much as recipients of great power, who can now no longer live normal lives. This subtle changing of an old motif borrows directly from superhero stories, and demonstrates further the 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolf’s status as a hero.

Of course, not all 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolves are heroic – there are still some sympathetic werewolves who become dangerous monsters, such as George in the British TV show *Being Human*. There are also villainous werewolves, such as Rowling’s Fenrir

Greyback. Even within these examples, we see the trend for heroic werewolves - George is one of the primary protagonists of the show, and Fenris is counterbalanced by the heroic professor Lupin. 21<sup>st</sup> century werewolves tend to be the heroes of their tales, and while their powers may come at a price, the cost is one many readers and viewers would gladly pay to be positively linked to nature, to have a family pack, and to be a sexy beast.

As we move deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the werewolf will change again to match the prevailing values of the time. It is the werewolf's mutable nature that has placed it squarely as one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's leading monsters, and it is likely to stay there.

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