

The Lycanthrope Club: Book II

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Melinda was gaining on her quarry. She didn't stop to wonder who or what she was pursuing, let alone why. She wasn't even sure how long she'd been running. All that mattered was the chase. Every step, every breath she took sent waves of joy coursing through her while the sight of her retreating prey filled her with a cruel, wicked delight.

Onward she ran, weaving nimbly between the trees, leaping over fallen logs and bushes, utterly focused on her target. The surrounding trees were massive, ancient things that exuded a somber alien menace. A full moon gleamed in the cloudless star-filled sky, shining its pale light down upon her. Though there was little wind their branches swayed violently in the chill air casting thousands of spindly, writhing shadows. Yet here in this dark foreboding realm, Melinda felt at home. There was nothing to be afraid of out here. She was the monster. And she reveled in it.

The weeds and brambles thickened and the trees loomed taller. It became increasingly difficult for her to keep her prey in sight. Twice it disappeared into the foliage only to reemerge yards ahead of where it had been. She sped up, but soon was forced to slow as the ground grew more tangled and unsteady. Eventually, Melinda lost track of her prey altogether. Snarling, she skidded to a halt. She lowered her head and sniffed the cool musty ground, feeling the dirt press against her leathery nostrils. There, among the countless smells of the forest, she discerned her prey's scent. She took a few steps forward, still sniffing, tracing the direction her quarry had gone, then sprinted off into the forest.

The ground began to slope upwards. Though she could not see it through the gloom she sensed she was ascending a shallow hill. If she could reach the top it could provide the vantage she needed to spot her prey. She slowed to a steady trot, keeping her body low. As soon as she felt the ground level she crouched and peered downwards. At first she saw nothing. Then, Melinda's ears perked. It sounded like a twig had snapped somewhere to her left. She turned and after a few seconds saw a flicker of motion in the darkness. Her keen eyes soon made sense of the shadowy tableau.

It looked as though her prey had stumbled into a dense patch of briars at the base of the hill. One of its legs had gotten stuck and it was trying to pull itself free without making too much noise. Licking her lips, Melinda took a few steps forward, circling her prey, watching its struggles with catlike interest. Suddenly, there was another, louder snapping sound. Melinda froze, looked down at her feet and saw she had stepped on a branch. Cursing, she looked back at her prey. It was staring at her through terror-filled eyes. Screaming, it violently tore its leg free and dashed off. Melinda followed, taking advantage of the downhill slope to rapidly accelerate.

She was close, now. Very close. She could tell by its rapid, wheezing breaths and clumsy gait that her prey was getting tired. It wasn't long before the gap between the two of them narrowed to mere yards. Then, whether having tripped or simply succumbed to exhaustion, her prey stumbled to the ground. Melinda instinctively crouched low, bunching her muscles together like a coiled spring, and leapt into the air. Sensing danger her prey whirled around and shielded its face. There was a long, drawn-out crunch as the two bodies collided and rolled along the forest floor. Once momentum had carried them as far as it could Melinda lurched forward, pressing herself against her victim with a throaty growl and for the first time got a clear glimpse of her quarry.

Staring back at her was the terror-stricken face of a teenage boy.

Melinda hesitated. It hadn't previously occurred to her that her prey had been bipedal. Yet somehow, it didn't seem to matter. He was hers now. She lowered her head until her muzzle was less than an inch from the teenager's face. She snarled, displaying two seemingly endless rows of white, sharp, shiny teeth. Drool trickled down her black lips.

"Please...no," whimpered the boy. Tears were running down his cheeks.

Melinda growled once again, fascinated by his fear. In truth she wasn't quite sure what she wanted to do with him.

"Let me go!" he wailed, thrashing about.

Surprised and angered, Melinda grabbed his arms with her paw-like hands and squeezed. The boy cried out and stopped squirming, eyes shut, teeth clenched in pain. She loosened her grip slightly, shaking her head in amusement. He was so weak compared to her. Vulnerable. Helpless.

Perhaps...

Perhaps there was something she could do about that.

Melinda grinned horribly. The boy immediately sensed her intention.

"No...don't..." begged the boy, trembling in mortal terror.

His eyes widened as Melinda opened her mouth and bore down on him...

* * *

...Plush warmth surrounded her. Melinda stirred beneath the covers. She turned over on one side, yawning, wondering vaguely where the boy had gone.

She opened her eyes. Nine inches away on her bedside cabinet sat her alarm clock. Its dull green LED display read 3:37 AM. She groaned and cupped her face, rubbing her eyelids. She froze, and then slowly shifted her body left and right. The mattress felt uncharacteristically soft and yielding. She stared down at her hands, barely visible in the dim light cast by the digits of her clock.

"Damn it," she hissed.

Melinda threw off the blankets, got up and walked to the hallway door, muttering under her breath in a curiously deep voice. She carefully nudged the door open and peered through the crack. The hallway was empty. Satisfied, she slipped out. She made her way to another door a couple feet away from her bedroom, opened it and stepped inside, locking the way behind her.

It looked like a typical bathroom - tile counter, sinks, soap dispenser, vanity mirror, shower, and toilet. A faint monochrome glow emanated from a translucent sky window above. Melinda reluctantly looked into the mirror. Even with her keen vision she could only make out a vague outline but it was enough to confirm what she already knew. Sighing, she flicked the switch on the wall beside her.

Blinding white light flooded the room. Melinda shielded her eyes briefly as they adjusted to the sudden radiance. Slowly, she lowered her hand and stared at her reflection in the mirror.

The being before her was enormous. Equal parts human and wolf, she stood on the balls of her feet, knees bent, body slightly hunched. She was easily seven, perhaps eight feet tall, barely fitting in the frame of the mirror. Dense fur, black as ebony, covered her from head to bushy tail, thinning slightly along her abdomen and stomach. Muscles flexed visibly beneath her pelt when she moved, tempered by modest yet unmistakably feminine curves. Her hands, or paws, sported stubby yet powerful padded leathery digits tipped with sharp claws. Tufted, pointed, lupine ears flicked back and forth on her head, which sported a wild black mane that extended past her broad shoulders.

Melinda leaned forward and examined her face. Though definitely lupine, it was not the face of a wolf. She had a prominent forehead, pursed lips and relatively short muzzle. Her yellow eyes were large and expressive, literally glowing with an inner light. There was both a savage strength and sad, gentle beauty in her countenance.

She glanced up at the bathroom wall clock, hesitated, and then sighed.

"Not again," she said.



Melinda took a deep breath. She stood there, perfectly still. Seconds ticked by. Nothing happened. Then, she shivered. Her entire body started to...shrink. Her fur receded, her muzzle flattened and her claws disappeared. The yellow light in her eyes dimmed and disappeared altogether, revealing bright, emerald irises. Her ears traveled down her head to her temples and rounded out. Her tail slithered up into her body.

In less than a minute the creature was gone - replaced by a naked teenage girl with black hair.

Shaking her head, Melinda reached for a bathrobe hanging on the bathroom wall. Once dressed, she shut off the lights and exited the bathroom. Though no one was around to see it, the moon briefly appeared in the sky window through a break in the clouds and then faded into the night.

* * *

The sun shimmered in the sky over Pinebrook High School. The parking lot, soccer field, basketball courts, and tracks were empty. A large banner hung over the wide double-doors, the words "Go Wolves!" written on its surface in white letters against a red background within a black border, silhouettes of a howling wolf head flanking the text. Inside the hallways were similarly deserted, though a few students were already moving between classes.

A shrill, metallic ringing pierced the air. It persisted for a few seconds, and then fell silent. Doors everywhere swung open. Hundreds of students poured out of the classrooms, flooding the walkways, corridors, and fields of the sprawling high school.

Melinda's black heels clicked smartly on the floor as she walked. She adjusted the right sleeve of her white blouse and glanced down at her watch. A few students nodded to her as she passed by. One or two boys watched her go with shy, telling smiles. Less than a year ago those same students wouldn't have given her the time of day, she reflected. As much as she'd like to attribute their newfound admiration to her success on the school lacrosse team and her now athletic body, the fact that she was now friends with Cynthia Carpenter, Lily Forger, and Heidi Erikson - the three most popular girls in the school - probably had more to do with it.

Flattering as it was, attention was the last thing she wanted right now.

She scanned the bobbing sea of heads and soon spied two familiar faces near the lockers. One had dark brown hair, tan skin - clearly Hispanic - and a generous but admittedly attractive application of makeup. The other, gorgeous by any standard, sported beautiful yellow hair, perfect complexion, ruby-red lips, and impressive curves even for a teenager.

The brunette gave her a little wave.

"Over here, Melinda!" called Lily.

Melinda quickened her pace, cutting through the crowd. She approached the girls.

"Hey, where's Heidi?" she asked.

"She'll be here in a bit," said Cynthia, brushing back her blonde hair. "She must still be changing in the locker room...no, not that kind of 'changing,'" she added dryly after seeing Melinda's reaction.

"I know," said Melinda, irritated. "But after what happened last week..."

"Jesus," groaned Cynthia. "Still going about on that?"

"Of course I am," snapped Melinda. "She's lucky I noticed before anyone else did."

"Maybe you should have warned us that stuff like that can happen," said Lily, folding her arms.

"I didn't know it could," replied Melinda. She lowered her voice. "Look, we need to discuss the...accident in detail at the next meeting so it's really, really important you actually show up at lunch next Friday. Okay?"

Cynthia rubbed her forehead

"Fine, but next time, just text us," she said. "It's easier."

"You know the rules," said Melinda firmly. "Don't mention the club online, on the phone or anywhere else it could be recorded unless absolutely necessary."

"Yeah, yeah first rule of Fight Club and all that," snorted Cynthia. "God, could you be any more paranoid? Look, people are talking more and more about the club because of all this secret shit. Whenever someone asks about joining I can't give a straight answer - the club doesn't exist, you don't meet our requirements, the club is breaking up, we aren't accepting new members, blah blah blah. Why did we start this stupid club in the first place?"

"It was your idea," said Melinda. "And keep it down."

"As a joke," replied Cynthia. "It's not my fault everyone went along with it."

"You just wanted to be able to reserve a classroom."

"Excuse me for wanting a little fucking privacy at lunch every once in a while. Is it so much to ask NOT to have half the school staring at my ass and the other half kissing it while I eat?"

"Oh please, you live for the attenti-"

"Hey gals!"

The trio turned and saw a tall, redheaded, freckled teenage girl with blushed skin in a red sports uniform jogging towards them trailed by a petite girl with brown hair peppered with thin white streaks wearing a modest green skirt and long-sleeved blue shirt.

"Heya!" said the redhead, laughing. "Sorry we took so long."

"Oh, uh, no problem, Heidi," said Melinda. "'Morning, Yvette."

"Good morning, Melinda," said the brunette, smiling brightly, a trace of a French accent in her voice. "Cynthia, Lily."

"Hey Yvette."

"Did you all have a fun weekend?" asked Heidi, wiping the sweat from her face.

"It was okay," said Cynthia, shrugging.

"Yeah," said Melinda unenthusiastically.

Heidi laughed.

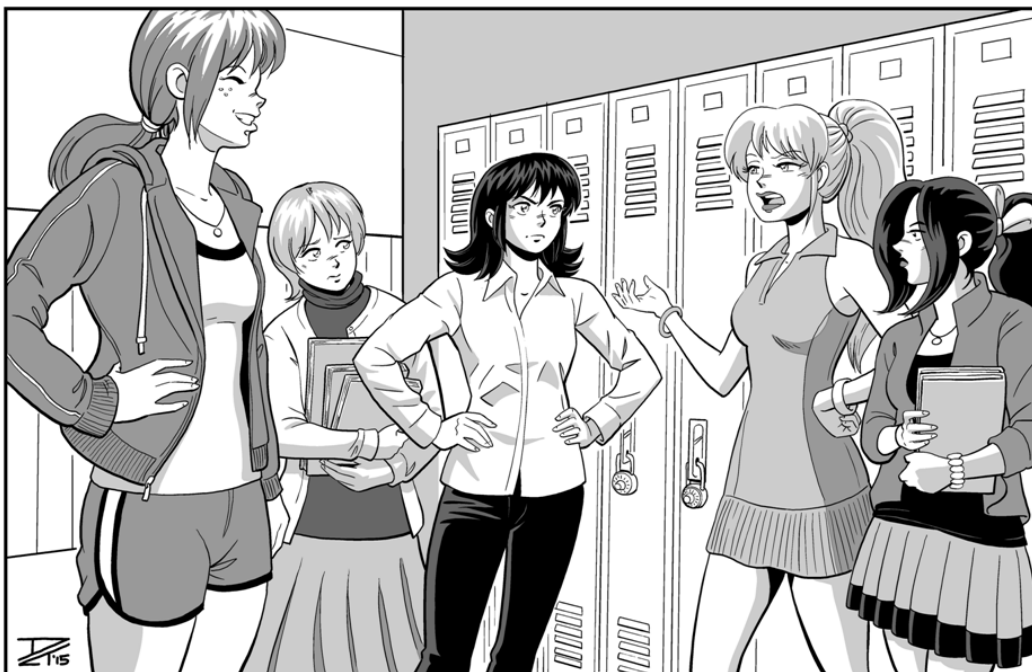
"Geez, sounds like you two had a real blast," she said. "Was the quilting bee too exciting to sit through?"

"Well, what did you do?" said Cynthia crossly. "Did your skinny ass get enough exercise or were you only able to squeeze in seven marathons?"

Melinda chuckled despite herself.

"Eh, only did about a half-marathon around the town," said Heidi, shrugging. "Not my best. But I'm trying to focus more on weight-lifting right now s-"

"Forget it," sighed Cynthia. "I'm sorry I asked."



"Well, I went to see that new Julia Roberts movie," said Yvette happily. "It was pretty good."

"Oh, was that the one where she goes out with that guy and they..." began Lily, wagging her fingers.

"Yeah!" chuckled Yvette.

"It's hilarious!"

"So, what's up?" said Heidi, glancing at Cynthia and Melinda. "It looked like you two were discussing something."

"Melinda here wanted to make sure we were all coming to the meeting next Friday," said Cynthia.

"Why didn't she just text us?"

"She's afraid the NSA would intercept it or some other bullshit," explained Cynthia, rolling her baby-blue eyes.

"What, seriously?" said Heidi, nonplused.

"No, I just think-" began Melinda. She stopped, sighed, and continued. "Look, I'll save it for the meeting. It'll be at the same time, same place. Everyone needs to be there, no excuses."

The assembled girls nodded.

"Good," said Melinda wearily. "See you then."

Cynthia, Heidi, and Lily turned and disappeared into the crowd, chatting amongst themselves as they walked. Yvette remained.

"Oh, was there something else you wanted to talk about?" asked Melinda.

"Not at the moment," said Yvette, shaking her head.

"Then, uh..." said Melinda, confused.

"I just thought we'd be walking to class together," said Yvette.

Melinda slapped her forehead.

"Oh, duh, we both have English next period," she exclaimed. "God I'm stupid."

"It's no big deal," laughed Yvette.

"Well, I didn't get much sleep last night," muttered Melinda, turning and walking down the hall.

"Insomnia?" inquired Yvette, following her.

"Yeah, sort of," said Melinda uneasily.

"It's probably the full moon," said Yvette, lowering her voice. "Only a couple of days from now. Always makes me feel a little restless."

"Tell me about it," said Melinda, shaking her head. "I thought I'd gotten used to it by now but it gets harder every month."

"Well, the last few full moons have fallen on weekdays," said Yvette, maneuvering between two girls in the crowd. "They're harder to deal with. The next two full moons fall on weekends, so that'll give us a bit of a break."

"I dunno," murmured Melinda. "We always wind up spending too much time out in the preserve and spend the next day catching up on our sleep. At least on school nights there's...kind of a motivation to get home before midnight. God, I still can't believe we're getting away with this."

"Sooner or later we're going to have to tell our parents, Melinda," said Yvette after a short pause. "If not...one of these days, they're going to catch us."

"I know, I know," said Melinda, stopping at one of the classroom doors. "It's just... we've managed to make this work. I don't know how, but we have. No one has caught us, we've always found an excuse to get out the house on full moon nights, hell, Lily's friend's uncle agreed to sell us raw beef in bulk at a discount."

"I understand, Melinda," said Yvette. "But...that incident during the tennis match? That close call in August? And don't forget that Lily, Heidi, and Cynthia will be graduating in a year."

"I get it," sighed Melinda, wringing her hands. "We do need to talk about it. Just...save it for the meeting, 'kay?"

"Of course," said Yvette, smiling.

Melinda returned her smile, though Melinda's wasn't quite as jovial. The two girls stepped inside the classroom just as the last bell rang.

* * *

Everything had worked out surprisingly well...at first, thought Melinda as she sat in her bedroom staring drearily into the glow of her computer's monitor. The assignment was due in two days yet she couldn't concentrate. Her mind kept drifting back to the events of the last year-and-a-half. She'd been thinking about everything that had happened more and more lately, if only to take her mind off more immediate developments.

It had all started when her father, concerned that she was spending too much time reading and not enough time outdoors, decided to take the family camping at a distant park. Admittedly something of a homebody and introvert at the time, Melinda hadn't been thrilled by the prospect; camping trips were some-

thing dads did with their sons, not their daughters. Despite her protests her father had insisted they go and her mother, sharing his concerns, agreed to the venture. During her very first night at the park Melinda wandered off a path and got lost in the forest. Frightening as it had been, nothing could have prepared her for what happened soon after. She tumbled into a deep pit and encountered something down there - massive, ancient, and furry. Miraculously, she'd escaped and found her way back to the camp, but not before being bitten on the shoulder. Two weeks later Melinda awoke in the middle of the night sweating and nauseated. Fearing she was about to throw up she staggered into her bathroom and there, under the light of a full moon, transformed into an enormous, black-furred werewolf.



Contrary to legend, she did not go mad with rage and bloodlust, though she had been understandably terrified by her metamorphosis. Incredibly, Melinda soon embraced what she had become. Being a werewolf was...amazing. The change granted her incredible strength, preternatural agility, superhuman senses, and a powerful, savage beauty. She soon discovered that she could shift from human to werewolf and back again at will outside the full moon's influence. Better yet, the transformation drastically altered her metabolism. In a matter of weeks her pasty, willowy body grew trim, healthy and toned with little effort on her part.

However, there had been another, more insidious side to her transformation. The new form had new urges and instincts. During her very first night as a werewolf she chased down and devoured a full-grown deer. When girls at her school harassed her, she growled at them. While playing tag football she tackled her opponent to the ground instead of snatching the flag from his belt. This isn't to say she couldn't control these impulses; they just sort of...snuck up on her. In any case, they proved to be only minor nuisances. Until the night of the big football match at Pinebrook High, that is.

Melinda had never attended a game before; she wasn't a sports enthusiast by any stretch. Then, after witnessing her performance in P.E., a girl on the school's lacrosse team invited her to the football match, hinting that she wanted her to join her league. No one at school had invited Melinda to do anything and so, surprised and grateful, Melinda agreed to go. At first it proved to be great fun but things quickly turned sour.

After the game, Yvette witnessed Melinda changing into a werewolf and ran away screaming. The sight of her retreating friend triggered Melinda's predatory instincts. She chased down and captured Yvette and bit her during the confusion. The next day Melinda met Yvette at school and tried to explain things. Unfortunately, Cynthia and her cronies saw the pair and decided to have some fun with them. They mocked Yvette until she snapped and bit the three of them before running off into the Pinebrook Wildlife Preserve. That very evening - a full-moon night - Cynthia, Heidi, and Lily transformed into werewolves. After explaining things to the trio, Melinda bullied them into helping her find Yvette. The four of them managed to track Yvette down but bringing her back proved far more difficult. For some reason, Yvette had changed into a larger, more feral variety of werewolf, seemingly unaware of who she was. She attacked Cynthia and probably would have killed her were it not for Cynthia's newfound lycanthropic regeneration. In the end, Melinda managed to return Yvette to her senses after tearfully apologizing and the five of them went home.

Afterwards the five girls settled into a routine. Every full-moon evening they met out in the wildlife preserve to hunt. If game was scarce, they'd pick up a huge order of ground beef at the local grocery store and hold a barbeque in the woods. Though it sounded like a hassle (and in many ways it was), it was also exhilarating. Running through the forest late at night, the wind blowing through their fur, the full moon shining down upon them, the scent of their prey - it was the ultimate release. On a whim, Cynthia made their group an official school club, registering it as "The Fantasy Book Club," though amongst themselves they referred to it - through whispered giggles - as The Lycanthrope Club. Apart from their monthly rendezvous at the park the five girls convened twice a month at school to discuss things - mostly their schedules, since they had to be careful to leave full moon nights open. Though Cynthia, Lily, and Heidi had hardly been cordial with Melinda and Yvette prior the incident they slowly warmed up to them. Melinda sometimes darkly wondered if it was genuine affection or some kind of instinctual pack mentality. In any case, Cynthia, Heidi, and Lily were the most popular girls at school, so their own popularity skyrocketed.

However, all good things come to an end. With the start of school the five girls found it increasingly difficult to fit their schedules around their monthly outings. Graduation was a little less than two years away and they were all busy filling their college applications with extra-curricular activities. Melinda had signed up for girl's lacrosse and track; Heidi had joined no less than six school sports teams. Pressure to succeed weighed heavily upon the girls. It became increasingly difficult to fit their schedule around their monthly outings. Fights had broken out more times than she could count, sometimes even between Heidi, Cynthia, and Lily, who had been close even before their transformation.

Melinda slumped back into the thick black padding of her chair with an exhausted sigh. There was a knock at her door. Melinda casually sniffed the air.

"Come in, mom," she said.

Melinda's mother - a trim, well-dressed, well-manicured and well-to-do middle-aged brunette - stepped inside.

"That's downright uncanny, dear," she said, smiling. "I don't know how you keep doing it."

"Lucky guess," said Melinda.

"Dinner's ready," said her mother. "Why don't you take a break and come down?"

"Sure, mom," sighed Melinda, leaning back and stretching her arms.

"By the way," said her mother, "I was taking out the garbage and this receipt slipped out."

Melinda blinked.

"Er, so what?" she said, trying to sound uninterested.

Her mother unfolded a crumpled bit of paper.

"It's just...I can't ever recall purchasing fifteen pounds of raw ground beef," continued Melinda's mother in a confused, mildly suspicious tone. "At first I thought it was your father but even he doesn't buy

that much meat in a single trip and I asked him about it to be certain. Do you have any idea where this could have come from?"

Several awkward, tense seconds of silence passed. Melinda looked up at her mother's inquiring face and shrugged.

"I don't know, mom," she said. "Maybe one of the neighbors dropped it in our trash on the curb when they were bringing their groceries in. Some people dump their dog's poop in our trash when they're taking them for a walk."

Melinda's mother looked askance at her daughter.

"I suppose," she said slowly. Then, she sighed, shaking her head.

"I suppose it makes as much sense as anything else," she said, pocketing the receipt. "Are you sure there's nothing you need to tell me?"

"Yes."

"Alright, I'll see you downstairs," she said, smiling.

Melinda exhaled as her mother exited the room. That was another thing. Keeping her secret from her friends, the school, and the town at large was easy compared to keeping it from her parents.

* * *

Melinda tensed her powerful arm muscles, gripping her crosse tightly in both hands. She shifted her stance, bending slightly. The cries and catcalls of the other players faded from her awareness. Then, she flung the ball as hard as she could. It blurred through the air in a tight arc, passing through the goal posts and colliding against the net, which bulged a good two or three feet outwards before the ball plopped to the ground.

The opposing team moaned.

"Alright, that's time!" called Coach Stevenson from the far side of the soccer field.

The members of the Dairyville High Lacrosse team left their positions and clustered around the coach, who gave them an encouraging nod.

"Good hustle out there," she said cheerfully. "You all need to improve your passes a little, but otherwise, great job. And Melinda - that was one sweet point."

Melinda grinned, wiping a trickle of perspiration from her brow.

"Okay, let's get the equipment off the field and in the storage closet. Marry, Nina, could you two put away the goals?"

"Sure thing."

"No problem."

"Good, the rest of you just pick up your gear," said the coach. "And don't forget - the game against Franklin is two weeks from now. The bus will be picking you up at the west side of the parking lot at five PM, sharp. We won't be getting back until ten so bring a snack and plenty of water."

The team dispersed and began collecting their things.

Melinda made her way to the stands. As she walked she glanced up, shielding her eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun. Even though school had been out for over an hour there were groups of parents

and students sitting in the upper rows, presumably watching practice or simply waiting for it to end. Upon reaching the stands Melinda bent over and pulled her duffel bag from under the first row of seats. She reached inside, grabbed a bottle of water and took a long, satisfying drink, draining the bottle of half its contents. Exhaling, she capped the bottle, tossed it back in the bag.

A tall brunette girl with suntanned skin jogged up to her.

"Wow, you were kicking ass today, Melinda!" said the girl.

Melinda glanced behind at her.

"Huh? Oh yeah, thanks Christine," she said.

"Seriously, if you keep it up we'll make it all the way to the regionals this year!" continued Christine, adjusting the neck of her sweat-soaked uniform.

"Yeah, well, I was getting a few sour looks out on in field," said Melinda, bending over to pick up her backpack.

"What do you mean?"

Melinda sighed.

"Well... look, I just joined the team a year ago and I'm already scoring more goals than anyone else."

"So, you think they're jealous?" said Christine, glancing over her shoulders at the other players.

Melinda shrugged.

"Aww, look at you all modest and shit!" laughed Christine, patting Melinda on the back. "Melinda, you're a goddamn natural. I saw it when we were playing flag football in P.E. If the rest of those gals can't keep up that's their problem. Just try not to let it go to your head."

"Thanks Christine," said Melinda, managing a wan smile.

"Besides, you still haven't beaten my season record," said Christine, smirking.

"Two goals away, three matches to come," said Melinda.

"That's just to tie; you'll need three points to break it," said Christine smugly. "And trust me, it won't be easy."

"What, you going to start messing with me on the field?" said Melinda, grinning.

"Oh, I'd never do anything like that."

"God, you are such a bitch," laughed Melinda.

"Not as big a bitch as you are," teased Christine.

"If only you knew," muttered Melinda not quite under her breath.

"Huh?"

"Nothing," said Melinda quickly.

"Seriously though, I'd never screw with you during a match just over some stupid record," said Christine.

"I know," said Melinda. "Besides, the other girls would probably have issues with you afterwards."

"Yep."

Melinda shouldered her duffel bag and started walking towards the parking lot. Christine followed.

"You want a ride home?" asked Christine.

Melinda shook her head. "Nah, I'm riding my bike home today."

"You sure? You look pretty beat," said Christine, noting Melinda's flushed complexion. "We could throw your bike in the truck bed."

"Well, I dunno," said Melinda. "I guess it'd be alright."

"Great! Let me go get Phillip."

"Phillip?" said Melinda curiously. "Your boyfriend?"

"Nah, my little brother," explained Christine. "Well, twin brother, but I call him that to mess with him."

"I didn't know you had a brother," said Melinda.

"Aw geez, you haven't met him?" said Christine, surprised. "He goes to this school. Come on, I'll introduce you."

"Um, sure," said Melinda.

Christine led Melinda back towards the stands. The brunette teen scanned the rows of seats looking for someone. Then, she looked down and grinned.

"Oh, there he is," she said, pointing.

Melinda spied two figures standing near one of the front corner of the stands, talking. Both were teenagers, one female and the other male - presumably Phillip. He was wearing a pair of curved blue-black sunglasses, a plain white cotton T-shirt noticeable absent of any stains or discolorations, loose khaki shorts, and Birkenstocks over wool socks. Despite this ragged demeanor he had a clean, honest face, speckled with only a token level of acne. He was a little shorter than Christine and nowhere near as toned, but neither did he look out of shape. The girl was petite and skinny with mousey brown hair and was wearing a plain beige cardigan and faded blue jeans. She almost looked too young to be in high school, though she was gazing down at her feet so Melinda couldn't see her face clearly.

As she and Christine approached the two of them, Melinda unconsciously started sniffing the air and realized she was doing it. She stopped, mentally cursing herself. It was a habit - or instinct - she was trying to break out of. People didn't always notice, but when they did it tended to nonplus them - especially when they'd seen her do it more than once.

That said, the boy smelled kind of...nice.

"Melinda, this is Phillip," said Christine cheerfully. "Phillip, Melinda. She's the one I've been telling you about - the girl who single-handedly scored six points against Asbury." She turned to the girl. "Um, sorry, who are you?" she asked

"J-Just leaving," said the girl meekly. "Bye, Phillip."

With that the girl scurried off towards the parking lot.

"Who was that?" said Christine, bemused.

"Ah...I never actually caught a name," said Phillip, shaking his head. "She's in my math class and was asking some questions about next week's assignments. Anyhoo, nice to meet you, Melinda."

"A pleasure," said Melinda with good-natured mock courtesy. For some reason, she felt a tingle of apprehension as she addressed him.

"You were amazing out there," said Phillip.



"Oh, thank you," said Melinda, who suddenly recalled seeing a boy who looked much like him sitting in the upper rows of the stands during practice. "You were watching me?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his head. "I usually stick around to watch Christie play, but you kinda stole my interest."

"Philly!" laughed Christine, elbowing him playfully.

"What?" said Phillip innocently.

Melinda was under the impression she was missing something.

"The thing is...well, I was wondering if...if you'd be interested in going to have a bite to eat with me," he managed shyly.

When Melinda realized what he was proposing, she couldn't even manage an "oh." Christine just chuckled.

"I mean, if you have the time," added Phillip quickly. "If you can't go right now, that's okay...I mean, if you can't I understand."

"Actually I do have to get home pretty soon," blurted Melinda nervously. "Sorry, but..." she trailed.

Then, it hit her. She was flattered. She was completely, utterly flattered by Phillip's invitation. Not once in her life had any boy taken the initiative like this. Sure, she'd gotten some looks now and again - especially after her transformation - but nothing like this. And Phillip was just her type. Strange...she hadn't even been aware she had a type. Nevertheless, he was it - polite, fit, obviously a bit reserved, but not excessively so, and not too bad looking. He didn't wear any cologne or hair gel either, a big plus for her and her extra-sensitive nose.

"Well," she said eventually, grinning foolishly. "I...I guess so. What did you have in mind?"

"Uh, maybe over at Marie's Kitchen?" he suggested. "You know, that place over on B street?"

"That's kind of fancy, isn't it?" said Melinda.

"Oh, er, sorry," said Phillip, scratching his head.

"Oh it's fine, I just-"

"No no, I don't want-"

"Okay, I gotta step in here," said Christine, chuckling. "Just go to J Burger like normal human beings."

Melinda and Phillip stared at Christine, then each other. Both blushed.

"Er, sounds good," said Melinda. "How about this Thursday after school?"

"Sure! I'll meet you outside the soccer field near the parking lot."

"So, here?" teased Melinda.

"Uh, yeah, here," said Phillip, laughing.

"Good, I'll see you then," said Melinda, nodding.

"Glad that's settled, then," said Christine rolling her eyes yet smiling at the same time. "Come on you two, let's go."

The three teens walked out into the parking lot. While Phillip and Christine stowed their bags in the truck Melinda hurried over to the bike racks and retrieved her bicycle. Once it had been secured in the truck bed she climbed into the vehicle with Phillip and Christine.

"Little tight there, huh?" said Christine as Melinda squeezed into passenger seat, sandwiching Phillip between the two girls.

"I'll be fine," said Phillip, digging into the crevasse between the cushions for the safety belt.

"Oh, I'm sure you will be," said Christine, grinning, starting the engine. As Melinda shut the door and reached for her own safety belt she spotted the girl from earlier who had been talking with Phillip. She was standing on the edge of the parking lot next to the school, watching them shyly. When she noticed Melinda looking at her she turned around and scurried behind a corner of the main building, vanishing from sight.

"Weird," murmured Melinda as the truck started backing up.

* * *

Melinda raised the perspiring glass of ice water to her lips and took a slow sip, her eyes glued to the entrance of the diner. Every so often the stout double doors would open and she would rise in her seat only to lean back in disappointment as another stranger, couple, or family would be greeted and ushered away by the receptionist. She absently dug through her pink purse and fished out a small comb. She proceeded to comb back her dark hair.

"More water?" asked a waiter.

"Oh, yes please," said Melinda quickly, tucking the comb back into her purse.

The waiter refilled her glass and disappeared into the crowd.

Melinda nervously bit her lower lip. Her palms were sweaty and there were butterflies in her stomach. Granted, it was her very first actual, real date, but she was surprised by how anxious she was. She wasn't certain what to say, how to act, what to talk about; not a thing. She'd heard you should just 'be yourself' on a date, but that particular nugget of wisdom didn't apply terribly well to her.

"Melinda?"

Melinda whirled around with a surprised gasp. Phillip was standing there with hopeful smile. Gone were his khaki shorts and loose T-shirt, replaced by long blue jeans and a navy-green polo shirt. He had shaved his patchy stubble and the more obnoxious zits were noticeably absent from his face. He was wearing chic thick-frame glasses.

I guess those were prescription shades he was wearing at lacrosse practice, thought Melinda. Not that it bothered her. Her eyesight had been terrible before her transformation.

"Um, sorry I'm late," he began. "I came in through the side entrance to save time."

"No prob," said Melinda, smiling warmly.

Phillip pulled out a chair and sat down. They stared at each other in awkward silence.

"Have you ordered anything yet?" asked Phillip eventually.

"Oh, no-no, I waited for you," said Melinda.

"Sorry again about that," said Phillip, blushing slightly.

"Oh, stop that," said Melinda, laughing nervously. "It's no big deal, honest!"

"I...well, if you say so," said Phillip.

The subdued sounds of the restaurant hung in the air.

"Umm, so, you've been playing lacrosse long?" asked Phillip.

"No, less than a year, actually," said Melinda.

"Oh, wow, that's amazing," exclaimed Phillip. "My sister's been playing for three years, and it's hard to tell which one of you is better. You must have a real knack for the game."

"Well, um, not as much as you would think," said Melinda hastily. "You've probably only caught me on my good days. Christine is a much better player, really."

"Come on, don't sell yourself short," said Phillip. "You're a fantastic athlete. It must have taken a ton of practice."

"Um... yeah," said Melinda.

"Something wrong?" asked Phillip, cocking his head.

"Oh, no, it's nothing. So, what classes do you have this semester?" asked Melinda, changing the subject.

"Math 3, A.P. U.S. History, A.P. English, P.E. 2, and Chemistry 2B," recited Phillip.

"Oh, two A.P. classes huh?" said Melinda. "That's nice. But isn't Chemistry 2B for sophomores?"

"Yeah, about that," began Phillip, scratching his head. "I got a D in my second year and my parents convinced the school to let me take it again. I just couldn't get into the subject and the teacher drove me crazy."

"Who did you have?" asked Melinda.

"Mr. Dinage," said Phillip. "Y'know, old guy, stutters a lot?"

"Oh, him," said Melinda, now totally sympathetic to Phillip's plight. In her experience, teachers reputed to be hardasses tended to be the best educators in the school. Dinage was the exception. The only reason he hadn't been fired was no one in the school administration could summon the courage to sack the 78-year old WW-II veteran.

"I heard the kook keeps a bayonet tip in his desk," laughed Melinda.

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"Yeah!"

"Anyway," continued Phillip. "I'm not worried. I'm blazing through Chemistry this semester. I scored the highest of the class in the last midterm."

"Oh, congratulations," said Melinda, smiling. "Could you...could you tell me more about yourself? Like, um, what music you listen to or something?"

"Um, sure," said Phillip, rubbing his head. "I, well, I like...Soul Coughing and Mike Doughty. You've probably never heard of them. Flogging Molly, too - especially their newer stuff. I'm in the school band, kind of into skating, but, well, it's not my life or anything. You?"

"Me?" said Melinda. "Well, I, I like reading. A lot, actually. As you've probably already inferred, I'm into lacrosse. As far as music goes I like...lots of stuff" she laughed.

A young waiter with a goatee approached their table.

"Hi, can I start you two off with something to drink or are you ready to order?" he inquired.

"Yeah," said Melinda. "I mean, if you're ready," she looked at Phillip apologetically.

"Actually, I think I am," he replied. "I've been here a few times before; I know what I want."

"Okay, great," said Melinda, eying the menu. "I'll have the Grand Old J Hamburger, no pickles, no mustard, no onions, extra rare. I'll also have a strawberry ice tea to go with it."

The waiter diligently noted her order on his pad and looked at Phillip.

"The Chicken Caesar Salad with ranch dressing," said Phillip, handing the menu to the waiter

"I'll have a Dr. Pepper."

The waiter nodded.

"So," began Phillip casually as he left. "What's this about you being president of the Fantasy Book Club?"

Melinda was in the middle of taking a drink of water when he said this. Her eyes bulged. A drop of water trickled down her larynx, causing her to cough violently, spraying water and spittle all over the table.

"Hey, you alright?" said Phillip, sitting up.

"I'm *cough*...just fine," said Melinda, cupping her mouth. "Just went down funny, that's all." She unfolded a napkin lying on the table and dabbed her mouth with it. Phillip waited for her to regain her composure before continuing.

"Anyways, I was just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about this mysterious organization," he said. "I mean, if you can," he chuckled.

"Oh, well, there isn't much to tell, really," said Melinda. She more or less automatically picked up the crumpled napkin and started wiping the table. "How, um, how did you know I'm a member, let alone that I'm the president?"

"Christine told me."

"Oh yes, I may have mentioned it to her before," said Melinda uneasily, now wondering how extensively he had probed his sister about her. She didn't know whether to be charmed or alarmed by this. Suddenly, something Phillip had said earlier clicked.

"What do you mean by 'mysterious organization?'" asked Melinda carefully.

Phillip shrugged.

"Well, I dunno. Everybody knows about it but no one really knows what it's all about."

"The name makes it pretty obvious, I think," said Melinda a little defensively.

"Yeah, but Cynthia Carpenter, Lily Forger, and Heidi Erikson are all members," continued Phillip as he adjusted his glasses. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but they don't exactly strike me as the sort of people who would enjoy the works of, say, R.A. Salvatore or Piers Anthony."

"That's true," admitted Melinda.

"I tried to join your club, actually." His cheeks turned red. "I...I was hoping it would give me an excuse to say hi to you. Before lacrosse and everything. But I couldn't get in. I asked around, and everyone who tried to join said they were turned down. Heck, a lot of them didn't know who to ask."

There was a pause.

"Well..." said Melinda, fumbling for an answer. "We're trying to keep things small, see. We weren't expecting such a huge response when we founded the club."

"Yeah, I figured as much," said Phillip, nodding. "The thing is, with you four being members...well, half the female students would join up just to be popular by association and half the male students would join just for an excuse to introduce themselves to you."

"Just like you tried," observed Melinda wryly.

Phillip smiled bashfully and shrugged his shoulders.

"Y'know, it's pretty silly, but there are some rumors going around school that the club is actually a cult or secret society," he laughed.

"Oh, wow, that is pretty silly," chuckled Melinda nervously. "Yeah, after midnight we all don sinister robes and go out to the woods to sacrifice deer to a pagan god."

"Whoa, seriously?" said Phillip in mock surprise.

"Oh, no no, not at all," said Melinda a little too quickly. "The truth is, I mean...they'd never admit it, but Cynthia and the rest of the gals got into the fantasy genre after reading Twilight and Harry Potter. They're a bit, um, embarrassed about it and just wanted to talk about their favorite books in private."

"Huh, guess that makes sense," said Phillip. He cleared his throat. "Um, sorry if I was being nosy, but I was really curious about the club. I'll keep quiet about Cynthia and the rest, scout's honor."

"Thanks," said Melinda weakly. "Like I said, we try to keep things on the down-low."

Melinda absently glanced over at one of the waiters as he passed by their table and then looked back at Phillip. The sight of his smiling, attentive, slightly-nerdy yet handsome face made her blush again. Almost unconsciously, she reached across the table and gently held his hand. Phillip looked down in surprise and then up at her.

Melinda's pulse quickened. Her skin grew itchy, particularly her arms, and her already preternaturally acute senses of smell and hearing were growing sharper. She could hear the tinkle of silverware from the other side of the restaurant and practically taste the scent of hamburger in the air.

Her eyes widened. She quickly withdrew her hand and steadied herself, taking a deep, long breath.

"You okay?" asked Phillip, cocking his head.

Melinda nodded. "Y-Yeah," she said distractedly. "Just a little, um, worn out from school."

"You, uh, need some water or, er-"

"I'm fine!" snapped Melinda more harshly than she had intended.

"Sorry, sorry," yelped Phillip, raising his hands.

Melinda scowled at him for a moment and then sighed.



"Look, there's a lot on my mind right now and I haven't eaten for a while," she said. "Let's...let's just wait for the food to come."

"Uh, sure," said Phillip.

The next couple of minutes were spent in silence, both teens occasionally risking brief glances at each other while feigning an interest in their silverware or the restaurant. Melinda tried to appear calm and distant but the experience had unnerved her. Part of her wanted to apologize and leave but she just couldn't do it.

* * *

A week had passed since her first date with Philip and there was a lot on Melinda's mind. It was Friday, for one. For another, it would be a full moon Sunday. It was also the first official meeting of the Lycant...Fantasy Book Club since the incident at the tennis game. More importantly, she was going out on another date with Phillip tomorrow. A bit soon, yes, but after the...unpleasantness at J Burger she felt as though she owed him. It was only a day shy of the full moon, however, so she was a bit concerned.

Given all this it was somewhat understandable that she spent five seconds wrestling with the classroom door before realizing she needed to unlock it first.

"Terrific," muttered Melinda as she dug into her pocket, pulling out a key.

She opened the door and stepped inside.

It was one of the school's smaller classrooms, used primary for specialty and AP courses that had short rosters. There were only a dozen or so chairs, presently arranged in a circle, a large whiteboard, a cluster of colorful glossy posters from previous courses and a small desk with a power strip underneath for

laptops. Reserving the room had been surprisingly easy once they'd registered the club with the school. Mrs. Rose, an AP English teacher, had agreed to be their advisor after securing their promise they'd read *Lord of the Rings*, *Dune* and a few other titles she deemed of literary merit. Fortunately, she wasn't required to sit in on any of the meetings.

Melinda walked over to the desk and put her backpack down on top of it. She shut off her cell phone and sat, glancing around the room expectantly. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door.

"It's me!" called a muffled voice from outside.

"Come on in," sighed Melinda.

The door whipped open and Heidi, perspiring, face blushed, trotted inside, an almost manic grin on her face.

"Woo! Awesome practice today!" she hollered, wiping her brow.

"Great, cool," said Melinda in a disinterested, irritated tone. "Any idea when Cynthia or Lily will be here?"

"Nope," said Heidi, sitting on top of the desk. "I think I saw Lily over by the locker room, but I couldn't smell her. Then again, it's kind of hard to smell anything over there, am I right?" she laughed.

"Yeah," said Melinda.

"Here, I'll text her an-"

"No texts!" barked Melinda.

Heidi stared at Melinda and then rolled her eyes.

"Jesus Christ, Melinda, not this again," she groaned. "Look, I'm just going to ask her how long it'll be 'til she's here! I mean, this IS an official club. What's so weird about me checking on her?"

Melinda opened her mouth and, unable to form a cogent rebuttal, shut it and waived her hand dismissively.

"Fine, whatever," she grumbled.

It proved moot as two seconds later there was another knock. The door swung open and Cynthia stepped inside followed by Lily.

"Hey gals," said Lily.

"Hiya Heidi, Melinda," said Cynthia with noticeably less enthusiasm when addressing the latter.

"Hey," said Melinda.

"So," began Cynthia, sitting at one of the desks. "Did you hear about what Mark Stevenson did during morning break?"

"Hear about it? I was there!" exclaimed Heidi, cackling. "I don't know what Jennifer was thinking. How could she go out with that little twerp?"

"Well, I heard he-..."

Tuning out the banter between the three cheerleaders, Melinda rested her chin on her hand and glanced at the door. She thought back to her encounter with Phillip out on the soccer field and smiled. It had been kind of bold, but she admired that. Then again, he'd said he'd been watching her for a while, which admittedly sounded a bit creepy. Maybe he'd just been working up the nerve to say something.

"Melinda?"

Melinda looked up in surprise.

"Ah, what?" she said.

All three cheerleaders were staring at her expectantly. Then, they broke into giggles.

"Nothing," chortled Cynthia.

Melinda rolled her eyes. Technically they were friends now, or at least acquaintances, but sometimes it felt like nothing had changed between the four of them.

A minute or so later Yvette arrived.

"Sorry I'm late!" she apologized.

"No problem, Yvette," said Melinda, smiling weakly.

"Let's get started," said Cynthia, looking down and typing on her cell phone. "We only got about twenty-five minutes."

Melinda glanced at Cynthia, looked over at the door, and then turned and addressed the group.

"The full moon falls on a Sunday this month," she began. "This makes our get-together out in the preserve a little easier to deal with, but don't forget to be home by 1:00 AM. As usual, one of us will be a designated driver. Heidi, it's your turn, so try to take it easy out there."

"Sure thing," said Heidi.

"I mean it; don't pass out like last time."

"I got it," said Heidi petulantly.

"What about food?" asked Cynthia.

"Even with the bulk deal on ground beef with my uncle we're a little short on food money this month," said Lily uneasily. "Since it's a weekend we should have enough time to hunt our dinner."

"Awesome," said Heidi gleefully, rubbing her hands together.

"I just hope it's not, like, a half-dozen skinny-ass rabbits like last time," said Lily, shaking her head. "Something big like a twelve-point buck would be great for a change."

"If there are any of those left out there," muttered Melinda not quite under her breath.

"Oh Christ, not this again," exclaimed Cynthia, still typing on her phone.

"We're overhunting," said Melinda. "As big as the preserve is there's a limit to how much we can hunt! It's only been about a year or so and the place is like a ghost town...er, forest."

"You're always the one who pigs out when we catch something worthwhile," protested Heidi.

"No, that's Yvette," said Cynthia, pointing a thumb in her direction.

"Of course she has to eat more," said Melinda. "She's twice our size. And would you put that damn thing down?" she growled, indicating Cynthia's cell phone.

Cynthia glared at her.

"Fine," she said, dramatically dropping the device on the desk.

"Look," sighed Melinda. "Let's...agree to a limit on how many deer or whatever we can take every month. There's probably some...research or something on how many deer a forest can lose without hurting the population. That's how they decide how many hunting licenses to issue every year, right?"

"I can search for that online," said Yvette helpfully. "I do eat more than the rest of you girls, so it only seems fair," she added.

"Good, great, do it," said Melinda resignedly. "Let's move on to the next topic."

As though already sensing what she was referring to, the other four girls - particularly Heidi - looked uncomfortable.

"The tennis match," began Melinda. "What happened?"

She was met with silence, the cheerleaders suddenly intrigued by their surroundings, desk, or anything else that would draw their gaze away from Melinda.

"Come on," pleaded Melinda. "This is serious. It's the closest call we've ever had and we don't know why it happened."

Heidi shrugged diffidently.

"Don't know what to tell you, Melinda," she said. "One second I was serving the ball the next thing I know you're dragging me off the court."

"What, I should have let you keep playing with a goddamn tail growing out your ass?" said Melinda.

"Come on, no one else saw it," complained Heidi. "It was barely there. You could have at least waited until I finished the set. It was 40-15, my advantage!"

"And what if someone had?"

"I could have just said it was...I dunno, fashion accessory or something," said Heidi.

"So, what, you'd be a furry then?" said Cynthia.

"A what?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know," shuddered Cynthia. "Something my creepy little brother is into," she explained after seeing their stares. "I don't even want to think about how he'd react if he found out about this."

Yvette coughed politely.

"I think what Melinda is trying to say is that, while it wasn't that big a deal and we caught in time, it may be a problem," she said. "One of us started to transform without even realizing it and it wasn't a full moon or even nighttime. What if it happens again?"

"Yeah, I thought you said changing gets easier with practice," said Cynthia.

"It does!" exclaimed Melinda. "Haven't you noticed? It doesn't take as long and doesn't even hurt that much anymore. Hell, it's barely even uncomfortable for me anymore. It's like a...a body-wide stretch."

Yvette bit her lower lip, tapping her hands on her chair.

"Maybe that's the problem, Melinda," she said uneasily.

"Huh?" said Heidi.

"If transforming becomes too easy, second nature, maybe it becomes...subconscious, like scratching an itch or tapping your toe."

The room went silent.

"Has...anyone else transformed out in the open, like, subconsciously?" asked Heidi.

Cynthia, Lily, and Yvette shook their heads. She turned to Melinda, who had been gazing down at the floor, frowning. Then, Melinda noticed Heidi was looking in her direction and promptly shook her head as well.

"Well, let's say that it does work that way," said Yvette slowly. "What triggers it?"

Heidi rubbed her chin, pondering the question.

"Um...it was a pretty intense match," she said. "I mean, it's been a while since anyone made me work so hard. That girl's backhand was sneaky as hell and her serves were killer. Had a little trouble with positioning, though. Of course, she won last year's tournament at-"

"The point?" said Melinda impatiently.

"What? Oh yeah. Maybe when we change when we get really worked up."

"Worked up?"

"You know, angry, excited, exhilarated, all that jazz," explained Heidi.

"Yeah, but we already know that happens," said Melinda. "The difference here is you didn't notice it was happening. Changing gets easier with practice, yeah, but it's never pleasant!"

Cynthia snorted.

"Well, Melinda, if it doesn't hurt as much anymore and you're already high on adrenaline or whatever you might not notice," she said.

Yvette's eyes widened.

"That must be it!" she exclaimed. "Heidi didn't notice the pain of transforming because she was too focused on the game and was already exerting herself."

"Makes sense," said Heidi. She turned to Melinda. "See, Melinda? I wasn't just trying to get an advantage in the game."

"We don't know that for sure," countered Melinda as the other girls nodded in agreement. "Maybe...maybe it just happens every so often at random."

"I hope not, Melinda," said Yvette, shaking her head. "Then we really are in trouble."

Melinda tried to form a rebuttal, but Yvette had a point.

"Okay," she admitted. "Maybe we should start taking certain precautions."

"Precautions? Like what?" inquired Yvette.

Melinda frowned.

"Well...avoid strenuous physical activity, for one," she said.

"Huh?" said Heidi, cocking her head.

"You know, no more sports clubs, no more exercise - at least in public," she said uneasily. "I mean, it's not like we have to worry too much about losing our figures."

"What? No fucking way!" exclaimed Heidi.

The other girls, Yvette included, appeared equally appalled by the suggestion.

"Putting aside how being a cheerleading kicks ass, my mom will throw a conniption fit if I drop out of the squad," cried Cynthia angrily. "And they won't let me wear the uniform on Wednesdays and Fridays!"

"Look, I know this sucks, but we may not have a choice!" said Melinda, throwing out her hands. "I mean, I'd miss out on lacrosse."

"Oh, who cares about that," said Cynthia dismissively.

"Look, even if only one person catches you, it's still a big problem," said Melinda.

"Speaking of which, are we sticking to our policy that we bite anyone who sees us or learns about us - family excluded?"

"For now," said Melinda.

"I still think that's a really, really bad idea, Melinda," said Yvette. "Doesn't that just make the problem worse?"

"It's the only way to be sure they'll keep their mouths shut," said Melinda defensively. "Our secret becomes their secret."

"As much as I hate agreeing with her, Yvette has a point, Melinda," said Cynthia. "It's a really dumb idea."

"For Christsakes," groaned Melinda, rolling her eyes. "Don't you all get it? This isn't some... game! If our secret gets out we can kiss our normal lives goodbye. Best case scenario? We all get shipped off to some lab or...or an isolated military base or something."

"Do you really think our parents would let that happen, Melinda?" said Heidi flatly.

"Well, no! But it's not as though they could do anything about it!" replied Melinda. "I mean, even if they didn't hurt us or throw us in a cage we'd get pulled out of high school, couldn't go to college, couldn't get normal jobs, have boyfriends..."

"Speak for yourself," said Cynthia.

Melinda glared at her.

"Come to think of it," continued Melinda slowly. "If we're going to have boyfriends, we should be careful with what we...do with them," she said.

"Come again?"

"Well, think about it," said Melinda uncomfortably. "You're on a date, things get a little hot, you start making out and..." she trailed off as she realized all four girls were staring at her with a variety of expressions, none of them too encouraging.

"Are you saying we might change into a werewolf while *fucking* them?" breathed Cynthia in shock.

"I didn't say that!" said Melinda quickly, her face bright red. "But, er, I guess it's possible."

This time Cynthia glared at Melinda.

"First off, eww, second off, we're not a bunch of horny sluts, Melinda," snapped Cynthia. "It's not like I've gone farther than second base with Greg."

One other, subtle quirk inherent in becoming a werewolf was increased emotional intelligence. That is, one became instinctively good at reading certain facial tics and signs, which is why all four of the other girls noticed Heidi shift her gaze away from Cynthia when she spoke, and what it implied. Melinda, who had gotten very good at suppressing her reactions, probably would have gotten away with it, but Heidi wasn't Melinda.

"Heidi!" hissed Cynthia angrily.

"What?" said Heidi, shrugging diffidently. "You said it only happened that one time."

"Really?" exclaimed Yvette, surprised.

"No way," said Lily gleefully.

"Enough!" barked Melinda. "Putting aside exposing ourselves-"

"Pun intended?" interrupted Heidi mischievously.

"...We still don't know exactly how this spreads. Maybe lycanthropy can be spread...sexually. It could even be something less extreme like...like growing fangs while kissing and accidentally biting them!"

"So, the werewolf...virus is an STD now?" said Cynthia sardonically.

"She's got a point, Cynthia," said Yvette. "We don't even know if it's viral or has any... physical basis to begin with. It breaks the laws of thermodynamics. We need to be careful."

"So, what, I have to break up with Daniel?" snorted Heidi.

"I didn't say that," said Melinda wearily. "I just think we should...limit physical contact until we figure this out."

"Oh bullshit," snarled Cynthia. "If you think you can control our love lives you can forget it."

"Okay, fine," snapped Melinda, whose patience was already running thin. "Keep doing whatever the hell you want. Run a televised marathon fuzzy and screw half the school for all I care! At least that way we'll find out whether lycanthropy is sexually transmitted before the men-in-black haul us off!"

"What's your fucking problem, huh?"

"You! That's what! Am I the only one who actually ca-"

"Girls, please, take it easy!" said Yvette, raising both her hands in a pacifying gesture. "I think both of you have good points but yelling isn't going to help."

Cynthia and Melinda turned and glared at Yvette, though Melinda's glare was slightly less severe.

"What I resent about this is that Melinda is the only one here who doesn't have a boyfriend," said Cynthia slowly, still facing Yvette.

"Um, neither do I," said Yvette.

"Fine, whatever," said Cynthia quickly. "The point is she thinks anything that's okay for her is okay for everyone else. I thought this was supposed to be a democracy but she goes around acting like a fucking queen B."

"Oh, don't even start," said Melinda angrily. "You, calling *me* a queen B?"

"What?"

"You were - hell, still are - the most stuck up, popularity-obsessed bitch in the school!"

"Yeah, I gotta side with Melinda on that one," said Lily reluctantly.

Cynthia threw her arms out in disgust.

"We don't know if ANY of this is true!" she exclaimed. "For the record, I've made out with Greg plenty of times since becoming a werewolf and I've never felt like I was about to go fuzzy. What about you, Heidi? Has Danny-boy ever pushed you over the edge?"

"Um, well, he's not the best kisser, but..." began Heidi.

"I mean have you ever felt yourself start to change when you're with him?" interrupted Cynthia, rolling her eyes.

"Oh! Nope, not at all," said Heidi quickly.

"See?" said Cynthia. "No problems there."

"Just because nothing has happened yet doesn't mean it won't!" pressed Melinda.

"Now you're just stretching," said Cynthia. "You know what? I think you're just jealous."

"Jealous?" said Melinda, both bemused and incensed.

"You're the only one here without a BF," said Cynthia. "And if you haven't found someone, hell, why should anyone else be happy with theirs? You know, I'm really disappointed with you. Not exactly a healthy way of dealing with your hang-ups, Melinda."

Melinda stared at Cynthia in shock. Even the other girls looked slightly nonplused by this.

"Bullshit!" snarled Melinda.

"Yeah, yeah, keep telling yourself that, Melinda," said Cynthia, a hint of triumph in her voice.

"For your information I have a boyfriend!" snapped Melinda, who then covered her mouth. The other girls looked on curiously.

"Oh really?" said Cynthia. "What's his name?"

"Phillip," said Melinda automatically.

"Phillip who?"

"Phillip Dodd."

There was silence.

"Wait...Dodd?" interrupted Heidi. "As in...Christine Dodd? Christine's brother?"

"Y-Yeah," said Melinda, growing uncomfortable.

"When did THAT happen?" asked Heidi.

"Er, about a week ago, last Thursday," said Melinda, shrinking under the collective stares.

"Huh, this is news," said Heidi, grinning.

"That's great, Melinda!" said Yvette brightly.

"Well, er...it doesn't matter!" said Cynthia, trying to regain momentum. "And you've only known him for a week? That's nothing."

"It doesn't matter how long I've known him," retorted Melinda. "Even if...even if it doesn't go anywhere I don't want to put him in any danger. If you really cared about Greg you'd be worried too!"

"Don't compare me and Greg to your little crush, 'Linda."

"Yeah, I haven't let him feel me up."

There was a deadly silence.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me, miss second base."

Cynthia fumed.

"That's it," she snarled, standing up. "I'm outta here." She grabbed her backpack and headed towards the exit.

"Hey, Hey! We're not done here!" said Melinda angrily.

Cynthia did not respond.

"Don't you dare walk out that door!" snarled Melinda, rising from her seat.

"Fuck you, Melinda," said Cynthia coldly, reaching for the doorknob.

Melinda's hands curled into trembling fists.

"Sit...**down**," rumbled Melinda, her voice suddenly several octaves deeper.

The room itself seemed to shudder slightly. The other four girls, Cynthia included, froze and stared at Melinda with varying degrees of shock and horror. Melinda blinked and then realized what she had done. Stunned, she turned and caught a glimpse of herself in the thick glass window in the classroom door. For a moment her visage had contorted into something...not quite human.

Melinda's lips tightened. She slumped back into her seat.

"See...that's what I'm worried about," she said quietly, staring down at the floor.

"Well, at least you didn't grow a tail," managed Heidi after a while, smiling weakly.

"Yeah, lucky," sighed Melinda, shivering a little. Then, her head snapped back up. "Actually it's because, no offense, I'm better at this than you. I've been a werewolf longer than any of you AND I actually practice shape-shifting. And even I came close to losing control!"

"Hey, I practice!" protested Heidi.

Melinda stared at her.

"Not every week," admitted Heidi, shrugging. "I'm busy."

"Make the time," said Melinda. "Whenever you know you're alone and somewhere safe - the bathroom when your parents are gone, out in the woods on a weekend if you can. Try that meditation stuff I talked about; it really works. That goes for all of you. And as far as sports and exercise are concerned...tone it down. Don't overexert yourself. We all know we could already be playing at the college level - hell, professional level even - so it shouldn't be too hard." She glared at Heidi. "And as far as dating goes, avoid getting too intimate with your boytoys, okay?" she added, this time looking in Cynthia's direction.

"Intimate?" said Heidi dryly.

"Fine, you want me to spell it out?" said Melinda. "Nothing past first base. And you know what? That's an order. Same for everything else. Same for me."

"So you're giving us orders, now?" sneered Cynthia.

"Yes, I am," said Melinda firmly.

"For how long, huh? You'll still be hovering over us like some goddamn babysitter when we're in college?"

"I...don't know," said Melinda, a modicum of uncertainty in her voice. She quickly recovered. "But for now, yes, I'm in charge. End of discussion. Now, is there any other business?"

She was met with two resentful stares from Cynthia and Heidi and uncomfortable, embarrassed silence from Lily and Yvette.

"Fine, meeting over," said Melinda curtly. She shouldered her backpack and got up. "See you all Sunday."

"Yeah, sure," said Heidi unenthusiastically.

Melinda stepped out into the hallway, shutting the door behind her. She stood there for a moment, took a deep, long breath, exhaled, and then started walking down the corridor. It was quiet. Most of the students were still in the courtyard or cafeteria.

"Melinda?"

Melinda glanced over her shoulder and saw Yvette hurrying over to her. Behind her, Melinda spied Heidi, Lily, and Cynthia walking towards the opposite side of the hall. Her footsteps echoed in the deserted passageway.

"What do you want, Yvette?" sighed Melinda as the brunette approached her.

"Is everything alright?" asked Yvette.

"Yeah, everything's just peachy," snapped Melinda.

"I mean it! Is something going on?" persisted Yvette in a concerned voice.

"It's nothing, Yvette."

"I'm worried about you," said Yvette. "So are the rest of the girls."

"Really?" said Melinda dryly.

"They'd never admit it but they are. We all are," said Yvette earnestly. "You've been acting so...so mean lately."

"Oh, and they haven't?" said Melinda, gesturing in the direction cheerleaders had gone.

"Well, maybe we've all been on edge lately," admitted Yvette. "But honestly, Melinda, fighting with them isn't going to help."

"We weren't fighting. We were...having a difference of opinions."

"Melinda, you know-

Suddenly, there was a buzzing sound. Melinda gazed down at her pocket and up at Yvette apologetically.

"Go ahead and answer it," said Yvette, shaking her head.

"Thanks," said Melinda in an apologetic tone, reaching for her phone. She pressed a button and scanned the screen. It was a message from Phillip.

"Shit," hissed Melinda as she read it.

"What?"

"It's...Phillip," said Melinda.

"Oh, him!" said Yvette, smiling. "What did he have to say?"

"He can't make it Saturday," said Melinda. "For our second, er, date," she explained. "He asked if we can move it to Sunday."

"Well, go for it," said Yvette.

"Not an option," said Melinda unhappily. "Sunday is a full-moon night, remember? Saturday was pushing it, but Sunday?"

"Just meet him for lunch or early afternoon," suggested Yvette. "Keep it simple."

"I just told everyone to tone down their...romantic pursuits," said Melinda weakly. "What kind of example would I be setting?"

"You're just going on a second date," said Yvette, shrugging. "Besides, it's none of their business," she added.

"They'll find out," said Melinda, shaking her head. "Then they'll start bitching at me for being a hypocrite or something. Doesn't even matter if nothing happens between Phillip and me; they'll use it as an excuse to do whatever the hell they want. Yvette, I have to keep things in line or next time it'll be more than a close call."

"Melinda," said Yvette in an uncharacteristically firm voice. "Go on your date."

"But-

"Go on your date," repeated Yvette. "Go out and have some fun with Phillip and then come to the preserve."

"But what if-"

"You'll be fine," said Yvette. "Just go."

Melinda opened her mouth, and then shut it. She cleared her throat.

"Fine," she said in a carefully neutral tone. "I will."

"Alright," said Yvette. "Good."

The two stood there awkwardly for a moment. More and more students were walking through the hall as lunch break neared its end.

"Thanks, Yvette," said Melinda, nodding. "I'll try to...keep cool," she said.

Yvette smiled. The two girls parted and disappeared into the growing crowd.

* * *

It was already thirty minutes past four and Melinda was getting worried.

She adjusted her skirt and gazed upwards. Although the sky was still blue the light was rapidly dimming as the sun approached the horizon. By her estimation - and she'd grown quite good at this since her transformation - there was barely an hour of daylight left. Agreeing to meet Phillip at four had already been cutting it close, but at this rate she'd barely have time to run home and change out of her nice clothes before heading to the preserve. Getting caught out on the road under the full moon was the last thing she wanted.

Speaking of which...

Melinda risked a peek at the moon, even now faintly visible in the cloudless sky. She shivered. Its influence over her wasn't nearly as potent as it was at night and she'd developed some capacity to resist its power, but she still felt it. If pressed to describe the sensation, Melinda would have likened it to a low grade fever coupled with a tingling sensation across the skin, particularly the hands. It didn't really hurt or even make her feel nauseous, but it did leave her a bit unsettled. Shaking her head, Melinda turned away and took a deep breath. The feeling passed.

"Damn it, where is he?" she muttered.

She glanced around the school. It was essentially empty, the only sign of life being a cluster of cars parked near the east entrance. Phillip was a member of the school band and had practice on Sunday. It was supposed to be over at four and indeed, she could no longer make out the muffled sound of instruments from the main building, but there was no sign of him.

Just as Melinda was contemplating texting him, the sound of distant, hurried footsteps filled the air. A few seconds later a figure appeared from around the corner of the building ahead of her. A cursory sniff of the air confirmed its identity.

"Sorry...I'm...late," panted Phillip as he ran up to her. He bent over on his knees, gasping for breath. He was carrying a black case in his right hand and a backpack over his shoulder.

"It's...fine," said Melinda unenthusiastically. "Um, what happened?"

"Band...teacher wanted to go over the upcoming dance," said Phillip. "Kept talking and talking about scheduling, dress code, blah blah blah, and then I got stuck putting away all the stands when I saw me trying

to duck out early. God, Melinda, I'm...I'm really sorry. I would have texted you but Mr. Dillinger is really strict about the 'no smartphones' rule so I-

"It's okay, Phillip," said Melinda, meaning it this time. It really wasn't his fault he'd been late and he looked kind of cute so flustered and anxious. "I'm just glad you could make it," she added.

"T-Thanks," managed Phillip, wiping a trickle of sweat off his forehead.

"Geez, that little jog tired you out?" said Melinda.

"No, no, it was all that band practice," said Phillip. "You think playing lacrosse is tough? Try blowing for over an hour."

"Hah, is that supposed to be an invitation?" said Melinda, smirking.

Phillip face, which was already blushed, turned bright red.

"Relax, Phillip," laughed Melinda, punching his shoulder. "Just messing with you."

He winced, but smiled.

"Geez, you're stronger than my sister," he said,

"So, what do you wanna do?" said Melinda.

Phillip scratched the back of his head with his free hand.

"Uh, well, I was going to invite you over to J's Burgers," he began. "But uh, if you have the time, why don't we hang out at the bleachers and watch the sun set?"

Melinda smiled, and then frowned.

"Uh, um, I actually need to get going around...five-ish," she said. "Want to, uh, just take a quick walk around the school?"

"Sure, I guess," said Phillip, sounding disappointed. "You sure you don't have time to stick around?"

To her surprise, Melinda found herself tempted to accept the invitation, but shook her head.

"Sorry, I can't miss this," she said.

"O-...alrighty then," said Phillip.

The two teenagers started walking along the perimeter of the main building. At first they were silent. Then, Phillip cleared his throat.

"So...how's your weekend so far?"

Melinda shrugged.

"Can't complain," she said. "Definitely improving now," she added.

"Oh, er, good."

As the two proceeded along the perimeter of the school Melinda realized she was gravitating towards Phillip. She inched closer and closer to the boy until they were nearly walking shoulder to shoulder. Phillip, oddly enough, didn't seem to notice, or at least was pretending not to. Smiling slyly, Melinda reached down and touched Phillip's hand. Phillip glanced down and then up at Melinda. Mirroring her smile, he accepted the invitation and took her by the hand. Melinda felt her heart flutter.

"Um...why don't we go to the bleachers and watch the sun set for a while?" suggested Phillip.

"Sounds great!"

The couple turned and stepped out into one of the fields adjoining the football grounds; the grass was still wet from the sprinklers. They weren't too far away from the bleachers but it was still a couple minutes' walk. As they walked, Melinda breathed in through her nose and actually trembled a little.

"Uh, you okay?" inquired Phillip, peering over at her.

"Y-Yeah," managed Melinda, face bright red.

A part of her wanted to stop and embrace him right there...among other things. She gazed deeply into his brown eyes and-

Melinda yelped and nearly tumbled over as her right foot collided with something hard in the ground. Phillip stopped and pulled her towards him, steadying her and inadvertently pressing her against his chest.

"Er, are you sure you're alright?" he asked, his face inches away from hers. "I mean, I-"

"Yeah, yeah," said Melinda, thrown off balance both figuratively and literally. She glanced down and saw a dented sprinkler head protruding through the grass. Whether from pain or the shock of the experience, her rational mind finally emerged from the haze. Blinking, she sniffed the air and realized Phillip's scent was stronger now. Much stronger.

Of course it is; he's sweating, thought Melinda. *I've never been this close to him...and the moon...damn it...*

There was...something else in the air but she couldn't identify it. Melinda dismissed the errant odor and instead focused on the immediate issue.

"I'm fine, let's keep going," said Melinda hurriedly.

She continued towards the stands, inadvertently dragging Phillip along with her a yard or two before letting him go. Phillip cocked his head, clearly perplexed, but quickly ran after her. The two teenagers approached the first row of seats. The aluminum stands were empty as was the playing field. The sun was a little off to the right and, even though the sky was clear, was somewhat subdued to the point one could almost gaze directly into it. The horizon beneath it was slowly transitioning from blue to a rosy orange-red. Melinda took a seat and was soon joined by Phillip.

"So...how've you been?" he inquired.

"Fine, fine," replied Melinda.

Time passed.

"Kinda pretty, huh?" commented Phillip with cheerful nervousness, gesturing at the sun.

"Uh, yeah," said Melinda. Not exactly the best reply but she still felt frazzled. Phillip sighed heavily, rubbing his face.

"Look, is everything alright?" he asked. "Because...and please, please don't take this the wrong way, it feels like...it isn't. I apologized for band practice and being late."

"It's not that," said Melinda automatically.

"Then what?"

Melinda silently cursed herself.

"It's just...I dunno, it's going a little fast, okay?" said Melinda uneasily.

"Oh, er, sorry?" said Phillip. He lowered his head and gazed down at the ground, suddenly looking very glum.

"Not that I er, don't want to...not see you again," stuttered Melinda. "Let's just...get to know each other a little bit more first," she finished lamely.

Phillip looked askance at her.

"Isn't that what we're doing now?" he asked.

Melinda bit her lower lip. She entertained a variety of stories, excuses, explanations, and outright lies that might satisfy Phillip. Nothing she could think of seemed adequate or even plausible. The fact she could feel the moon's influence over her growing by the second didn't help. Then, it occurred to her the only way out of this would be to tell the truth. Not the whole truth, of course, but part of it. It was a risk, but it was the best she could come up with. She cleared her throat.

"Alright, there is something," admitted Melinda slowly. "It's not your fault," she added before Phillip could respond. "But I can't tell you anything about it. Not yet. You'll just have to trust me and let me deal with it on my own terms."

Phillip was silent.

"Sorry, Melinda, I didn't-"

"Stop apologizing," giggled Melinda. "Let's just watch the sun for a little bit longer. We'll see each other tomorrow."

Phillip grinned foolishly.

"O-Okay," he said.

The two turned back to the horizon. Melinda leaned back and sighed, relieved. She glanced down at her watch. If she wanted to be at the gathering on time she'd need to leave now. Shrugging, she looked over at Phillip, reached over and wrapped her arm around his shoulders. Smiling, Phillip did the same. The couple sat there for a while.

Around fifteen minutes later - although to Melinda it felt barely over one - an all-too familiar wave of heat passed over her. A prickling sensation ran across her arms and hands. Her gums grew sore and her clothes suddenly felt a size or two too small. Melinda shut her eyes and focused, suppressing her body's sudden, urgent impulse to change. Though successful, she could feel impending transformation in the back of her mind.

"Uh, I have to go now," said Melinda, rising from her seat.

"Yeah, it is getting kind of late," said Phillip, a modicum of disappointment in his voice.

Phillip got up as well. The two gazed at each other uncomfortably for a moment. Then, Melinda leaned forward and gave him a hug.

"Thanks for understanding," she said, patting him on the back.

"N-No prob," managed Phillip, grinning ear-to-ear.

Melinda stepped back, gave Phillip a little wave, turned and started walking.

Suddenly, Melinda grimaced. Though the air was cooling her body temperature was steadily rising. She glanced upwards. The sun had finally touched the horizon and the eastern sky was turning dark purple.

I don't think I could make it home in time now. I'll have to...strip out of my clothes here, change and go directly to the preserve.

She looked over her shoulders at the bleachers and then at the parking lot. Her car was now the only one remaining, meaning Phillip had either ridden his bike, walked, or gotten a ride from Christine. In any case there was no sign of him and his scent was rapidly fading (she was downwind of him, luckily).

Once she reached her vehicle Melinda unlocked the passenger door and crawled inside. She pulled a grey woolen blanket from out of the space below the driver's seat and placed it on the passenger seat. She shut the door and pulled off her sweater, followed by her undershirt and jeans. Next came her shoes and socks, then her jeans. Glancing nervously out the windows, she pulled the blanket over her like a hood and stripped out of her undergarments. She piled her discarded clothing on the passenger seat, wrapped the blanket around her nude form, and stepped out into the parking lot, closing and locking the door behind her.

Melinda shivered as her bare feet touched the gritty surface of the asphalt.

Now, where should I change? she thought.

She glanced up at the looming bulk of the main building and the smaller structures surrounding it.

Too risky. There might still be some band members inside. Plus, it's all locked up.

She turned to her right. In the fading light she made out the familiar contours of the soccer field, the adjoining supply shed, the football field, the bleachers, and forest bordering the school.

The shed's out of the question. They lock it regularly now. I...guess I could try walking all the way to the trees from here. The only problem is it's a bit far and you can see everything from the road. Well, I guess it doesn't matter if a driver sees me-

A pulse of energy and heat ran through her body. She gasped. Trembling, she glanced down at her hands and saw they had swollen.

No time! thought Melinda in panic. *I gotta find shelter, fast.*

Sweat trickled down her neck. Then, Melinda recalled the bleachers at the football field.

They're not too far and there's plenty of cover. I can transform there and run out into the forest. No one will see me.

Stepping quickly but carefully to avoid any broken glass or other sharp fragments, Melinda made her way across the lot, onto the field and hurried over to the stands. As she walked, the wind shifted, carrying with it that odor from before she couldn't identify. No longer inundated in Phillip's scent she recognized it.

Someone's here!

Melinda looked around wildly. Though the dimming light didn't hamper her vision she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, even a cursory sniff told her someone was nearby - close to the main building, maybe even in the parking lot. Just as she was coming to grips with this unsettling news another wave of heat passed over her. She couldn't repress the transformation for much longer. Grimacing, Melinda limped along towards the bleachers, hoping whoever was around hadn't seen her and wasn't following her.

Her heartbeat was now so strong she could practically feel it in her skull. It was already the longest she'd ever delayed the change and it hurt like hell - almost as much as the first time she transformed. Second after agonizing second passed. She was mere yards away from the bleachers when she stumbled to her knees. Screaming in frustration and pain, Melinda scurried over and disappeared under the stands, where she collapsed.

Lying in the shadows beneath the stands, Melinda breathed a relieved sigh and then shuddered as the change engulfed her body. Her enflamed hands expanded and morphed into large paws that sprouted black talons. A layer of jet black fur enveloped her nude form as she grew, tight, wiry muscles bulging to massive, Amazonian proportions. Unsettling cracking and popping sounds filled the air as her leg bones stretched and contorted. A long, bushy tail slid from her backside while black leathery pads formed on her feet. Melinda slowly rose on all fours. She grit her teeth as her face started to change, her nose turning back and her jaw jutting forward forming a reduced muzzle. Her ears traveled up her head and formed pointed tufts as her teeth grew and narrowed into deadly fangs. Finally, her eyes changed from green to yellow. Melinda felt an

urge to howl well up inside her but managed to resist the impulse. Instead, she forced herself to rise up on two legs, took in a deep, long breath, and exhaled.

"W-What the heck?"

Melinda yelped and whirled around. The voice had come from a figure approaching her no more than a couple yards away. The sun had nearly set and the undercroft of the stands was quite dark, but it was clear the observer had seen everything. Melinda instantly recognized his...no, her scent as the one from before. She was short and slightly overweight with brown hair a smattering of freckles, wearing jeans and a beige sweater. The girl looked frightened out of her mind and ready to run, which she promptly did.

"W-Wait," called Melinda, raising a paw.

The girl didn't respond.

Feeling rather foolish, Melinda carefully ducked under the support bars, emerging from the bleachers, and scampered after her. She quickly overtook the girl, circling around her and blocking her way. The girl screamed and changed direction. Melinda simply circled around her again, this time standing.

"Hold on," growled Melinda.

The girl did a 180° turn and started running towards the forest.

Fine, I'll let her tire herself out first, thought Melinda grimly. *She heading towards the forest anyhow and-*

A memory flashed in her mind.

"... Are we sticking to our policy that we bite anyone who learns about us - family excluded?"

Melinda's eyes widened, and then narrowed.

Damn it. Not again!

Paws curling into fists, Melinda started walking towards the retreating figure.

* * *

Sophie Mason gasped breathlessly as she staggered through the thick undergrowth of the forest. Sharp branches raked her skinny pale legs. Tiny pebbles kicked up in her flight had become lodged in her shoes, battering and bruising her already raw feet. Her knees, elbows, and hands were caked with dirt. Only two things kept her from collapsing: fear, and the dwindling supply of adrenaline pumping through her body.

The petite young teenager yelped pitifully as she stumbled over a protruding root. She tumbled violently to the leaf-strewn ground and laid there for a few seconds, sobbing quietly, her soft cries barely audible over the chirp of the forest crickets.

Still sniffing, she lifted herself off the forest floor, brushing leaves and dirt off her plain beige sweater and faded long jeans. Her freckle-dotted nose was bleeding profusely. She looked around. Though she saw no sign of the monster she couldn't shake the feeling she was being followed. Terror seemed to have heightened her senses and they were telling her there was something in the woods. She could smell its musk in the air and hear its distant footsteps. She moaned. Her mind was screaming at her to run even as her body begged her not to.

Suddenly, Sophie caught a flash of motion in the corner of her eye. She slowly turned her head. Ahead of her stood a twisted oak tree, a huckleberry bush, a rotting log, two glowing yellow eyes...

Sophie froze.

A monstrous black beast exploded from the darkness. Sophie screamed. Before she could take a step two powerful arms seized her and dragged her to the ground. She instinctively curled up into a ball and shut her eyes, expecting to be torn to shreds.

She felt a sharp, painful pinch on her neck, and then...nothing. Several seconds passed. Sophie slowly opened her eyes. There was only darkness. She tried to sit up but felt an incredible weight pressing down atop her. She shifted her legs. As they moved she felt her skin rub up against something warm and hairy. Her eyes widened in terror. The monster was sitting on top of her! She started twisting and wiggling her body in an attempt to escape. Her struggles, if anything, only served to lodge her further underneath the beast.

Suddenly, the creature rolled over, forcing Sophie on her back. She glanced down and saw a muscular furry black arm wrapped around her flat chest. She glanced to her right and saw the massive frame of the creature lying beside her. She couldn't get a glimpse of its face; its head was facing away from her.

"Are you alright?" rumbled a voice - deep, yet strangely familiar.

Sophie's eyes widened.

"Say something!" growled the beast.

This was too much for Sophie. She screamed and redoubled her efforts to escape. She kicked, punched, and bit at the monster like a maddened rabbit.

"STOP MOVING!" roared the beast.

It squeezed her so hard that Sophie thought her head would pop off her shoulders. Terrified, she immediately stopped struggling. The creature, in turn, loosened its grip. Sophie gasped and massaged her bruised throat. As she explored the upper reaches of her neck and head she felt a warm dampness there. Was it blood? Sweat? She couldn't tell.

"I'm not going to kill you," intoned the beast in a surprisingly gentle voice.

Sophie gulped. She felt like she should say something.

"What's your name?" asked the beast.

Sophie gulped.

"S-S-Sophie, m'name's Sophie," replied Sophie in a thick southern drawl.

She felt the beast shift its weight off her body, though it maintained its grip.

"Alright...Sophie," said the beast. "I'm going to let go of you, but I want you to promise not to run off when I do, okay?"

Sophie nodded quickly. It wasn't as though she could outrun the thing.

"Okay?" growled the beast impatiently.

"Yes! Of course!" squeaked Sophie, realizing that the creature couldn't have seen her nod from where it was lying.

The beast relinquished its hold and slowly stood up. As it rose, moonlight shining down through the trees illuminated its upper body. Sophie scrambled to her feet and stared at her attacker. She hadn't gotten a good look at it under the stands.

The thing was enormous! It towered over her at a height of at least eight feet, head to toe, and it was built like a tank! Every inch of its black, furry body was lined with smooth, powerful muscle. Its arms alone were nearly as wide as Sophie's waist. Its abs were like slabs of concrete. Most astounding of all, however, was its wolf-like head. It had a lupine nose and jaw, tufted, triangular raised ears, and piercing yellow eyes that glowed with an inner fire.

Overawed, Sophie stumbled back, tripping over a large rock. She fell on her rear with a terrified yelp.

"Easy," rumbled the creature, raising a paw-like hand.

"W-W-Wha-What d-do ya'w-want?" stuttered Sophie, frantically scooting away.

The creature sighed.

"I want to talk," it said.

It slowly knelt to the ground until its face was level with Sophie's. It stared intensely into the girl's quivering brown eyes. As their gazes locked, Sophie froze - mesmerized. She felt herself being pulled into the creature's eyes, drowning in their golden radiance. It was as though everything around her - the trees, the rocks, the stars and the sky - had disappeared. She wasn't sure if she was afraid, fascinated, or simply exhausted. All she could do was stare dumbly into those two, gleaming yellow spheres.

The beast stood, breaking whatever spell it had put over the girl. Reality reasserted itself. Sophie looked down and saw the great beast padding towards her. She gulped. Though she was no longer terrified of the creature it was still quite...disconcerting.

"I'm...sure you have a lot of questions," said the creature.

Its long, black nose was now mere inches away from her face. Sophie stared on wide-eyed.

"What...what are ya?" quivered Sophie.

The creature looked up at her. It hesitated.

"I'm...a werewolf, Sophie," said the creature eventually. "My name...my name is...Melinda."

There was a pause.

"You're a...werewolf?" breathed Sophie.

Melinda nodded.

"And...y-er name is Melinda?" said Sophie, gulping.

"Yes, now listen carefully," continued Melinda. "I...I've bitten you. I didn't have a choice; you saw me transform. Do you understand what this means?"

Sophie's lips moved silently as she thought. Finally, she looked up at Melinda and shook her head.

"Well, it's..." Melinda hesitated. "Anyone who is bitten by a werewolf become a werewolf."

Sophie's expression instantly turned from that of confusion to abject horror.

"A-A-A w-werewolf?" she stuttered. "L-L-Like you?"

Melinda nodded solemnly.

"B-but, I don't wanna be a werewolf!" cried Sophie.

"Easy! Easy!" said Melinda, raising both her paws. "Don't panic!"

"This can't be happening," wailed Sophie. "It's...it's gotta be some bad dream."

"No! Please! Try to stay calm!"

"I-It ain't fair," said Sophie, tears forming in her eyes. "I'm...I'm a good girl. I always do my homework. I never say anything mean about anyone. Now I'm...I'm gonna turn into some kinda m-monster?"

"No! It's not like that at all!" protested Melinda. "Calm down! Please!"

Sophie looked at Melinda with a pleading look in her eyes.

"W-Why did y'do this to...Ah....AH."

Sophie clutched her stomach, grinding her teeth. Her already pale skin had turned even more pallid.

"AHHHHHH!"

Sophie shrieked in pain and crumpled to the ground. Melinda rushed to Sophie's side and gently lifted her. She noticed that the girl's fingertips were beginning to swell. Her gums were bleeding profusely as well. Melinda glanced up at the full moon, then back at Sophie.

"It hurts!" cried Sophie through clenched teeth.

"It's the transformation," said Melinda nervously. "It's...it's already begun!"

Sophie's tear-filled, blood-shot eyes widened.

"No, oh God, it's horrible!" screamed Sophie. "Please, make it stop! I'm begging you!"

"I can't," said Melinda helplessly, staring down at Sophie through her bright, yellow eyes. "I'm sorry. It...it's just going to happen."

"N-No...Ah! AHHHHHH!"

Sophie's screams filled the night air, growing louder and more distressed with every passing moment. Melinda winced.

"Sophie! You have calm down!" urged Melinda. "Please! If you panic it'll just get worse!"

Sophie didn't respond. Indeed, she barely seemed aware of Melinda's presence. She was lying on the ground twitching in pain, massaging her inflamed hands.

"Please, Sophie!" cried Melinda, gently shaking Sophie. "I know it hurts like hell, but...but...try to think about something else!"

Sophie screamed so loud that Melinda was forced to cover her ears. As she screeched, her back arched violently. Sophie slowly reached up as though grasping for something the sky. Her fingertips were as large as cherries and nearly as red. Her entire body began to throb, each convulsion greater than the last. Then with one final, violent spasm her swollen fingertips burst open.

Long, monstrous claws emerged from the bloody stumps.

Sophie gazed up through the haze of pain. She splayed her fingers against the full moon, flexing them. Before she could react, a sharp pain shot through her arms and traveled down her hands and fingers. Sophie moaned and shut her eyes as the agony intensified. It felt as though each of her fingers were slowly being torn out of their sockets. Suddenly, she felt something in her fingers snap. There was a moment of excruciating pain, followed by a dull, pervasive numbness. Sophie opened her eyes and looked up at her hands. What she saw sent chills running down her spine. Her delicate hands had become long, hairy paws equipped with razor-sharp talons. She stared wide-eyed at her new manipulators. She curled her fingers, watching her knuckles appear and disappear beneath her furry skin.

"No..." she whispered hoarsely.

Even as she spoke, she felt the pain returning. She looked up at Melinda, who had been silently watching the entire time.

"Kill me," croaked Sophie.

Melinda's yellow eyes widened. She gripped Sophie by the shoulders.

"No Sophie, you don't want that!" she protested. "It'll be over soon, I promise!"

"It hurts too much!" cried Sophie. Melinda looked down and saw patches of thick, gray fur sprouting on her arms.

"The pain shouldn't be that bad at this stage!" cried Melinda. "You need to relax! If you don't...well, the pain could kill you!"

"It's already killing me!" screamed Sophie. "How am I supposed to relax when it feels like my bones are growing out of m'skin?"

Melinda hesitated.

"Just kill me," whimpered Sophie, tears flowing freely from her eyes. "It's not...it's not as if my death'll matter much."

"Don't say that!" growled Melinda. "You're not thinking straight! Your body doesn't think it can survive what's happening to it, but it can if you just accept the transformation and stay calm!"

Sophie's pleas for death degenerated into howls of pain. Melinda watched helplessly as the girl's skinny body expanded, veins and arteries bulging below her pale perspiring skin. Tight sinews of muscle bulged along her arms, legs, shoulders, and torso. Her previously nonexistent breasts were beginning to poke against the fabric of her shirt.

Melinda seized Sophie and hugged her tightly.

"Please, stop!" cried Melinda as Sophie shook in her grasp. "It's going to be okay! Everything's going to be alright!"

Sophie roared. Melinda glanced down and shuddered at what she saw. Long, sharp fangs had replaced Sophie's eyeteeth. Blood was dripping freely down her lower lip. Her face was sallow and taut - a death mask. Melinda could feel her heart beating through her chest.

Her heart...

"Listen," whispered Melinda into Sophie's ear. "I want you to concentrate on your heartbeat. Pretend there isn't anything else in the world - no trees, no ground, no stars, no sky, just your heart. Nothing else."

Melinda winced as Sophie ran her burgeoning claws across her back, drawing blood. She ignored the pain and continued.

"I can hear your heart, Sophie," continued Melinda. "It's wild and rapid, frantic and uncertain. I want you to imagine it slowing down. I want you to imagine each successive beat growing longer. I want you to imagine the tension draining out of your body."

Though Sophie was still shaking, she was no longer struggling.

"I want you to take long, deep, steady breaths," continued Melinda. "Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. I want you to imagine it flowing out of your body every time you exhale. In, and out..."

Through Sophie's long, tired pants, Melinda made out the sound of fabric ripping. She could feel the girl's body growing in her arms like an expanding balloon. She was getting huge.

"Your heartbeat is slowing, Sophie," whispered Melinda. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Everything is okay. You're safe here."

For the first time since she encountered Melinda under the bleachers, Sophie was still. Her massive chest heaved up and down, pinned between the ground and Melinda. There was a sudden, urgent whine, followed by a sigh of relief. Melinda peered down. Through the darkness she spotted something long and furry protruding from Sophie's backside.

Time unfroze. The night air was silent save for Sophie's muted sobbing.

"Shhh," hushed Melinda, patting Sophie on the back. "It's over. You did just fine. Everything's alright."

"It...it still hurts," whined Sophie, her voice deeper.

"Your muscles are just sore, that's all," said Melinda. "You'll be fine."

"And I feel all weird..." muttered Sophie. "Oh Lord, what's that smell?" She paused. "Do, do I have a tail?"

"I think so," said Melinda. "Come on, let's get you up and have a look at you."

Melinda stood up. She glanced down at the figure lying before her. Two glowing red eyes stared back. This seemed to nonplus Melinda.

"Are you angry or something?" asked Melinda, a hint of concern in her voice.

"N-no."

Melinda shrugged. She extended a paw. A moment later, a surprisingly powerful gray-furred hand gripped it. Melinda lurched forward at the unexpected force of the pull.

Sophie rose into the moonlight like a monolith. Melinda looked up in awe.

"Whoa..." breathed Melinda.

Her eyes ran up and down Sophie's hulking form. Like Melinda, she was a wolf-like humanoid - only bigger in every respect. Her legs, formally stick-thin, were now massive bulks of muscle, bone, and fur. Wide hips flanked rock-hard abs and a stomach as flat and tight as a steel drum. Above, her breasts, though not markedly large relative to the rest of her body, easily rivaled soccer balls in size. Her arms were truly impressive. They were nearly the width of a thin man's waist. Her biceps alone were more than a foot in diameter. The fur on her back, shoulders, and arms was black while her chest, stomach, and legs were a charcoal gray. Her face and head were considerably more human than Melinda's; her muzzle and ears were stunted and her snout was only marginally darker than her fur. Her eyes were a crimson red that shone in the darkness like embers.

Sophie looked down at her new body and yelped. She immediately covered her chest with her arms with an embarrassed whine. She clumsily crossed her shaking legs.

"M-My clothes...where are my clothes?" she muttered in a daze.

"Down there," chuckled Melinda, pointing a clawed finger. They were little more than rags.

"Oh, um..." gulped Sophie.

"Don't let it bother you," said Melinda, smiling. "It's not as though there's anything down there I haven't seen before." She chuckled again. "Besides, I don't think they would've fit you anymore."

"I...I..." whimpered Sophie, overwhelmed.

Suddenly, she sneezed violently. She sneezed again, and the again. A fourth sneeze threw her off balance. She fell to the ground with a loud thump and began crying.

"I'm, *sob* I'm a *sob* freak! I'm...*sniff* a monster!" wept Sophie.

Melinda stifled a giggle. The sight of such an enormous beast sitting on the ground - crying like a baby - was pretty ridiculous. However, her amusement quickly faded.

"Look, I'm sorry if I was insensitive," said Melinda, kneeling beside her. "I know this isn't easy."

Sophie didn't appear to hear her.

"What *sob* is my ma' going to *sob* do?"

"Sophie, listen to me," said Melinda firmly.

There was no response. Just crying.

"Sophie!" barked Melinda.

Sophie peered up at Melinda through moist red eyes.

"It's okay," she said slowly. "When the sun rises you'll change back. I promise!"

There was a pause.

"Y'mean...y'mean this ain't permanent?" said Sophie.

Melinda gave Sophie a wan smile.

"Well...yes and no," said Melinda carefully. "You'll change back in the morning, yes, but next full moon you'll transform again. That's the 'curse' of the werewolf, remember?"

"Oh Lord," whimpered Sophie.

"Wait, there's more," said Melinda. "You have to change during the full moon, yes, but otherwise you can change back and forth whenever you want."

There was a pause.

"W-Why would I want t'do that?" said Sophie, confused.

Melinda sighed. She sat down beside the despondent werewolf.

"You've got a lot to learn, Sophie," said Melinda, trying to sound friendly. "So...let's take this one step at a time. How do you feel?"

"Feel?" gulped Sophie. "Scared, nervous, terrified, petrified...kinda hungry."

"Well, putting hunger aside," said Melinda. "Why are you afraid?"

"I-I'm a werewolf! That's why!" exclaimed Sophie, sounding more alarmed than angry.

"Why is that so bad?" asked Melinda flatly.

"W-Why is that so...lookit me!" exclaimed Sophie. "I'm a monster."

"Why are you a monster?" asked Melinda. "Is it because you look different?"

"Well, yeah," said Sophie with equal parts fear and confusion.

"So anything that looks strange or different is automatically a monster?" continued Melinda calmly.

"Well, I, um...no," stuttered Sophie. "It's just...werewolves are supposed to be evil! Minions of Satan and all that! I don't want to be no minion of Satan!"

"Since transforming, have you felt the urge to kill, maim, rape, dance around an inverted burning cross singing praises to the devil, or otherwise offend God?" asked Melinda dryly.

"N-no," said Sophie, taken aback.

"Do I seem like a demonic creature? Be serious."

"Well, um, you did...attack me...and changed me," said Sophie resentfully. "Why? Why did you do it? Why couldn't y'all just leave me alone?"

"Because you saw me transform. I'm very, very sorry Sophie, but I had to do it to protect our secret. Look, back to the point at hand. Werewolves are no more inherently evil than humans, Sophie. In fact, I happen to know one who's a devout Baptist."

"B-B-But, I mean," stuttered Sophie. "I'm...I'm..."

"Fuzzy?" supplied Melinda.

"It ain't funny," whimpered Sophie, staring down at the ground.

There was silence.

"Listen," said Melinda. "Before we go any further I think you should see your...new self."

Sophie looked up at Melinda.

"What do y'mean?" she asked, confused.

"There's a small lake nearby," said Melinda, pointing westward. "You could probably see your reflection in the water."

Sophie hesitated. She stared down at her big, powerful paws, flexing them.

"N-No, I don't think I need to," she murmured.

"Come on," said Melinda. "This isn't something you can ignore."

Again, Sophie seemed unsure. She tightened her lips, and then nodded dumbly.

* * *

Lily bounded nimbly through the dense foliage, ducking and weaving between the bushes and trees. Hardly a blade of grass or leaf was disturbed as she made her way through the forest. Her smooth grey fur shone in the gentle alabaster light of the full moon. Her powerful legs were a blur beneath her body. She stopped suddenly, lifting her lupine snout into the cool evening air, sniffing, and then scampered away.

Several miles in the span of ten minutes later she trotted into a small clearing. There were a few lichen-ridden boulders lying in the center. Lily paused, glancing upwards. No longer obscured by the thick branches of the trees, the full moon was plainly visible in the cloudless, starry night sky. Lily felt an overwhelming joy fill her soul as she stared up at the radiant white orb. She darted towards the mound of boulders and leapt to the top, tail wagging. She sat, raised her head to the heavens, and howled. Her call was proud and jubilant - its smooth, unwavering timbre drowning out the muted noises of the forest.

Suddenly, another howl filled the air, then a second, and then a third. Lily perked up and looked around expectantly. Below, a giant white werewolf with purple eyes emerged from the forest, closely followed by a smaller one with a reddish-brown, almost fox-like pelt. A keen observer would have quickly noted many differences between the two in addition to size and color. The latter resembled Lily much more than the former, though the newcomer was about a foot taller and more muscular. She had paws with longer, flexible digit that included some homolog of a human thumb. Her muzzle was short, her forehead relatively flat and her eyes faced forward. The white-furred one simply resembled an oversized wolf (albeit with shimmering violet eyes).

Another werewolf appeared. This one looked more like the red furred one - a large, tall, anthropomorphic wolf. Her pelt, however, was unlike that of any wolf. Her fur in color from golden-brown to light yellow, bringing one more to mind of a Labrador retriever than lupine beast. Her features were soft and her curves pronounced, almost cartoonish, contrasting with her sharp predatory green eyes and confident demeanor. She also sported a long, smooth mane of blonde hair.

The red and blonde werewolves stood up on their hind legs while the white one remained on all fours; even then it was nearly as tall as the other two.

"God, it's a beautiful night, isn't it?" exclaimed the red werewolf.

"Yeah," nodded Lily.

"Where's Melinda?" continued the red werewolf, combing back her wild red hair with her paws.

"Last time I saw her was at school on Friday," said the blonde werewolf. "Haven't seen her since."

"I think I've caught her scent," said Lily uneasily. "But it's really, really faint. Either she's upwind of us or it's just...left over from another night."

"We should wait for her to show up before we catch dinner," said the red one.

"Oh please, Heidi," said Cynthia, folding her furry arms. "It's been over an hour. Screw her."

"What do you think, Yvette?" said Heidi mischievously, turning to the white werewolf.

Yvette managed to convey an amazingly human expression through her lupine countenance, rolling her eyes and flexing her neck as though shrugging.

"Oh geez, like that joke hasn't gotten old," groaned Lily, rubbing her forehead.

"Come on, girl, speak!" urged Heidi. "Did Timmy fall down a well?"

Yvette's tufted ears flicked forward in annoyance. She moved her lips, making a strange, throaty sound.

"Good girl!" said Heidi, chuckling.

Yvette made the sound again, though this time it was more nuanced. Curious, Lily leaned in closer to listen.

"Sssccrrrooooo...yooooouu..."

The laughter filled the clearing.

"You just got burned by a half-ton wolf," snorted Lily.

"Yeah, yeah," said Heidi sourly, though her grin remained. "We ought to just get you one of those magic collars from that Pixar movie that lets dogs talk."

"Um, first, they weren't magic," said Cynthia. "Second, not real."

"Maybe they are," replied Heidi, sounding almost half serious.

"Oh please."

"Yeah, just like werewolves aren't real."

"She's got a point," said Lily slyly.

"Oh come on, those are two totally different things! One is made up and the other isn't!"

"How do we know? Maybe Santa Clause and the Easter bunny are real."

"Oh God, that's for kids!" groaned Cynthia. "And where the fuck is Melinda?"

"Maybe we should just start without her," said Lily.

"Eh, I don't want to deal with another one of her hissy fits," said Cynthia irritably. "They give me a fucking migraine. And here I thought we couldn't get sick anymore. One of the few benefits of this goddamn lifestyle."

"...And super-senses and super-healing and we can't get fat no matter how much we eat - God damn I love that," said Heidi, counting with her clawed fingers.

"...And we can't touch silver and we look like the bride of Chewbacca every month and if anyone finds out about us we'll be locked away," countered Cynthia.

"You sound like Melinda," snorted Heidi.

"The little bit-....brat has a point," said Cynthia reluctantly.

"Who the hell are you and what did you do with Cynthia?"

"I just don't want this...this thing to completely take over my life, okay?"

There was silence as the four girls contemplated this, gazing down at the ground or off into the woods.

"Well, then, maybe you should ease off Greg a bit," said Lily eventually, addressing Cynthia.

She might as well have slapped her in the face. Cynthia turned to her and growled, baring her teeth.

"Don't even go there," she snarled.

Though clearly surprised by Cynthia's aggression, Lily did not back down.

"We both know you haven't told Melinda everything," she continued. "Hell, there's some stuff I did that I...I really wouldn't want Melinda to find out about, but if we're-

"Lily?" interrupted Cynthia in a dangerously cheerful tone.

"What?"

"If we're going to start playing 'who's the biggest slut' we both know who's going to take home the gold trophy."

Lily's ears folded back. "C-Come on Cynthia, I never said th-

"I seem to recall a certain sophomore - hideous fashion sense, nice personality, really needed to lay off the churros - who, one night on homecoming..." Cynthia trailed off, grinning evilly, and then dismissively wave a paw. "Eh, never mind; I forget what her name was anyhow."

Lily lowered her head in shame.

"Lay off, Cynthia," snapped Heidi.

"What? Just making conversation."

"Cynthia," said Lily in a quivering voice. "You said you...you'd never-

"I never said it was you," replied Cynthia with mock innocence. "Oh, do you know the girl? Because she-

There was a low-pitched rumbling sound. It wasn't particularly loud, but the ground itself seemed to resonate. It took the girls a second or two to figure out it was emanating from Yvette; it was so deep, so *powerful* that they had difficulty coming to grips with the fact it was actually a growl.

Cynthia's expression instantly turned from wicked delight to discomfort.

"H-Hey, easy Yvette," she said.

Yvette didn't move but fixed her piercing gaze on the recalcitrant blonde werewolf for an uncomfortably long time. Then, the white wolf snorted, turned and took a few steps away from the group, looking out into the forest.

"Geez," said Heidi after a while. "Not that you didn't have it coming, Cynthia," she added sorely.

Cynthia didn't respond, at least not verbally. She glared at Heidi, a faint red tinge visible on her cheeks beneath the yellow fuzz. Then, she turned and started walking away.

"Where are you going?" called Heidi.

Cynthia just kept walking.

"Cynthia?"

"Fuck all of you!" snapped Cynthia, whirling around. She then turned back around and disappeared into the trees.

"Shit!" swore Heidi. "Not again. Guess it's just..." she trailed as she saw Yvette too was leaving the clearing. "Shit," she repeated, now sounding more frustrated than angry.

The two werewolves stood in the clearing.

"What the fuck is going on?" exclaimed Heidi, throwing out her paws. "It's not just Melinda. Any ideas, Lily?"

Lily said nothing. She was gazing down at her furry feet.

"Hey, hey!" said Heidi firmly, stepping in front of the grey wolf-girl. "Don't let that, that...God, I'm just going to say it...bitch screw with you." She patted her on the shoulder. "Come on, let's catch some dinner before those other two idiots scare everything off."

Lily looked up at her, took a deep breath, and then sighed.

"Fine, fine, whatever," she said, shrugging. "But...Melinda still isn't here."

"It's been over an hour, Lily," said Heidi. "I'm not waiting any longer." She paused. "Still, I wonder what kept her."

* * *

Melinda stared out across the placid waters and up at the moon. The glittering surface formed a perfect mirror of the sky and shore. It was pleasantly quiet. Even the crickets had gone silent. She turned to face Sophie, who was hiding behind a tall pine.

"We came all this way, Sophie," said Melinda. "Don't you at least want to take a peek?"

Sophie stared glumly down at the muddy soil.

"Fine," said Melinda. "No rush."

Minutes passed. Melinda stretched her long, muscular arms over her head. Somewhere off in the distance, an owl hooted.

"Why were you so ready to die back there?" asked Melinda suddenly.

Sophie looked up. Her glowing red eyes were plainly visible in the darkness even if her body wasn't.

"I know the pain must have been awful," continued Melinda. "But when you said your death wouldn't matter much, well...come on."

Sophie said nothing.

"Now I know you're thinking this is none of my business and you may even be right," said Melinda calmly. "But I don't want a suicidally depressed werewolf running around my town. I've seen it happen and once is enough, believe me."

Sophie shuffled her feet.

"I...it's just...I had a really crummy day," she muttered uneasily. "I...forgot my lunch, fell in a puddle and got laughed at, got a D- on my English paper, and then these girls in P.E. called me a...oh Lord, this sounds stupid."

"No it doesn't," said Melinda. "I know how depressing a bad day at school can be. But if there's one thing I've learned over the last year, things get better just as often as they get worse. How old are you?"

"Wh-What?" said Sophie, caught off guard.

"How old are you?" repeated Melinda patiently.

"Si-Sixteen," stuttered Sophie.

"Sixteen," said Melinda. "Let's say for the sake of argument you only live to be fifty-six. You still have a good forty years. Forty years - that's...at least fourteen thousand days - fourteen thousand chances for things to improve. You've barely seen a quarter of your life and you're ready to give it all up?"

"Well...it's not as though they've been particularly happy years," said Sophie quietly.

"It's easy to look back on your life and see nothing but pain and suffering when you're feeling depressed," continued Melinda. "Even if that were true you can't assume it's going to stay that way. Almost no one's life is so crappy that it isn't worth living."

"But what's the point?" cried Sophie suddenly. "What difference would it make if I never existed in the first place? We...we hear about all these great scientists and leaders and...and geniuses who have done things we couldn't accomplish in a lifetime. Compared to them I ain't worth squat." She stared glumly at the ground. "I'm just a waste of a body."

Melinda cringed. This was getting uncomfortably philosophical.

"Sophie you shouldn't....you shouldn't judge yourself by what others have done," said Melinda eventually. "You should judge yourself by what you do and what you've done. You shouldn't be so concerned by the scale of what you accomplish as much as how much it matters to you."

There was silence.

"Okay, how about this," said Melinda wearily. "Consider this: you're one of the last few werewolves left on Earth. That's got to count for something, right?"

Sophie slowly looked up at Melinda. Her expression was difficult to read.

"Do you...need some more time?" inquired Melinda.

Sophie hesitated. She stared into Melinda's brilliant yellow eyes, seeing her own reflection in them.

"No, I-I'm feeling a lot better now," she said.

"You sure?" asked Melinda.

Sophie nodded. To even her own surprise she managed a weak smile.

"Well then," said Melinda. "You ready to get a glimpse at the new you?"

Sophie hesitated, and then rose.

"O-Okay."

Sophie stepped from behind the tree and crept towards the shore. She went as far as a foot from the water, and then stopped. She looked back at Melinda, who gave her a nod of encouragement and a thumb up. With a gulp of trepidation she peered over the water's edge.

Twin crimson embers writhed in dark flames that throbbed rather than flickered. Radiance greater than a thousand suns condensed into two, intense red motes framed by the savage, noble visage of a wolf. A massive gray-furred body of Amazonian physique tempered by soft, seductive curves and an unmistakable aura of feminine grace and allure. She stared at it. It stared back.

A minute later, Sophie stepped away from the shore and approached Melinda. For the first time since Melinda met her she no longer looked frightened or bewildered. She looked, if anything, pensive.

"Well?" said Melinda.

"I-It's...not what I expected."

Melinda smiled.

"Do you still think you're a monster, Sophie?" said Melinda.

"I...don't know what I am anymore," said Sophie quietly.

Suddenly, a loud gurgle broke the silence and the drama.

"Hungry?" said Melinda, chuckling.

"Starvin'," replied Sophie, clutching her stomach. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

"I could go for one myself, actually," said Melinda.

There was a pause.

"Y'weren't joking just then, were you?" said Sophie nervously.

"Nope," said Melinda.

Sophie gulped.

"O-On second thought I think I'll be alright," said Sophie, backing away.

"Nice try," said Melinda, folding her massive arms. "Look, transforming takes a lot out of you and the only way to recover is to eat. And there aren't many McDonalds out there that'll serve a werewolf."

"C-Can't we just...I dunno, sneak into a grocery store or something?" pleaded Sophie.

"That'd be far too dangerous," said Melinda, shaking her head. "There's no reason to risk being seen when there's plenty of food around here."

Sophie whined and stared down at the ground.

"You're a predator now, Sophie," said Melinda, shrugging. "You need meat. More to the point, you have a psychological need to hunt."

"Well...still," murmured Sophie, wringing her paws.

"Tell you what," said Melinda as kindly as she could manage. "I'll go hunt something down and share it with you. You won't have to raise a claw if you don't want to. All that I ask is that you tag along."

Sophie considered this.

"A-Alright."

* * *

Sophie stepped carefully over a tangled mass of roots while ducking under a low-hanging branch from the same tree. She glanced at the forest ahead. Even with her newly acquired night-vision she couldn't make out Melinda. It was like trying to spot, well, a shadow in the dark. Fortunately, her heightened senses of smell and hearing more than compensated. At times she could've sworn she heard Melinda's heartbeat.

Sophie pushed aside another, larger obstructing branch, snapping it in the process.

Melinda's head popped up through the leaves.

"Stay quiet!" she hissed. "It'll hear us."

"S-Sorry," said Sophie meekly.

Despite her tremendous size Sophie was having little difficulty moving through the forest. It wasn't that she was especially quick or agile. Rather, there was very little that could get in her way. Bushes, branches, saplings, just about everything short of fully-grown trees could be brushed aside or trampled with ease. It was as though the world had suddenly turned very small and very soft.

Snap.

"I said keep it down," growled Melinda ahead of her. Sophie saw her eyes flare in the darkness.

"Sorry! Sorry!" whispered Sophie frantically. "It's hard to keep up with you without makin' some noise. I'm just too big."

"Then get down on all fours," snorted Melinda. "It'll make moving through the undergrowth a lot easier and make you harder to see."

Sophie hesitated, and then dropped to the ground. The moment her front paws touched the soil something clicked inside her brain. Before long she was trotting along on all fours as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Sophie was amazed and more than a little frightened by the ease of the transition.

"This way," whispered Melinda. "It's a deer."

Sophie sniffed the air.

"I-I know," said Sophie, following her voice. "I...can smell it."

"Good," replied Melinda from the bushes. "I can take it from here. Stay down and keep quiet."

"Alright," whispered Sophie.

Only a trail of faintly rustling bushes marked Melinda's departure.

Sophie crouched low to the ground. Peering through the dense undergrowth she spotted a dark shape moving through the treeline. She brushed aside some of the foliage to get a better view. The branches parted to reveal a young male deer nibbling on a patch of grass. The creature raised its head. Moonlight shone off its dark, scraggly pelt and glossy black nose as it gazed into the seemingly endless expanse of trees, its breath plainly visible in the cold night air.

Several seconds passed. Then a minute. Then two. Then five. Sophie found herself growing increasingly anxious. She shifted her weight slightly, taking some of the strain off her back legs. She wanted desperately to stand up and stretch her massive, hulking body. Her muscles, as powerful as they felt, were sore from being bunched up for so long. Dirt, twigs, and other forest debris were getting lodged in her fur. It was worse than walking with pebble-filled shoes. Ahead, the stag peacefully grazed, oblivious to her presence.

Sophie growled. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't take her focus off the animal. When she turned away or shut her eyes she could hear it tearing at the grass. When she covered her ears, she could detect its pungent musk in the air. It was as though the world was condensing, leaving nothing left but herself, the deer, and the distance between them. She was angry - angry at losing control, angry at the pain and discomfort she was experiencing, angry with Melinda for changing her, angry at the world for making her life miserable. Frustration, rage, and despair steadily blurred into a single, seething animus. A tiny fragment of Sophie's mind cried out in alarm before being smothered by a maelstrom of emotion and instinct.

Sophie would never quite remember what happened next. There were brief images - blurred visions of the forest, silhouettes of a terrified retreating deer, and then screams, blood, guts and gore. When awareness did return to her, Sophie was sitting next to the disemboweled corpse of the deer, her claws and muzzle slick, her stomach full. She stared down at the grisly thing. For a brief moment she felt a tremor of revulsion at what she had done. Then, not understanding why, she returned to her meal. A minute later Sophie became aware that someone was standing behind her. She looked up. Melinda was leaning against the trunk of a pine several yards away.

"Whoa, nice catch, Sophie," said Melinda, slightly in awe.

Sophie didn't say or do anything in response apart from staring at Melinda. A drop of blood fell from her lips.

"Sophie?" said Melinda curiously, taking a step forward.

There was a hint of a growl from Sophie. Then, the newly transformed wolf girl blinked. Looking somewhat disoriented, Sophie stood up - looming over Melinda - and sighed. She wiped the blood from her snout.

"You knew this would happen, didn't you?" said Sophie quietly.

Melinda nodded.

"I saw it move in your direction and I was going to take it down. Then I thought about it and figured...it'd be better to wait and let you do it. Get it out of your system." She grinned nervously. "Are you angry?"

"Yeah, a little," said Sophie.

"Sorry," said Melinda. "I wanted to help you through the change, but your first hunt is something special."

There was silence.

"It's...fine," said Sophie. "I...I actually feel a lot better now. It's weird, but I can't remember a time when I felt this...good."

Melinda smiled. She nodded in the direction of the forest.

"Come on, there's still a lot for you learn." Sophie looked up into the dark sky and up at the pale full moon.

"Maybe...maybe this won't be so bad," whispered Sophie to herself as she scurried after Melinda.

* * *

The morning sun crested over the trees. Light filtered down through the branches and onto the forest floor as bird songs filled the air. Sophie was curled up on the ground next to a tree. She yawned, stretching lazily.

"Sophie?"

Sophie stirred. She blinked her eyes sleepily and glanced around. A dark-haired teenage girl wearing a blue bathrobe was standing a couple feet away, staring at her in shock.

"It's just me, Melinda," said the girl quickly. "This is my human form."

Sophie nodded

"Y-Yeah, I kn-" she began.

"Why haven't you changed back?"

"Oh, um," said Sophie, confused. "Am I supposed to?"

"Yeah, come one," said Melinda. "We're not too far from the school. It's risky to...to look like that during the day."

"Er, h-how do I...do it?" asked Sophie.

"Just will yourself to turn human. It's not hard at all."

Sophie nodded frantically. She shut her eyes and concentrated. Several seconds passed. A little worm of worry began to gnaw through Sophie's stomach.

"Nothing?" breathed Melinda. "Look, just...just keep trying."

Sophie nodded. She strained herself, still not entirely sure what she was supposed to be doing. She tried visualizing herself turning back. She tried relaxing her body. Nothing worked.

Tears streamed down her red eyes.

"I can't...I'm...stuck," she whispered.

* * *

Heavy rain pattered against the windows of the restaurant, multitudes of quivering clear droplets dribbling frantically down the panes. Melinda took a sip of her diet cola as she stared listlessly at her reflection in the grease-smeared glass. The face in the window returned her gaze with its piercing emerald eyes. As she waited, she idly wondered why they'd started holding club meetings at the downtown Chinese restaurant when a) school wasn't in session and b) meeting out in the preserve was out of the question. It wasn't that the restaurant was actually bad. It was just so, well, mediocre. The soda was watery, the rice was dry, the meat was stringy, the service was slow, and the tables and chairs were inevitably covered by a sticky veneer of dried soda and teriyaki sauce. Then there was the smell. While she couldn't identify most of the odors they had a terribly suggestive organic quality.

Then again, it did offer privacy. Hardly anyone patronized the restaurant, at least during the time of day the girls met, and the staff spoke just enough English to get their orders right. Granted, meeting at one of their houses would have been even safer, but this was neutral territory. No one felt at a disadvantage here.

A tiny bell tinkled. Melinda glanced towards the entrance. Yvette stepped through the doorway. She was wearing a yellow rain jacket and galoshes. She paused momentarily to wipe her feet on the doormat and then approached Melinda. Her boots squeaked nosily on the vinyl tile floor as she walked.

"Hey Melinda," said Yvette.

"Hey yourself," said Melinda quietly.

Yvette sat down. She removed her jacket and folded it on the seat besides her. Outside, a lone truck rolled by, sending twin streaks of water high into the air.

"I take it I'm the first one here," said Yvette after a while.

Melinda shrugged.

"Cynthia said they might be late," she said. "They stayed after school for that free college seminar in the cafeteria."

"I'm surprised you didn't stick around for that yourself," said Yvette, conversationally.

"Well, it's a little hard to worry about college at a time like this," said Melinda.

Yvette's smile flickered.

"I should've checked the forecast," said Melinda, staring gloomily out the window. "I mean, I could've at least given her a poncho or an umbrella or something." She hesitated, and turned back to Yvette. "Do you think the cell phone will be okay?"

"I'm sure it will be fine as long as it stays in the backpack," assured Yvette. "Even if it is ruined it's no big deal. She can have mine."

"Yeah, I guess," sighed Melinda.

The two of them just sat there for while. The dull hum of the nearby soda machine hung in the air.

"Aren't you going to order something?" asked Melinda impatiently.

Yvette frowned. She noted Melinda's sunken eyes, greasy black hair, and pale countenance.

"Melinda," began Yvette, leaning forward slightly. "When's the last time you got a good night's sleep?"

Melinda looked up. Her lips tightened in annoyance. Then she slumped back in her seat with an exhausted sigh.

"Not since the last full moon," she murmured, massaging her temples.

"Six days?" exclaimed Yvette with equal measures surprise and concern.

Melinda nodded.

"Melinda, this sounds serious," whispered Yvette. "You should take some sedatives or something."

"It wouldn't help," said Melinda. "I'm not sleepy. I'm just...tired."

Yvette hesitated.

"Tired?"

"Tired," repeated Melinda mechanically.

Yvette said nothing. Her mouth opened and shut. Finally, she cleared her throat and said:

"Really, Melinda, just take some SleepQuil or -"

"No, no, no!" growled Melinda, sounding more frustrated than angry. "I'm not sleepy! Just tired."

Melinda stopped. She took a deep breath, sunk back to her seat, and exhaled. Empty, awkward silence pervaded the restaurant.

"Melinda, you...you shouldn't keep beating yourself up over this," said Yvette uneasily. "What's done is done. We just have to deal it as best we can."

Melinda glanced irritably at Yvette

"Wow, brilliant idea, Yvette," she sneered. "I would have never thought of doing that. Just dealing with it."

Yvette went quiet.

A sudden guilt passed over Melinda. She'd never seen Yvette so sad. She'd snapped at her in the past and Yvette had always forgiven her or shrugged it off, but now...The last thing she wanted to do was make Yvette feel more depressed, especially when she had nothing to do with the incident.

"Look, I...I'm sorry," managed Melinda. "Maybe it is just sleep deprivation." She hesitated. "I'll...pick up some sedatives before I go home, okay?"

"Well, yeah, if you think so," muttered Yvette, not bothering to look up.

"I think the others are here," said Melinda, relieved, glancing at the parking lot through the window.

The tiny bell mounted on the entrance's doorframe jingled again as Cynthia, Heidi, and Lily stepped inside. Cynthia was wearing a black sweater-vest over a plain white blouse and long blue jeans. Lily sported

a thick corduroy jacket and black dress jeans held up by a garish, oversized silver belt-buckle. A tiny black leather purse hung from her left shoulder. Heidi was wearing a gray sweatshirt with the words 'Dairyville High School Track and Field' emblazoned on the front, along with baggy exercise pants. Sweat and rain were dripping down her long auburn hair.

Melinda and Yvette nodded in their direction.

"Hey girls," said Yvette softly.

"Yeah, hey," said Cynthia, closing her dark-blue umbrella. "We're going to order our food, okay?"

"Sure," said Melinda with a terrible fake smile.

The three cheerleaders approached the counter. Back at the table, Melinda gave Yvette a penitent look.

"I'm sorry for acting like such a brat, Yvette," said Melinda quietly. "I know it isn't helping the situation, but...well..." she petered off.

"Yeah?" said Yvette.

"I have no idea what to do," said Melinda, dropping into a hoarse, panic-filled whisper. "I've been wracking my brain since Tuesday, but I have nothing. What if...what if Sophie is stuck like that for life? What are we going to do?"

"That's why we're here, Melinda," said Yvette solemnly. "To discuss this as a group."

Melinda said nothing.

"You still don't trust them, do you?" said Yvette, though there was little accusation behind her voice.

"I don't know, Yvette," sighed Melinda, running her hands through her hair. "I honestly don't even trust myself anymore."

"Melinda," said Yvette after a brief pause. "I was going to wait until the start of the meeting to say this, but Sophie is going to be fine."

"But-"

"She'll be fine," repeated Yvette patiently. "Don't forget that I was stuck in my fur for a while. I got over it, and so will she."

"But that was different," protested Melinda. "You were...scared out of your mind."

"And she isn't?" observed Yvette.

"I guess..." Melinda hesitated, and then continued. "But you were alone and it's been six whole days!"

"Look," began Sophie patiently. "We've established that strong emotions can trigger the transformation, yes? When Sophie failed to change back in the morning after the full moon, her fear may have been what...inhibited the change in the first place. She remains stuck in werewolf form, which scared her even more, and so on and so forth."

"But I've been working with her every day since the full moon!" exclaimed Melinda. "We even tried that meditation routine. There has to be something else at work here."

"I'm...not saying there isn't," said Yvette. "But we don't even know that for sure. Heck, she could change back any..." Yvette stopped and glanced up at something behind Melinda.

"Sorry about the wait," said Heidi as Cynthia, Lily, and she approached the table.

"Um, no problem," said Melinda as they sat down.

The five girls sat together at the table in uneasy silence. Melinda glanced at each of them. Heidi was sitting upright in her seat, patiently waiting for the meeting to start. She noticed that Melinda staring at her, and gave her a bright smile. Beside her, Lily had produced a stick of red lip-gloss and was applying it in an unconcerned way. Across the table, Yvette had sunk back into her seat and was staring vaguely at the floor as though lost in thought. Cynthia was staring directly at her, a carefully neutral look etched upon her flawless face.

"Well," said Melinda after a while. "No need to stand on ceremony." She cleared her throat. "Our..." she grimaced as she spoke "...Newest member is...stuck. I have her hiding out in the wildlife preserve."

"How is she doing, anyways?" asked Yvette.

"Considering the circumstances...pretty well," said Melinda. "She's gone from being terrified to depressed to...well, accepting it. She's definitely not prepared for a long-term vacation from herself, though. We need to fix this - and fast."

"What about her folks?" asked Heidi. "I mean, they must have noticed she's gone missing by now."

"Unfortunately, yes," said Melinda. "I stopped by her house today. There was a police car and a channel eleven news van outside."

The four girls exchanged nervous glances.

"Yeah, I know," said Melinda. "If the police start asking questions they may connect Sophie's disappearance with us. The last thing we need right now is the police sniffing around."

"About that," said Lily. "Have you figured out why she can't change back?"

"Well...not quite," said Melinda. "But Yvette has a theory."

Everyone looked at Yvette, who blinked at the unexpected attention.

"I think it may have something to do with her emotional state," began Yvette. "We - that is, werewolves - have a hard time maintaining human form when stressed."

"Well, duh," said Cynthia. "That's pretty much the only thing you've been talking about since the incident at the tennis game."

"Sophie may have already been under a lot of stress when she was bitten," continued Yvette. "This made it difficult for her to transform in the morning. Her inability to change back made her even more stressed, making it even harder for her to revert, and so on."

There was a moment's pause as the girls digested this.

"Sounds kinda flimsy," said Heidi.

"Yeah," agreed Lily. "I mean, geez, it's been days."

"Look, it's only a theory," said Melinda. "And keeping Sophie calm and relaxed is still a good idea. The last thing we need is another werewolf on the rampage, uh, no offense Yvette."

"None taken," said Yvette.

"You know, there's another possibility we should be considering here," said Cynthia thoughtfully.

"Yeah?" said Melinda.

"Changing her back to a human."

A hushed, thoughtful silence followed.

"You...think it's possible?" said Melinda slowly.

"I dunno," said Cynthia. "I mean, have we even considered that as an option? Besides me, of course."

"Er..."

"Ah, well..."

"No fucking way," snorted Heidi. "I love being a werewolf."

"Um, yeah, that's kind of my point," said Cynthia, annoyed. "We all got caught up in all this 'one with mother Earth' shit, but never took the time to wonder if it could be reversed. Like, isn't there some kind of weed that can fix us? Wolfs bane or something?"

Yvette looked at her uneasily.

"Well, there is precedent in folklore," began Yvette. "I've been doing some research from the computer lab. There are a lot of different legends regarding werewolves. Some of them, well, you wouldn't believe some of the cockamamie werewolf stories I've dug up. This one guy claimed werewolves are visitors from another dimension and are fighting a race of lizard people that wear human skins as disguises."

Heidi snorted and starting laughing while the rest of the girls broke into a fit of giggles.

"But then I found this older story about an order of werewolf in Eastern Europe that were, well, I guess you could call them holy warriors," continued Yvette. "In 1692, a man in Germany claimed werewolves were real and protected people from demons and witches. Called them the hounds of God. He was dismissed as a madman but it really doesn't sound so unreasonable now, does it?"

"That there was an order of holy werewolf warriors or that they fought the minions of Satan?" inquired Cynthia dryly.

"Either, er, both, I suppose," said Yvette, shrugging. "The point is there may be some truth to the legends. The tricky part is figuring out what's real and what's not."

"So, about the cure?" pressed Cynthia.

Yvette bit her lower lip.

"Wolf's bane - *Aconitum vulpara* - is supposed to remove the 'curse.' Or, um, kill the werewolf. The legends were kinda vague there," she added nervously. "Then again, most lycanthropy 'cures' were pretty dangerous."

"Aconytum vulpariah? Geez, Yvette, you sound like such a freakin' nerd," laughed Heidi.

Melinda glared at Heidi and then turned back to Yvette.

"Is there any...wolf's bane around here?" she asked.

"Well, there are actually many different species of *aconitum*," said Yvette uncomfortably. "That's the uh, tricky part. Do we use the variety from Europe? The variety that grows in the gardens around here? They're all pretty poisonous. Very risky."

"So? Poison barely works on us," snorted Heidi. "Remember that time my family got food poisoning at the burger joint on Fifth Street? My mom and pop had to call in sick three days and I just got a bit of a stomach cramp. Hell, remember when that hornet stung me out on the field during practice? Didn't feel a thing afterwards."

"That doesn't mean we're immune to everything, Heidi," said Cynthia wearily. "Maybe some stuff still works on us. I mean, I still take Advil now and again and it still helps."

"That's a drug, not a poison," said Heidi flatly.

"Jesus H. Christ, no wonder you got a D in biology," groaned Cynthia.

"I got a C minus!"

"Oh bullshit, y-"

"Hey-hey-hey, let's try to stay focused here," exclaimed Melinda, raising her hands. "This sounds...promising, Yvette. I think it's something we should look into."

"You want to give Sophie wolf's bane?" said Lily.

"Not until we're sure it's safe," said Melinda. "We need to test it." She took a deep breath. "And since I'm the one who changed Sophie, I think I should be the guinea pig."

There was silence.

"That...might not be such a good idea," said Yvette uneasily. "It IS a toxic plant, so even if it doesn't have any power over werewolves, chances are it will still make you sick."

"Look, I've already tested silver on myself," said Melinda impatiently. "I'm willing to take the risk again."

"It isn't the same," said Yvette, shaking her head. "You actually have to ingest the stuff. We don't know how much it will take to affect you, let alone what it'll do. It could make you sick, it could suppress your ability to transform for a while or permanently; it might even kill you."

"There's only one way to find out," said Melinda levelly.

Yvette gave Melinda a strange, concerned look. Her lips tightened and relaxed several times as though she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to.

Melinda frowned.

"Are you alright, Yvette?" she asked.

"I...no, it's nothing," replied Yvette quietly. "I just wanted to make sure you knew what you were getting into."

Melinda drummed her fingers on the table.

"Fine," said Melinda, nodding towards Yvette. "Get some wolf's bane - one of the species from Europe if you can. Until then, the best thing we can do is sit tight and hope Sophie changes back on her own. I've given her my cell phone and all of our numbers. If anything goes wrong, she should be able to get in touch with one of us. I'm going to visit her later tonight to check up on her."

"Can we come?" said Heidi.

"I'd...prefer if you didn't," said Melinda. "But you can tag along if you want."

"Well, I can't go," shrugged Cynthia.

"I have an essay due tomorrow," said Yvette meekly. "I know it sounds petty, but my English grade is on the line."

"Me neither," said Lily. "The Big Brother season finale is on at eight."

Melinda groaned inwardly. She really didn't want anyone else to come, but Big Brother? At least come up with a better excuse.

"I guess it's just you and me," she sighed, nodding towards Heidi.

* * *

One of the biggest problems inherent in being a werewolf wasn't the late hours, excessive body hair, or even having to cover your nose while walking down the perfume aisle. It was how damned expensive it was.

Melinda had conceded long ago that lycanthropy didn't - *couldn't* - obey the laws of nature. The transition from human to wolf and wolf to human entailed something that would cause the average physicist to scream bloody murder: the creation and destruction of matter on the macroscopic level. It was a flagrant violation of the first law of thermodynamics. Then again, maybe it wasn't. Perhaps it tapped into some unknown source of energy. Perhaps it exploited some undiscovered quirk of the universe - some quantum loophole that allowed matter to come into being from nothing. Whatever the reason, it was close enough to magic as far as Melinda was concerned.

The problem was that while it didn't obey the letter of the law, it obeyed its spirit, i.e. equivalence. Changing from human to wolf took a lot of energy, and the only way to recoup that energy was to eat. This meant every transformation carried a price somewhere in the realm of twenty pounds of meat, and even the cheapest beef cost five dollars a pound. Take into account the fact that the full moon lasted three nights a month and you were looking at \$300 a month, minimum, for the privilege of being a werewolf - a considerable sum for someone still in high school. The deal they'd reached with Lily's contact at the meat packing plant had been a godsend. Granted, you could also save a lot by hunting, but the local wildlife just couldn't satisfy the collective appetite of five hungry werewolves.

This, in Melinda's opinion, was reason enough not to spread lycanthropy. A town of werewolves could empty a cattle ranch in a matter of hours.

"Melinda!"

Heidi was looking back at her about a hundred feet ahead on top of a hill. Faint moonlight shone down through the branches of the trees, outlining her brawny red frame.

"You okay?" called Heidi.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, sorry," said Melinda. She adjusted the worn pink backpack hanging from her shoulder. The smell of its contents was making her drool.

"Come on. We can eat when we find Sophie!"

"Sorry!" called Melinda.

Heidi stopped and sniffed the ground, her black canine nose brushing against the blanket of fallen leaves.

"God, this is taking forever," she said, lifting her head.

Melinda padded up to her.

"Well, I couldn't ask her to sit in one place all week!" said Melinda. "Too bad Lily didn't want to come."

"Yeah, the nose on that girl is incredible," said Heidi. "Why do you suppose that is?" she asked suddenly.

"Huh?"

"I mean, it's not just her sense of smell," continued Heidi, pointing at her nose with a furry digit. "She's smaller and faster than us too. Well, faster than everyone but me," she added smugly.

Melinda hesitated. She'd actually given this some thought but hadn't discussed it with the rest of the club.

"The same reason Yvette looks like a giant prehistoric wolf, I suppose," said Melinda, shrugging. "There must be different...versions? Subspecies? Varieties of werewolves."

"But you don't look anything like Yvette or even Lily and you're, like, the alpha werewolf."

"Remember the ban on using terms from lupine social structures?"

"Jeez, sorry," said Heidi quickly. "What I meant was, you're the one who changed Yvette, and then she bit us, so shouldn't all of us look like you?"

"I don't know, Heidi," sighed Melinda. "I guess when a person is...infected with whatever causes lycanthropy they could change into any number of different types of werewolf. Maybe it's random, maybe genetics has something to do with it. Hell, maybe it has something to do with what day it is when they're transformed."

"Well it can't be that," said Heidi.

"Why not?"

"Cause Yvette bit all three of us on the same day and Lily turned out different."

"True, true," conceded Melinda sourly. "The point is we still don't know that much about werewolves even though we *are* werewolves and that's a problem. We didn't know it was possible for someone to get stuck."

"So, uh, on that note, do you think Sophie's a different type of werewolf?" asked Heidi.

"I...suppose she is," said Melinda thoughtfully. "She's bigger...well, at least as big as Yvette but can still speak and walk on two legs."

"Cool, can't wait to get a look at her," said Heidi gleefully.

Melinda gave the red-headed werewolf a Look. "This isn't exciting for her, Heidi. Anyways, at this rate I doubt we'll find her before sunrise," she added anxiously.

Heidi cocked her head in thought.

"We-ll, if we can't find her, why don't we get her to come to us?" she said slyly.

"How?" said Melinda.

"Howl, silly," winked Heidi.

Melinda hesitated. She wanted to object, but Heidi had a good idea.

"Alright," she conceded grudgingly.

Heidi pointed towards a nearby knoll. "Let's get to higher ground first," she said. "The sound will carry better up there."

"Geez, where do you get this stuff?" muttered Melinda.

"Instinct," said Heidi, grinning toothily.

Melinda rolled her yellow eyes.

The two werewolves wove their way through the trees and padded up the mound.

"After you," said Melinda.

Heidi nodded. She raised her head high into the air, cleared her throat, and howled. Melinda followed suit. Their twin bays filled the forest. Several seconds passed. Suddenly, a third howl - distant, yet clear - erupted from the east.

"There she is," said Heidi. "All we have to do now is wait."

"Fine," said Melinda.

Heidi rose to two feet and strutted towards a towering evergreen standing on the northern edge of the hillock. She leaned against its thick side, languidly stretching her muscular furry arms over her head.

Melinda sat down on her hind legs and looked up at the starry sky and crescent moon. A light breeze passed through the forest. Melinda's ebony locks danced gently in the air as she stared upwards.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Melinda?" said Heidi.

Melinda glanced back at Heidi.

"Nothing," said Melinda, turning back to face the sky.

"Thinking about your date with Phillip, maybe?" said Heidi mischievously.

"Not now, Heidi," said Melinda, annoyed.

"Aww come on. Inquiring minds want to know."

"We're doing okay and that's the end of it," said Melinda curtly. "Now drop it."

"Come on, you can't leave m-"

"MELINDA!" called a voice.

Grateful for the interruption, Melinda leapt to her feet. She stared down at the woods and saw a hulking shape making its way through the foliage. She sniffed the air, scrambled over to the edge of the hill, cupped her mouth and yelled.

"Up here!"

The dark figure stopped, turned towards the hill and started loping towards them. It was huge, standing at least eight feet in height - probably nine - and moved with a powerful inertia. Though vaguely humanoid it seemed to alternate between biped and quadruped movement. It sported bright red eyes that gleamed eerily in the gloom. Eventually, it emerged from the gloom and lumbered up the hill. Melinda and Heidi watched silently as the behemoth approached them.

"Jesus, Melinda," said Heidi in awe. "You weren't kidding. She's gigantic!"

"H-Hi," rumbled Sophie with a timidity that should have been impossible for a creature of her size. She waved a paw the size of a dinner plate.

"Sophie," nodded Melinda, smiling. "This is Heidi. Heidi, Sophie."

"Nice to meet you," said Heidi, extending a paw.

Sophie blinked, and grasped the proffered appendage like an ogre shaking an infant's hand.

"Heidi...Carpenter?" said Sophie hesitantly.

"Um...yeah," chuckled Heidi nervously. "Do we, uh, do we know each other?"

"Well...I know you," said Sophie, as though apologizing. "You used to sit next me in French 3. I...don't think y'all ever paid much attention to me."

"Ah, well...sorry?" said Heidi.

"Oh no, I ain't complaining," said Sophie quickly. "Not many people notice me."

"Well...they'd be hard-pressed to ignore you now," said Heidi, grinning toothily.

"Heidi!" exclaimed Melinda.

"What?" said Heidi, shrugging.

Sophie wrapped her arms around her body blushing underneath her fur.

"Knock it off, Heidi," barked Melinda. "This is why I didn't want you or the rest of the girls to come."

Heidi gave Melinda a 'who, me?' look, and then laughed. She strutted back to the tree and leaned against its base.

Melinda glared at her, and then turned back to Sophie.

"Anyways," said Melinda, unshouldering her backpack. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," said Sophie, relaxing somewhat. "It...it really ain't so bad."

"I brought you some food and water," continued Melinda, carefully opening her backpack's flap by hooking the zipper with a claw and pulling.

"T-Thanks."

"It probably won't be enough to last you until we can bring more, so have you uh, caught anything recently?"

"Yeah," said Sophie. "I just caught me a deer an hour ago." She coughed. "I 'et most of it, but if you're hungry there's still some left. It ain't far from here."

Heidi waved her paw dismissively.

"Thanks, but I like my prey fresh," she grinned wickedly.

This comment drew two disconcerted stares.

"ANY-ways," said Melinda slowly. "Are you sure there isn't anything you need, Sophie?"

"N-Not really. Nothing to complain about. To tell the truth I kind of like it out here." She hesitated. "It's...peaceful," she added uneasily, sensing this wasn't enough. "My family doesn't go camping and, well, this is the closest I've ever gotten to having one. Even if it is kind of...freaky."

"Yeah, I can relate," nodded Heidi. "Don't worry. Once you get over how weird it is, it's pretty fuck-ing rad."

"Um, I...I don't know...."

"Come on, you're as big and strong as a Kodiak bear and have a...a..." Heidi waggled her paws in the air. "...Damn, Melinda, what's that thing that the one dude with the claws from the comic books has?"

"Healing factor," sighed Melinda.

"Yeah, healing factor, nerd," said Heidi gleefully. "Pretty much nothing can hurt you. You can't even get poisoned or drugged. How is that not awesome?"

"I-I'd rather just be me again," intoned Sophie quietly.

"Geez, newbies," said Heidi, rolling her eyes.

"Okay, ignoring Heidi's tactlessness," said Melinda, rubbing her furry forehead. "We have another problem. Your disappearance hasn't gone unnoticed," said Melinda. "The channel 11 news did a story on your disappearance. I caught it just before I left."

"Oh," whispered Sophie, covering her mouth with her paws.

"Don't look so surprised, sweetheart," called Heidi. "What, did you think your parents were just going to shrug their shoulders and get on with their lives?"

"Well...um..."

"And the longer this lasts, the harder it'll be to come up with a plausible excuse once you change back - assuming you do change back," said Melinda.

"S-So what are we goin' to do?"

Melinda folded her arms and sighed.

"Hope like hell you do change back on your own," she said. "We're doing a little research as well. There might be a way to fix whatever's happened to you."

"But...why do y'all have to do research on werewolves?" said Sophie, confused.

"None of us started out as werewolves, Sophie, and it's not as though lycanthropy comes with an instruction manual. There's still a lot we don't know about ourselves - about you."

Sophie was silent for a moment.

"So...what'll we do if y'all can't change me back?" she whispered.

"We'll turn ourselves in, that's what."

It had been Heidi who spoke.

Melinda and Sophie turned and stared at the russet werewolf, who stepped away from the base of the tree. She was no longer smiling. She looked dead serious.

"She can't stay in the preserve," said Heidi, gesturing at the forest around them. "What else could we do?"

"Something other than just turning ourselves in," replied Melinda, taken aback. "It'd be the end of...everything."

"We can't keep this up forever," said Heidi. "I mean, sooner or later people are going to find out about all this crazy shit. Did you really think a couple of dumbasses like us could keep something this big a secret forever? Heck, until we graduate?"

"Well...yes," said Melinda weakly.

"How?"

"It's worked pretty well so far," said Melinda weakly.

"Yeah, until now," said Heidi, gesturing at the large, bewildered werewolf behind them.

"It's not as though the...the police or the government will know what to do!" exclaimed Melinda. "The problem won't go away; it'll only make things more complicated."

"We don't know that, Melinda," said Heidi. "Maybe they already have the answer. Maybe we aren't the first who-"

"Christ, not this whole 'werewolves secretly run the world' shit again," groaned Melinda.

"T-They do?"

"No, Sophie, they don't," said Melinda.

"As far as we know," muttered Heidi not quite under her breath.

"Give it a rest, Heidi. Even if there are others like us out there we have no idea how or where to start looking."

"Doesn't mean we shouldn't try," retorted Heidi. "Especially now. Remember what Yvette said about that...about those werewolf knights? Maybe they're still around."

"We don't have the time or resources for a wild goose chase like that. And going to any authority is just too damn risky."

"Damn it, why are you so afraid of revealing ourselves?" growled Heidi, drawing closer to Melinda. "We don't know how the world will react to us. If we go public they can't just lock us up! I doubt they could

if they wanted to! Why should we keep this to ourselves anyways? It'd be like...like finding the cure for cancer and not telling anyone." She paused. "Hell, for all we know lycanthropy cures cancer!"

"It'd still be the end of our lives as we know them," said Melinda, stepping up to face Heidi. "We'd become celebrities, freaks, and lab rats all at once. I don't want that! I want to live a normal life!"

"Oh boo frickin' hoo," sneered Heidi. "We both know that's impossible now. Deal with it."

"Don't take that tone with me, Heidi," growled Melinda.

"I'll take whatever fucking tone I want when you're acting this stupid," snarled Heidi.

"Oh, you're one to talk."

"Excuse me?"

"You want me to spell it out for you? It's probably the only way you'd understand."

"Fuck you, Melinda!"

"Fuck you!"

"**STOP IT!**" bellowed Sophie.

Melinda and Heidi stumbled back. Though startled by the volume of Sophie's voice the sudden change in her demeanor was far more jarring. Once reserved and timid, the young teen turned werewolf loomed over them eyes ablaze, fangs bared, ears slanted forward. It looked as though she were about to attack one or both of them.

Melinda and Heidi stared at Sophie in shock.

"Easy, Sophie," said Melinda, raising her paws. "We're not fighting any more, okay?"

"Y-Yeah, girl," whimpered Heidi, terrified. "Take it easy."

Sophie said nothing. She just stood there, breathing heavily. Then, her expression softened somewhat. Melinda relaxed slightly and turned to Heidi.

"We'll discuss this later," said Melinda in what she hoped sounded like a conciliatory tone. "You should head home. Let tempers cool and all that. I'll stay here with Sophie a little while longer."

Heidi stared at her.

"Just go, okay?" said Melinda, gesturing towards the town with her head.

With a muttered curse Heidi turned and fell to four feet. Glancing over her shoulder to give Melinda a dirty look, she sped off into the forest.

"Sorry...you had to see that, Sophie," said Melinda, slumping her shoulders. "We aren't always like that," continued Melinda. "Things are tense right now."

"A-A'm sorry," whispered Sophie. Though not crying, she looked utterly miserable. She clutched her skull. "It's just...I get these...it's hard to control..." she stuttered.

"It's just instinct and emotion," said Melinda wearily. "Instinct and emotion. You've got to learn how to control it or it will get the better of you."

"I'll try," said Sophie. "I mean, it'd be easier if I..."

"If you what?" asked Melinda.

Sophie hesitated. She rubbed her paws together nervously and then, to Melinda's surprise, chuckled softly.

"N-Never mind," she said. "I forgot what y'all said earlier."



Melinda frowned.

"Well, okay," she said, puzzled but relieved Sophie suddenly seemed to be feeling better. "Anything else I...we can do for you?"

Sophie gave this some thought.

"Er...um...can y'all pass along a message to someone? Let them know I'm doin' alright?"

"To your mom and pop?"

Sophie gave her a blank look. Then, she sighed.

"Yeah, my mom and dad," she said unenthusiastically.

"Sorry," said Melinda shaking her head. "They'll want to know where we got that information and then, well..."

"Yeah yeah, I get it," said Sophie glumly.

"Maybe...maybe after another week," offered Melinda.

"Yeah, sure."

Melinda suddenly felt at a loss. She gazed at the despondent young girl. She opened her mouth to speak, and when no words were forthcoming, shut it. She muttered some vague farewell, turned and left her alone in the woods.

* * *

Melinda stared at the chalkboard. The symbols, letters, and diagrams scrawled upon its black dusty surface seemed to stretch on forever. She squinted her eyes, making one final attempt to follow their logic, and then gave up. Sighing, she looked up at her teacher; or at least his back as he hadn't quite finished writing on the board. She glanced back at her classmates, who were sitting in their respective desks dutifully taking notes. The urgent susurrus of thirty-odd scribbling pencils hung in the air.

The teacher turned to face the class. He gestured towards the chalkboard and started speaking. Though Melinda heard his words she couldn't decipher them. His voice seemed distant and ersatz - as though he were speaking from far away through a broken microphone. Frowning, Melinda raised her hand. The teacher didn't notice her, or if he did, elected not to recognize her. She spoke the teacher's name but again he didn't respond.

Melinda shook her head in confusion. She glanced around the class. Everyone seemed totally preoccupied with the lesson. She then stared down at her hands - her smooth, pink hands - and was suddenly struck with a bizarre and terrifying thought. What if she started to transform into a werewolf? Here? In front of everyone?

As that notion entered her mind a strong pressure engulfed her fingertips. Melinda flipped her hands over and was met with a terrifying sight. Her nails were gone. In their place were ten two-inch-long claws. With a frightened yelp she tucked her hands between her legs. As she did, an all-too familiar wave of nausea washed over her. She gripped the sides of her desk to steady herself but still nearly tumbled to the floor. Melinda slowly lifted herself back into her seat. Fuzz was beginning to creep along her arms and legs and her clothes were growing unbearably tight. Melinda shut her eyes, growling in pain and frustration.

She had to get out of here. She had to leave the classroom before it was too late. She tried to raise her hand again but found she couldn't lift her arms. She spoke, asking the teacher if she could use the restroom

but he simply continued the lecture - unaware or indifferent to Melinda's plight. Indeed, the entire classroom seemed to be ignoring her.

Melinda groaned. She could feel veins throbbing against the surface of her perspiring skin. Her body had nearly doubled in mass and was still growing. She felt exhausted, exhilarated, and terrified all at once. It was absolutely maddening. Suddenly, a series of distressing ripping sounds filled the air. Tears were running down her jeans and blouse, thick dark fur spilling from every open seam. It wasn't long before her clothes were little more than rags clinging her hairy, muscle-bound frame. She experienced a flicker of embarrassment as her breasts popped out of her bra. Then, Melinda felt a sharp pinch on her ears as they narrowed into points, followed by an intense pressure centered on her skull and neck. The pressure steadily grew until it was downright torturous. She felt her nose peel back and expand into a thick muzzle. Her teeth narrowed into gleaming white fangs. Melinda screamed, gripping her temples so tightly that she drew blood. Several, agonizing seconds later, the pain finally receded.

Melinda slumped back in her seat only to discover she was lying on top of the crushed remnants of her desk. She rose to feet, shaking her newly formed pelt. There were screams all around her. She glanced drunkenly around the classroom and saw that the students were scrambling to get to the door.

Her secret was out.

Oddly enough, Melinda didn't feel alarmed at all. It was the disaster she'd feared since becoming a werewolf, but things couldn't get worse now. Besides, it wasn't as though anyone could stop her from doing what she wanted.

Feeling strangely liberated, Melinda darted out the open door and into the hallway. A few of the slower students were still scampering down the hall. She grinned evilly and chased after them.

The first one was a tall, skinny blonde boy whom Melinda recognized from her third period class. The boy peered over his shoulder and opened his mouth to cry out only to be cut short as Melinda tackled him. The instant the two of them stopped rolling Melinda reared back and bit the boy savagely on his right arm. He screamed as her fangs dug into his soft, pink flesh. Satisfied, Melinda spat his arm out, wiping the blood from her lips. She tossed the boy aside like a rag doll and scampered down the hallway.

Melinda continued to pick off her former classmates one by one. It wasn't long until the corridor was empty save for her victims, who lay scattered around the floor clutching their wounds. Suddenly, there was a loud pounding. Melinda glanced over her shoulder in the direction the noise was coming from. The stout double doors at the end of the hall burst open and a cadre of armored soldiers armed with shotguns poured inside. The first row knelt and leveled their guns at Melinda, who stood there, frozen in fear. Somehow, she knew the shells were full of silver filings. A few torturous seconds passed as Melinda waited for them to fire. Then, the school bell rang.

RRRRRIIIINNNNNGGGG!

Melinda twitched in her bed. Her head slowly rose out from under the blanket and comforter.

RRRRRIIIINNNNNGGGG!

She turned towards the telephone sitting inches away on top her dresser.

RRRRII-

Melinda stumbled out of bed and snatched the phone. She pressed the "talk" icon and raised the phone to her lips.

"Hello?" she muttered hoarsely.

"Melinda?" said a concerned male voice.

"Who is this?" asked Melinda, rubbing her eyes.

"Uh, it's Phillip," said the voice.

"Oh, hi Phillip," said Melinda in a slightly nicer tone of voice.

"Is this a bad time?" inquired Phillip.

"Oh, no, not at all," said Melinda, yawning. "I just got up from a nap."

"Oh, uh, I didn't wake you or anything, did I?" asked Phillip.

"No, no," said Melinda. "Believe me; your timing couldn't have been any better." She added uneasily.

"Oh, uh, alright," said Phillip. "I was...just calling to see if we were still on for tonight."

"Yeah, my place at five," said Melinda. "My parents are out of town. Concert at the park. Anyways, we have the house to ourselves."

"Oh really."

"Very funny, Phillip. We're just going to watch the movie."

"Don't worry," laughed Phillip over the line. "I'll be a perfect gentleman."

"I know you will," said Melinda, smiling. "Call me when you arrive."

"Bye, then."

"Bye."

Melinda slowly placed the phone back in its charger and then flopped back onto her bed with an exhausted sigh. She glanced at the radio clock sitting next to the phone. It read 4:13 PM. She wrapped the blankets around her body and pressed her head against the pillows, cursing under her breath. If it wasn't the anxiety-induced insomnia it was the dreams. It was getting to the point where she dreaded falling asleep. Why the hell did she keep dreaming about spreading lycanthropy? Doing it had caused her nothing but trouble. While she genuinely enjoyed Yvette's, Heidi's, Lily's, and even Cynthia's company out in the forest, a not so insignificant part of her wished she could have kept everything to herself. Things had been so much simpler.

Then again, Heidi and Lily had a point. A secret this big couldn't...shouldn't be kept forever. What if it really could cure cancer just like Heidi had suggested? What if the inner workings of lycanthropy held the secrets of life itself? It'd be horribly selfish not to share it if it could help so many people.

Still questioning and wondering, Melinda drifted back to sleep. Forty-five minutes later the phone rang once more. She reached for it from under the covers.

"Yeah?" she murmured.

"It's me," said Phillip. "I'm here."

"Oh, hey" said Melinda languorously. "Come on up. The door should be open."

"Uh, sure," said Phillip. He sounded uncertain. "Do you have a cold?"

"No, still waking up, that's all," yawned Melinda.

"Okay. I'll be right up."

Melinda replaced the phone and lazily stretched her arms. She felt her fingers drift against wall.

Was it just her or did the bed seem a bit...small?

Melinda's eyes shot open. She threw the blankets off the bed and stared down at her body. She screamed.

"Melinda?" called a voice from downstairs.

Melinda's ears twitched and nostrils flared. It was Phillip. She leapt out of bed, causing her mattress to bounce several inches in the air

"Was that you?" called Phillip. "Are you okay?"

OhmyGodOhmyGodOhmyGod... thought Melinda hysterically.

"You up in your bedroom?"

He's coming up the stairs! thought Melinda in blind panic. *Oh God, he's coming up the stairs! I can hear him! I have to get out of here!*

She glanced wildly around the room.

The window!

Melinda rushed to her bedroom window and peered through the shades. She scanned the yard and street for any signs of life. For a moment it looked as though it was empty, but then to her consternation she spotted one of her neighbors washing his white Hyundai on the curb.

Damn!

She stared back at her bedroom door.

I'll have to risk it! she thought grimly, already fumbling for the latch.

Suddenly, there was a knock at her bedroom door.

"You in there?" came Phillip's muffled voice.

Melinda slowly turned to the door.

The doorknob began to rotate.

"Don't come in!" barked Melinda. "I'm changing!"

"Uh...sorry," replied Phillip.

Melinda relaxed slightly. That bought her some time. She shut her eyes and concentrated.

Several minutes passed.

"You, uh, almost done in there?" said Phillip.

"Just a second!"

Melinda growled in frustration. Why couldn't she change back? It wasn't a full moon. Hell, it wasn't even nighttime. She took a deep, cleansing breath, and tried again.

...Yes. She could feel the process reversing itself, though her body was resisting the change at every step. She concentrated even more intensely, and as she did, the strain steadily increased.

Come on, you can do this!

Melinda took another deep breath and focused, pouring every last ounce of her will and resolve into one final psychic exertion. Just as she was starting to revert, something deep inside her snapped. Unspeakable pain surged through her. Melinda howled in anguish and crumpled to the floor.

"MELINDA!" cried Phillip.

The pain quickly subsided, though every nerve in her body tingled in sensory memory. Slowly, Melinda rose to her knees, swearing under her breath. She glanced upwards.

Phillip was standing in the open doorway, staring at her. A small bouquet of flowers lay at his feet.



His quivering eyes ran up and down the creature before him. He stared down her powerful digitigrade feet, up at her massive, muscular arms, sleek black fur and lupine head.

A thousand thoughts flew through Melinda's mind in an instant. None of them reached her mouth.

Melinda more or less automatically rose to her full height - a good two feet taller than Phillip. Her piecing yellow eyes shone through the shadowy bedroom.

"Don't move," barked Melinda in panic.

Phillip immediately stepped back. His face was a mask of terror

"No! Please! Don't run! I won't hurt you, I swear!" pleaded Melinda.

Phillip hesitated. For the time being, his curiosity overruled his fear.

"Don't be afraid," said Melinda softly.

"W-where's Melinda?" stuttered Phillip.

Melinda opened her mouth, and then shut it. Maybe it'd be better if she didn't tell him.

No.

No more hiding. No more lies. It was too late. Besides, Phillip deserved to know the truth.

"I'm...afraid you're looking at her," said Melinda solemnly.

Phillip goggled. He took a step backward and fell to the floor with a terrified yelp. He scooted back towards the hallway, his gaze locked on Melinda.

"Easy," said Melinda nervously.

Phillip was now just outside the entrance to her room. He looked as though he was about to make a run for it.

"Come back," said Melinda, adding a degree of firmness to her voice. "Think about it. If I wanted to hurt you you'd be dead by now." She took a deep breath, and continued in a slightly gentler tone. "Please...don't go."

Phillip staggered to his feet. He gazed up at Melinda's massive form, and gulped.

"P-Promise?" he said hoarsely.

"I promise I won't hurt you."

Phillip gave her an almost imperceptible nod. Not taking his eyes off her for a second, he slowly stepped back inside. Although he looked composed Melinda could tell he was scared out of his mind. He *reeked* of fear.

"Could you close the door?" she asked him.

After a long pause, Phillip reluctantly turned and shut the door behind him. Boy and wolf stared at one another in silence.

"Melinda?" whispered Phillip.

Melinda frowned. She stared down at the trembling, scrawny brown-haired youth before her. He looked so tiny - so helpless - yet Melinda had never felt more exposed or vulnerable.

"Yeah, it's me," she said finally.

Phillip's lips moved silently as he tried to form a sentence. "How?" he managed.

"I'm...a werewolf."

"A werewolf?"

"...Yes." Phillip stared at her.

"How?"

Melinda sighed.

"Sit down," she commanded.

Wordlessly, Phillip sunk to his knees. Melinda took a step back and carefully lowered herself on her bed. The mattress springs groaned in protest as she sat.

"I'll start from the beginning," said Melinda, clearing her throat.

She told him about the camping trip. She told him how she had gotten lost in the woods and encountered the giant wolf. She told him how she had transformed weeks later under the light of the full moon. Minutes flew by. Outside, the streetlights flickered to life one by one as the setting sun dipped below the sky.

"So...you can change back and forth whenever you want?" said Phillip in astonishment.

"Well, I thought I could," said Melinda, rubbing her left shoulder. "About the same time you arrived I changed without wanting to and I've been stuck like this since. That's why you caught me in my, um, fur."

"Do you think it's permanent?" asked Phillip.

"I don't think so," said Melinda, shaking her head. "My fr...that is to say, I've had little episodes like this in the past; I've gotten over them." She thought of Sophie and then added, "Still, I'm a little nervous."

Phillip quietly regarded Melinda. He had calmed considerably over the intervening minutes, though he still held her in awe.

"Could you get me something to eat?" asked Melinda, in part to break the silence.

"Hungry?" said Phillip, bit of nervousness creeping back into his voice. 67

"Famished," said Melinda. "It happens every time I transform." She nodded down the hall. "There should be some lunchmeat and frozen chicken in the fridge. Could you run downstairs and get it for me?"

"Uh, sure," said Phillip, already rising to his feet. "How much do you want?"

* * *

Sophie gazed miserably up at the evening sky, idly scratching scribbles into the dirt with an out-stretched digit. She sniffed the air and winced, still not quite used to her preternaturally strong sense of smell. Sighing, the giant grey werewolf rose from her squat and wandered over to a large birch tree. A worn brown backpack was slumped against the tree's base. Sophie turned and slowly and awkwardly lowered herself down to the ground with a thud, yelping in pain as she sat on her tail.

"God *damn* it," she growled in a deep, menacing voice.

Sophie reached around and, grimacing, pulled her tail out from underneath her posterior.

"Fuck," hissed Sophie. She pounded the ground with a coffee can-sized paw. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck..."

She stopped suddenly.

"No..." she whispered as though terrified. "K-Keep it together."

Sophie hugged herself and quivered.

"T-They said you got to relax," she said to herself. "Just...try to sleep or something...out here..."

There was a flicker of movement to her right. Sophie instantly looked up in its direction. She narrowed her eyes, and then sighed when she recognized the silhouette - and smell - of the creature.

"J-Just a possum," she muttered.

Sophie looked down at the ground, up at the trees and over at the backpack. Sighing, she reached over and, after gingerly opening its flap, reached for something inside. After a few failed attempts she managed to pluck the cell phone out. She placed the tiny thing on her padded palm and carefully tapped its cracked screen with her right paw. After a brief delay, it flashed to life. Though not particularly bright, the cell phone gleamed like a star in the dim forest. Once it had booted Sophie tapped the screen a couple more times until she found what she was looking for. A soft, catchy jingle filled the night air as Sophie started the first level of the game. She had only played for a couple of seconds when an urgent beeping interrupted the music.

"No power?" breathed Sophie in surprise. "How?"

She quickly shut the device down.

"Da-...d-darn it," she murmured. "Now what? I-I-I got to have a working phone."

She looked around the woods uneasily.

"No choice," she whispered.

* * *

Phillip watched in frightened amazement as Melinda devoured the chicken. The palm-sized slabs of meat disappeared off the plate like popcorn.

"Sorry they took so long to defrost," said Phillip meekly.

Melinda, who was in the middle of chewing a particularly large chicken breast, shrugged.

"Nho bhig 'eel," she said, swallowing her meal. "Are you sure there isn't any more?"

Phillip shook his head. "Sorry, nope," he said. "Last piece of meat in house as far as I can tell."

Melinda harrumphed, folding her huge furry arms.

"If you want I can run down to the grocery store and pick something up," offered Phillip.

"Nah, this'll tide me over," said Melinda. She snatched the remaining two chicken breasts finished them in a single gulp.

"Wow," breathed Phillip, watching the food slip down her throat. "That was, um...that was cool. And disturbing. Cool and disturbing."

Melinda placed the empty plate on the floor besides the bed.

"You *like* it raw?"

"For the thousandth time, yes," chuckled Melinda. "When I'm like this, at least."

There was a pause.

"Er...please, don't take this the wrong way, but I gotta ask. You don't eat...people, do you," he asked apprehensively.

"No, werewolves don't eat people," said Melinda. "You don't even smell good to me."

"Oh, whew, that's good," said Phillip, relieved.

"Er, actually," began Melinda awkwardly. "It's not that you smell bad, as such," she said.

Phillip stared at her.

"So I *do* smell...appetizing to you?"

"No-no-no," said Melinda quickly. She sighed. "What I mean is you smell...nice."

"Oh, OH!" exclaimed Phillip. "Er, thanks," he said, blushing. "Would you...would you mind if I sat next to you?" he inquired suddenly. "It's, uh, it's kind of uncomfortable down here."

"Huh? Um, sure," said Melinda, surprised.

Phillip stepped over to the bed and, after a moment's hesitation, took a seat besides her. Their difference in mass was made embarrassingly obvious as he sat; the mattress barely squeaked under his added weight.

"So...now what?" said Phillip.

"I don't know," said Melinda, frowning. "I suppose we could just hang out and watch movies like we planned, but to be honest, I'm not in the mood for television right now."

"Neither am I," admitted Phillip.

Both were silent for a time. Melinda gazed down at the floor, frowning. Finally, she sighed, shut her eyes and spoke.

"Phillip," she began. "Now that you know about this, I-"

"Wow."

Melinda blinked. She turned and saw that Phillip was staring at her, eyes as wide as dinner plates.

"It really is you," he whispered reverently.

"Huh?" said Melinda, completely caught-off guard.

"It really is you," repeated Phillip. He paused. "I mean, you're a big...wolf-thing, but when I look at you... I know who you are. Even if you hadn't told me I think I would've figured it out eventually. It's...it's downright uncanny."

"Um...thanks," said Melinda, blushing underneath her fur.

Phillip tentatively reached towards her right arm as though to touch her and then stopped. He looked up at Melinda sheepishly.

"It's alright," she said, chuckling at his bashfulness. "You can touch me. I don't bite."

Phillip grinned foolishly. He slowly extended his hand until his fingers touched her fur, and then gently ran his palm along her ebony pelt.

"Whoa," exclaimed Phillip. "It's so smooth."

"I'm glad you approve," smiled Melinda, who found she rather liked the sensation of Phillip's hand gliding across her fur.

Phillip began feeling her coat with both hands, running them up and down her arm. He gasped as he encountered her cantaloupe-sized biceps. His hands slowly traveled up her arm, brushing against her thick, sinewy deltoids.

"Um..." said Phillip, looking quizzically at Melinda.

Understanding, Melinda lowered her head. Phillip reached up and ran his fingers along her smooth, flowing mane. As he did, a wave of pleasure traveled down her scalp all the way to her tail. Melinda sighed contentedly and leaned closer to Phillip.

"Mmmm," she purred. "That feels really good."

"Wow, um...why didn't you tell me you liked this so much?" said Phillip

"I didn't know," murred Melinda dreamily. "It's not as though I can scratch myself with these claws. I'd cut myself to pieces."

"Oh, uh, sorry?"

"Sorry?" chuckled Melinda. "What are you apologizing for?"

"Uh, er, nothing, I guess," said Phillip, thoroughly overwhelmed by everything that was happening.

"Here, let me lie down on the bed," said Melinda. "It'll be easier for you."

Melinda flopped onto the mattress and rolled over onto her side facing away from Phillip, who dutifully scooted over to her and continued scratching her head. Melinda whined happily as his fingernails caressed her scalp. She strained her neck, pressing her head against Phillip's hands. Her face was locked in a big, stupid, silly canine grin. She felt absolutely wonderful.

On a whim, she rolled over on her back, raising her paws into the air. She gazed longingly at Phillip.

"Could you scwatch my tummy now? Plllleezze?" she cooed in a comically demure voice.

Phillip's face turned bright red as blood rushed to his head. He gazed in awe at her flat, velvety stomach, her perfect six-pack, and her pert furry breasts. Enraptured, he reached down and placed his hands just below her chest. He slowly began to drag his fingernails along her belly. Melinda squirmed in pleasure. She alternately ahh'd and whined as Phillip's fingers did their magic, rocking her head side-to-side on the soft, yielding surface of the mattress. Below, her tail wagged back and forth, creating ripples in the bed sheet.

Phillip brought a hand to his mouth to stifle a giggle.

"What?" said Melinda playfully.

"Heh, oh, ah, nothing," said Phillip quickly, trying not to laugh "It's just, well, you're...."

"...Acting like an oversized puppy?" supplied Melinda.

"Well, uh, yeah," said Phillip, blushing.

"But that's what I am," said Melinda, laughing.

Never before had she felt so carefree - so silly. All of her fears, worries, and discretions seemed distant and irrelevant. All that mattered was this one magical night. She looked up at Phillip, and was struck by a sudden, urgent desire to be with him - to feel him and hold him. Without warning she wrapped her long arms around him and pulled him to her.

"Hey!" protested Phillip, laughing.

Melinda rolled over on her side, giggling. He was so tiny and helpless. And cute! She cuddled him, nuzzling his soft, warm face, sniffing and breathing in his wonderful scent. Phillip, for his part, felt as though he had been wrapped in the warmest, most comfortable blanket imaginable. He nearly fainted from sheer bliss when he realized the two massive mounds rubbing against his chest were in fact her breasts. He kissed Melinda tenderly on her furry cheek. Melinda returned his affection with a lick on the nose, soon followed by a second, and then a third. Then a fourth. Then a fifth. Her tiny licks rapidly degenerated into a host of slobbery wet dog kisses.

"Hey, cut that out," chuckled Phillip, trying to hold her back.



Melinda wouldn't have stopped herself even if she could. She was addicted to the taste of his skin - completely hooked. Before long every inch of Phillip's face and neck was slick and shiny.

The couple paused, starrng lovingly into each other's eyes.

"You're beautiful," he whispered.

Melinda pressed her muzzle to his lips.

They kissed. It was a simple thing, yet both of them would remember that moment for the rest of their lives.

Melinda sighed happily. She leaned forward, rubbing her cheek against his.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear.

"I love you too," whispered Phillip.

A strange drowsiness enveloped them both. Phillip was the first to nod off. He curled up in Melinda's loving embrace and fell asleep, his head resting against her chest. Melinda yawned toothily. Her eyelids were growing heavy. She glanced at Phillip's sleeping, cherubic countenance, smiled, and fell asleep.

* * *

Sophie nostrils flared as she gazed up at the bedroom window from Melinda's backyard. The enormous grey werewolf took a step towards the house and then stopped, trembling. She flexed both her massive paws. Boxcutter-sized talons alternately emerged and retreated into her furry digits. Her burning red eyes gleamed in the fading light.

Suddenly, a siren wailed off in the distance. Sophie snarled and covered her ears, dropping the backpack that had been hanging from her arm. It fell to the concrete and something inside cracked. She didn't seem to notice.

As the siren faded Sophie slowly lowered her arms. Scowling, she lowered herself to all fours and circled around the backyard like a caged beast. She glanced up at the house and then the entryway leading to the side street; the gate was wide open. Then, with a final, frustrated, almost plaintive snarl, Sophie stalked off out of the yard and into the night, leaving the backpack lying on the ground.

* * *

Melinda leaned forward and licked Phillip on the cheek.

Phillip stirred. His eyes opened. Melinda was lying on the bed besides him nestled in a tangle of blankets and pillows, smiling. Her enormous furry black body dominated his view.

"You know, this is probably the first time a guy has woken up and been glad to see something big and hairy licking his face," observed Phillip wryly.

Melinda chuckled, gently brushing his hair with her paw.

"Too true," she agreed.

She embraced him, pressing his body against her massive chest.

"E-Easy," gasped Phillip, laughing all the same. "I'm a lot...weaker than you."

Melinda eased her grip.

"Whew, like a vice," he said, shaking his head.

"Sorry, honey," said Melinda sheepishly, ears drooping. "It's just, well, I've never hugged anybody who wa...I've never hugged anybody before like this," she added quickly. "I don't know my own strength."

"It's alright," said Phillip.

The couple just lay there for a while.

"I'm naked right now, you know," said Melinda suddenly, smiling naughtily.

Phillip's reaction was complicated. His face tightened and immediately turned a bright shade of red. His mouth opened and shut, rapidly fluctuating between a grin and a grimace of horror.

"Relax!" chortled Melinda. "It's not a big deal."

"Yeah, well, um, it is technically true," said Phillip weakly.

"I don't feel naked when I'm like this," said Melinda. "Not entirely," she added, smirking.

Melinda let go of Phillip. She rose, causing the mattress to bounce off the frame as her ponderous mass left it. She lifted her muscular arms over her head and stretched. A series of snapping and popping sounds filled the air. Wordlessly, Phillip sat up. He stared dumbfounded at Melinda's Amazonian physique.

"I guess this changes our relationship, huh?" murmured Phillip.

Melinda hesitated.

"Yeah, I guess it does," she said quietly.

"Like, full moon nights are out as far as dates are concerned," said Phillip.

"Not necessarily," said Melinda as she smoothed back her hair and tufted ears.

"Oh, er?" said Phillip, somewhat surprised. "Well then, I suppose I should be careful not to carry anything made of silver, right?"

Melinda looked back at Phillip, sighed, and then turned around to face him. She gently held his hands in her paws.

"Phillip, I'm the same girl you watched play on the soccer field," she said. "I'm the same girl you took to J Burger. I'm the same girl you were going to watch a movie with tonight," she gestured at her body. "I'm still me."

Phillip frowned. His gaze shifted downward.

"I...I know what you're saying, Melinda," he said quietly. "You're absolutely right, but..."

"But what?" said Melinda.

"This is, well, it's big," said Phillip tensely. He pulled his hands away from her. "It's really big. This...this changes my perception of reality! I mean, Jesus, I'm dating a werewolf!"

Melinda's lips tightened.

"I'm just going to need some time to wrap my head around this," he muttered, rising.

"You're not scared of me, are you?"

"No!" replied Phillip automatically. "Well...I mean, maybe a little," he added, having the decency to look embarrassed.

"You didn't seem so freaked-out about this before," said Melinda somewhat resentfully.

Phillip shrugged.

"I think it was the shock," he explained, shaking his head. "Now that I'm...well, now it's starting to sink in. I mean, I still have a ton of questions."

"Of course, ask me anything," said Melinda.

Phillip bit his lower lip, thinking.

"Just how...contagious are you?"

"Huh?"

"I hate to ask, but, I mean, would you have to bite me or scratch me or does it work some other way?"

"Oh, oh!" said Melinda, understanding. "Well, a bite does the trick. I'm not sure if a scratch would have the same effect but I'm pretty sure someone would also change if they were exposed to my blood or maybe even my...my..." she trailed off.

"Melinda? Is...is everything okay?"

Melinda took a deep breath, and then exhaled. She stepped over to the bed and sat down next to him. Phillip had to shift his body slightly as the mattress bent inwards under her weight.

"Phillip," she began solemnly. "There's something you need to know."

"Um, sure."

Melinda gazed at him, noting his anxious yet attentive expression with a certain degree of dread. She took another, deep breath. Her enormous furry chest expanded and contracted like a bellows.

"There's...a rule we have when someone finds about us," she said, a slight tremble in her otherwise somber voice.

"Us?" said Phillip. "You mean, other werewolves?"

"Yes."

"There are other werewolves living in Pinebrook?"

"Uh, yeah," said Melinda uncomfortably. She hadn't told Phillip about how she had transformed the others. "Anyways-"

"Wait, so, are your parents are werewolves too?"

"No," said Melinda. "I got bit by that thing in the pit, remember? They don't even know I am one."

"Oh, yeah, duh," said Phillip, slapping his forehead. He frowned. "But then, who could..."

Suddenly, Phillip looked up at her, mouth agape.

"The fantasy book club!" he exclaimed. He wagged a finger at Melinda. "You're all werewolves!" he said, giggling with nervous excitement. "Aw man, it makes perfect sense! The secret meetings, the membership by invitation only policy...holy crap! That means Cynthia Carpenter is a-"

"Is a werewolf," confirmed Melinda.

"And Lily Forger, and...huh, it weirdly makes sense that Heidi Erickson is one."

"Yes, they both are," said Melinda, simultaneously relieved and irritated by the digression.

"So, how did they, um, become werewolves?"

"Long story, but it's not the time for it now."

"Oh, my bad, go ahead."

Melinda cleared her throat.

"As I was saying, one of the club rules is...is..." she shut her eyes "Anyone who learns about our secret must be transformed into a werewolf."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"So, that means you're going to..." began Phillip. He gestured at himself. "You're going to turn me into a werewolf too."

Saying nothing, Melinda lowered her head, rested her elbows on her knees and covered her face. Then, she nodded slightly.

"But...why?"

"To protect our secret, that's why," snapped Melinda, looking up at Phillip. "I don't want to do this to you, Phillip. I really don't. But I don't have a choice!"

"C-Come on Melinda," said Phillip. "I won't tell anyone! Fuck, no one would believe me if I did!"

"It doesn't matter," wailed Melinda. "I can't make any exceptions."

Phillip stared at her.

"There's some kind of world-wide secret society of werewolves, isn't there?" he whispered. "And if they found out you didn't change me we'd...we'd be in a lot of trouble, right?"

There was a moment of dead quiet. Then, Melinda snorted and started laughing.

"What? No! Not at all!" she chortled.

"Huh?" said Phillip, thoroughly confused.

"God-damn Phillip, thank you. Thank you so much. I needed that," she said as the tension slowly drained away. "No, there are no world-wide werewolf secret societies. It's just me and the girls."

"Wait, what?" said Phillip. "That's impossible. What about the one in the pit?"

"I don't know, Phillip," said Melinda, still chuckling. "Okay, yes, maybe there are other werewolves out there. Maybe there actually is some kind of secret organization of werewolves, but we've never met any outside the club. And trust me, if we ran into one, we'd know. Werewolves can always smell other werewolves, even when we're human. My point is the club rules are just that - club rules. We made them up ourselves."

"But then, why do you have to do it?" he asked, dumbfounded.

Melinda sighed, her amused expression fading.

"If we start making exceptions for good reasons, we'll start making exceptions for bad ones," she explained. "If the secret got out, it would be a disaster. Even if we didn't wind up being locked away it'd be the end of our lives as we know them. Our...situation is just so fragile. We can't afford to take any chances. At least this way, anyone who uncovers our secret feels compelled to protect it because it becomes their secret as well."

"But that's..." Phillip paused, uneasily noting Melinda's enormous stature and fierce appearance, but continued anyways "...That's stupid, Melinda! What if the person you bit didn't care about being locked up or...or were a sociopath or something? It defeats the whole purpose! I mean, what if you barely knew the person?"

"That's...that's something we'd just have to deal with," said Melinda uncomfortably.

"Come on, Melinda, you'd turn a psycho into a werewolf? What if it were your mom or dad?"

"Well, I...yeah, obviously there'd be some exceptions!" snapped Melinda, who then froze.

"Then, why can't you make an exception for me?" asked Phillip quietly after a while.

Melinda hung her head. A low growl escaped her black lips, though there was no anger evident in it. Still, Phillip gulped. He glanced at the door and back at Melinda, who hadn't moved.

"It's really not so bad," she murmured.

"Huh?"

"The first transformation hurts a lot," continued Melinda, gazing at him through misty yellow eyes. "But afterwards, it's wonderful." She paused. "I won't pretend there haven't been times I wished it'd never happened, but those feelings don't last long. It's not just the power, the confidence, the superhuman senses or even the thrill of the hunt. Everything feels more...more real." She chuckled, shaking her head. "God that sounded lame, but I don't know how else to put it. It's like if you spent your entire life with a hood wrapped around your head and one day, someone took it off. Everything is more intense, better. And being able to change shape is just awesome! It's living two lives at once, seeing through two sets of eyes."

She turned back to Phillip, who had been listening, spellbound. Melinda reached for his hands, and then stopped. She looked at him questioningly. He nodded. Smiling, she gently cradled his hands in her massive paws.

"I know how crazy this seems and I know we've only been together for two months but I really care about you," she whispered. "The truth is, I'm making a lot of this up as I go along, so maybe you have a point." Her voice cracked a little as she spoke, but she continued. "So, let's try it this way instead. Phillip, would you like to become a werewolf?"

Phillip stared into her eyes. He opened his mouth slightly and then shut, frowning.

"N-No," he stuttered.

Melinda sighed, releasing his hands.

"I mean, I don't know, Melinda," he added quickly. "It's...it's a big decision! I mean, you didn't have a choice. It just happened. Me, well, I dunno. What abo-"

"No, no, you're right," said Melinda, waving a paw disarmingly. "You don't have to answer right away. Just think about it, okay? We can talk about it more after school this week."

"Alright," said Phillip, relieved. "But, what if I say no?"

Melinda sucked in air through her pointy teeth.

"I'll call a club meeting," she said. "I'll explain what happened and try to convince them to let you decide whether or not you want to join." She grimaced. "I'm going to catch a lot of flak for this, but we have bigger problems to deal with right now so I think they'll let it go."

"Thanks Melinda," said Phillip.

"No, thank you, Phillip," said Melinda. "After everything that's happened over the last few weeks...I needed this." She rose from the bed. "Have my parents come back?" she inquired.

"I didn't hear anything."

"Well, they should be home pretty soon, so I should change," she said, nodding towards the hallway.

"Change? But your clothes are...oh, yeah."

"Speaking of which," sighed Melinda, turning back to the bed.

She grabbed the edge of the blanket and folded it back, revealing a tangled mess of torn clothing.

"Terrific," said Melinda in a deadpan voice. She plucked the remnants of a yellow T-shirt from the mattress and dropped it, shaking her head. "Thank God I wasn't wearing jeans."

"Uh, yeah," murmured Phillip, staring at the ruined raiment.

"You, uh, you might want to get going," said Melinda, shrugging her broad shoulders. "It's getting late."

"Y-Yeah," said Phillip, rubbing the back of his head. "I gotta get a good night's rest. Tomorrow is the last band practice before the dance." He cleared his throat. "Do you...do you still want to go with me to the dance? After I finish playing of course."

"Yeah, definitely," said Melinda, smiling.

Phillip stared at her.

"Oh, er, sorry," apologized Melinda, realizing how disconcerting it looked when she bared her teeth. "Would you mind taking the clothes down to the garbage bins on your way out?"

"Uh, no prob," said Phillip. He scooted along the mattress and started gathering Melinda's torn clothing into a bundle. Meanwhile, Melinda stepped over to her closet and began picking out a new set of apparel.

"Phillip?"

Phillip, who had been dangling Melinda's bra in the air, goggling it, quickly stuffed the undergarment in the bundle with the rest of her clothes and whirled around, blushing.

"Y-Yeah?"

"Are you...sure you're alright?" said Melinda anxiously. "I mean, if I were in your shoes I-...I'm sorry," she shook her head. "Can you promise me you won't tell anyone about this?"

"Of course, Melinda!" said Phillip earnestly, stepping towards her. "I promise I won't tell anyone about your secret!"

"Pinky swear?" said Melinda mischievously, extending a paw.

"Um, yeah," said Phillip, chuckling at the absurdity of it.

He reached out and hooked his pinky finger around Melinda beclawed equivalent. As soon as he let go Melinda suddenly lurched forward and embraced him, wrapping her massive arms around his body.

"Thank you, Phillip," she whispered into his ear. "You're the best."

Phillip nodded vaguely, trying not to think too hard about the two furry mounds pressing against his head.

* * *

The three girls sat in the restaurant booth staring at Melinda, who was seated on the opposite side of the table. Their collective demeanor was less than cordial.

"You fucking hypocrite!" breathed Heidi.

"After giving us all that shit about not transforming when we're with our boyfriends!" growled Cynthia.

"And now you want us to give *your* little boytoy a pass?" fumed Lily.

Melinda nodded solemnly.

"Yes," she said dourly.

"Unbelievable," cried Cynthia, flopping back in her padded seat.

"Look," began Melinda. "I take full responsibility here. I fucked up. And I admit haven't exactly been the best leader."

"Understatement of the goddamn century, you skank," spat Cynthia.

Melinda's lips curled into a snarl. Then, she shook her head, took a deep breath, and nodded.

"If you want we can vote for a new club president," said Melinda. "I'll step down."

"Step down? Oh no-no-no, we're kicking you out of office!" said Cynthia.

"Wha-...fine, whatever," said Melinda. "The one thing we all can agree upon is that we need to revise the club rules."

"So your precious Phillip doesn't get werewolf'd?" said Heidi sardonically.

"No! I mean, yes, I mean..." stuttered Melinda. "Look, it was a stupid rule. I shouldn't have bitten Yvette. It's caused us nothing but trouble. But that's why we shouldn't force the change on Phillip just because he found out about us. He might panic or have trouble changing back, just like Sophie."

Suddenly, Cynthia leaned forward, pressing her hands against the table's surface. She eyed Melinda thoughtfully.

"No," she said slowly. "I think we should transform Phillip."

"What?" said Melinda.

"We shouldn't ignore club rules when we find them inconvenient," said Cynthia. "Not just ensure Phillip keeps his mouth shut but to teach Melinda here a lesson." She smiled nastily. "You know what? I think we should banish Melinda to the preserve for a couple of days. It'll give her some time to think about what she's done AND she'll be able to keep Sophie company. It's her fault she's stuck there, anyhow."

Melinda stared at Cynthia, mouth agape. To her horror the other girls were nodding in agreement.

"But, wait, she'll miss out on the dance," said Lily.

"That's kind of the point, Lily," said Cynthia, rolling her eyes.

"Oh yeah, heh."

"Forget the dance," cried Melinda. "What about my mom and dad? They'll kind of notice it if I disappear!"

"Just like poor Sophie's parents?" said Cynthia mockingly. "We-...you'll figure something out."

"Come on, Cynthia," protested Melinda weakly.

"What if it were one of our boyfriends?" said Lily. "I'd bet you'd have your jaws locked around his neck faster than a vampire bat."

"Why don't we vote on it?" suggested Cynthia. "All those in favor of changing Phillip and banishing Melinda to the Pinebrook Wildlife Preserve for an indefinite period, raise your hands."

Cynthia and Lily hands shot upward. Melinda and Heidi just sat there. Cynthia and Lily blinked in surprise, and then shot Heidi an angry look.

"You know what? Keep me out of this," said Heidi, raising her hands. "I'm, ah, abs...asbane..."

"Abstaining?" supplied Cynthia.

"Yeah, that," said Heidi gratefully.

"You fucking traitor," growled Cynthia, rubbing her blonde hair.

"Hey, don't get me wrong, I'm pissed at Melinda," said Heidi. "I just think it's a really stupid idea to transform Phillip if he doesn't want it. I mean, it's not his fault his girlfriend is a bi-...an idiot."

"That makes it one-to-two," said Melinda, relieved. "We'll have to wait for Yvette."

"Like she's going to vote our way," muttered Lily.

"Where is that cheerful little geek?" said Cynthia, glancing down at her watch. "It's been almost forty minutes."

"She said she was going to be late," explained Melinda. "She-"

A catchy electronic tune suddenly filled the air. Melinda glanced down and fished a cell phone out of her pocket.

"That's your ringtone?" snorted Cynthia.

"Shut up, it came with the phone," said Melinda. She tapped the 'accept call' button.

"Hello?" said Melinda. She sighed and smiled wanly. "Oh, hey mom. Look, can I-...uh huh..."

Melinda listened quietly. The other girls regarded her with interest.

"Are you sure it's mine?" said Melinda in a surprised, concerned tone. "My backup cell phone? Yeah...yeah, I know I'm not supposed to...it's broken?" Melinda visibly paled.

"Wait, isn't that the cell phone th-" said Heidi.

Melinda raised her free hand, gesturing for silence.

"I...I must have dropped it one night or something," said Melinda, biting her lower lip. "Um, maybe I threw it in there by accident when I went to practice. Yeah. Yeah, that must be it. It explains all the empty packets of beef jerky and the smell. I'll clean it up and...look, I'm sorry. You can take the cost of replacing the phone out of my allowance, okay? I'm sorry." Melinda was silent for a few seconds. "Alright. I'll clean it out when I get home. Sorry. Yeah, see you soon."

Melinda pressed the 'end call' icon and placed her phone down on the table.

"Girls," she began gravely. "We may have a bigger problem."

"Your mom found the backpack you gave Sophie in your backyard and the cell phone she was using was broken," said Lily promptly.

Melinda stared at her.

"Super-hearing, remember?" said the Hispanic teenager, tapping her ear.

Melinda grunted irritably but nodded.

"So, wait, what does this mean?" said Heidi.

"I don't know," said Melinda.

"You think something happened to her?"

"I don't know," repeated Melinda, shaking her head.

"Maybe she went to the cops or something," said Heidi. "I mean, let's be honest Melinda. We didn't exactly leave her with a good impression the last time we visited."

"Then why the hell would she drop the stuff I gave her at my house? It doesn't make any sense!"

"Maybe someone or something got to her," said Lily nervously. "Left the backpack as some kind of warning or...or threat."

"She's a nine-foot tall werewolf built like a fucking Mack truck," said Cynthia. "What the hell could 'get' her?"

"Well...Yvette could," said Lily.

"Oh come on," said Heidi.

"Yeah, why the hell would she fuck with Sophie?" sighed Cynthia.

"She fucked with us before, didn't she?" said Lily defensively. "And remember how she growled at us the night Melinda bit Sophie? She's unstable."

"Wait, hold on," said Melinda.

"Oh, can it, Lily," said Cynthia, ignoring Melinda. "Look, as much as I hate to say this, but we...kind of sort of had it coming on both occasions," she said, grimacing as she spoke. "Well, you girls did at least. And what's in it for her? She doesn't get off on fucking with people for no good reason."

"Well, what else could kidnap her?" cried Lily, throwing out her arms.

"Everybody shut up for a second!" roared Melinda angrily, her voice suddenly uncharacteristically deep.

The three cheerleaders sat there in stunned silence.

"Okay, geez, sorry!" said Cynthia. She glanced back at the entrance of the restaurant. The elderly Asian cashier was staring at them half-curious, half-terrified. He quickly looked away after he saw Cynthia glaring at him.

Blushing slightly despite herself, Melinda took a deep breath and continued.

"Look, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's just go out into the preserve the first chance we have and look for her. Maybe she just dropped it or something or...or left it at my house because she couldn't get a hold of me and the phone broke. If she's not--"

A soft ringing sound emanated from the main entrance as someone opened the front door. It was Yvette. Breathless and pale, she hurried over to the girls' table, pressed her hands against its surface and leaned forward.

"Sophie's missing," she croaked.

The girls stared at Yvette as though she had stepped inside the restaurant, pulled out a handgun and shot someone.

"This is a joke, right?" said Cynthia incredulously.

Yvette shook her head.

"No," she said miserably, taking a seat opposite Melinda.. "I'm not. Sorry. She wasn't in the forest. I looked everywhere."

"Jesus," muttered Heidi. "Something did happen to her."

"Huh?" said Yvette, confused.

"My mom found the backpack and cell phone we gave her in my backyard," said Melinda. "Last time I was out there...it couldn't have been more than a day or two ago." she paused. "Hold on, how on Earth could you have possibly lost her? Even if she left the forest you should've been able to follow her by scent!"

"I spent over two hours searching the wildlife preserve," said Yvette. "Her trail led to the river. It just sort of disappeared from there."

"Did you say river?" said Lily sharply.

"Uh, yeah," said Yvette, mildly surprised.

Lily bit her lower lip, hesitating.

"Spit it out," pressed Melinda.

"Well, y'see," began Lily. "The reason you - er, Yvette - lost Sophie's trail...well, it's really hard to track something after it moves across water."

"Why?"

Lily waved her hands vaguely.

"It, uh, it disperses the smell," she said. "I mean, smell is your nose picking up stuff in the air, right? Most of it comes from footprints or, or when your body scrapes against a bush or something. You leave a bit of...residue that stays there for days. Water washes it away."

The other four girls stared at Lily.

"What?" said Lily. "I'm the one who does all the tracking, remember?"

"Wait, back up," said Cynthia, raising a hand. "Why were you visiting Sophie in the first place?" she asked suspiciously, addressing Yvette.

"I, er, just wanted to check up on her," said Yvette uncomfortably. "It sounded like she was having a hard time and I thought she'd like someone to talk with."

"You should have checked with the rest of us before going," said Cynthia reproachfully.

"Sorry."

"Forget it," said Melinda. "We have bigger problems."

"You mean one big problem," observed Heidi wryly.

Melinda gave her a dirty look but continued.

"We're going to have to search the whole preserve. We'll start by following the river upstream and downstream. Even if she - or whoever or whatever kidnapped her - used it to mask her scent sooner or later they'll have to leave the water. Then we can-"

"Hey-hey-hey, hold on," said Cynthia angrily. "We're through taking orders from you, remember? Your reign as alpha bitch is over."

"Put a dollar in the 'no wolf terminology or bitch jokes' jar," said Melinda wearily.

"Whatever, look, the point is you're out of office," persisted Cynthia. "And since we were about to banish you to the preserve, maybe you should get your furry ass out there right now and get a head start on the search."

Melinda glared at Cynthia, her knuckles whitening as she gripped the edge of the table. Heidi and Lily edged away from the two.

"We still need Yvette's vote," said Melinda, nodding at the brunette.

"What's going on here?" said Yvette.

"Oh, you're going to love this," said Cynthia gleefully. "Turns out Melinda-"

"Stop it, Cynthia," interrupted Melinda angrily. "I'll tell her myself."

Cynthia harrumphed, folding her arms, but complied. Melinda cleared her throat.

Yvette listened as Melinda explained how she had shape-shifted in her sleep and how Phillip had caught her. Her expression didn't change much as Melinda told the story. If anything, she seemed mildly amused.

"...So, now we have a decision to make," said Melinda. "Do we follow club protocol and transform Phillip against his will or not?"

"Just like you did with Sophie," said Cynthia nastily.

"Yeah, yeah," said Melinda, shaking her head.

Yvette considered this for a moment.

"But, what's this about losing your office and being...banished to the forest?" she asked curiously.

"We think Melinda needs to be punished for letting herself be seen transforming twice in the same month," said Lily.

"And for being a fucking hypocrite and piss-poor leader," added Cynthia.

"Not to mention she can't control her transformations," said Heidi sorely. "I've screwed up, like, once, and I didn't go full wolf in front of anyone."

"Yeah!"

Melinda sat there, red-faced, as the three cheerleaders poured on insult after insult. She hated the way that, even after all they had been through together, they still treated her like less than a friend. But what she really hated was the fact that they were right.

"Okay, fine, fine! I'm a fucking pathetic excuse for a werewolf and a leader!" snapped Melinda. She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, alright?" she said, her voice suddenly soft. She tightened her lips, sniffing slightly.

"And...it's not the first time I transformed without knowing it, either," she added, her gaze drifting downwards.

"What?" said Heidi.

"Huh?" said Lily.

"I've changed a couple of times in my sleep," quivered Melinda. "Four, maybe five times. I don't know what causes it. I practice, I meditate, and try and I try but it keeps on happening! Maybe...maybe I do belong in the forest with Sophie."

Heidi, Lily, and Yvette were silent. Cynthia, however, folded her arms and smirked.

"Well, admitting it is the first step," she said smugly.

Yvette suddenly turned to Cynthia. The brunette teenager's ordinarily kind face was a mask of fury. Cynthia's smile all but drained away.

"What?" she said, laughing nervously.

"Shut up, Cynthia," said Yvette bluntly.

"But sh-"

"Shut up," repeated Yvette in a tone that, while not loud, brooked no dissent. It carried a strange but unmistakable menace that promised nothing short of oblivion. Cynthia turned pale and nodded meekly.

Yvette sighed, sagging a little. Then, she turned back to Cynthia.

"Tell her what happened when you were with Greg McCloud after the game against the Eau Claire Huskies."

Cynthia opened her mouth to protest but one look from Yvette stopped her. Instead, she blushed, and then muttered something under her breath, squirming in her seat.

"Louder," said Yvette harshly.

"I accidentally changed while making out with him," blurted Cynthia.

Melinda's jaw dropped. Cynthia glared at the group, red with a mixture of insolence and embarrassment.

"It's true," confirmed Lily, sighing. "She came to me because she needed to borrow a change of clothes."

Melinda reeled. In the span of less than half a hour she had gone from panicked to enraged to embarrassed to miserable. Now she couldn't even tell how she was feeling. It was though she were suffering from some kind of emotional whiplash.

"Why...why didn't you tell me?" she managed.

"Because we knew you'd freak out," said Lily sharply.

Melinda pointed a shaking finger at Yvette.

"How did...how did she-"

"Cynthia confided in me because she was scared it would happen again," explained Yvette patiently. "She swore me to secrecy but..." she glared in Cynthia's direction "...Sometimes, rules need to be broken."

"So...Greg knows?"

"His friend Tyler knows too," sighed Cynthia. "The shthead smoked too much weed bet Tyler he had a werewolf girlfriend. Tricked me into coming to his house transformed. Oh, he paid for that! But that's everyone...I think."

"You think?" wailed Melinda.

"And to be fair, my boyfriend and I, well, he knows too," admitted Lily, cringing slightly.

"What?"

"And, er, my boyfriend doesn't know," said Heidi, smiling wanly. "But my parents do...and my track coach."

This last revelation proved shocking enough to draw Melinda's full attention. She whirled around in her seat.

"Your *track coach*?"

"It happened on the track late at night about...three days shy of the full moon," said Heidi nonchalantly. "Freaked her out something fierce. Don't worry, she promised to keep quiet about everything." Heidi cleared her throat. "Er, she has, um, mentioned she'd like to get some more werewolves on the team."

"As in, she wants us to join or transform some of the other team members?" asked Yvette carefully.

"Uh, she didn't specify, but-"

"Just shut up!" barked Melinda. "Yvette, I...I can understand Heidi, Lily, and Cynthia screwing up, but please tell me no one ever caught you in your werewolf form."

"I've never been caught," said Yvette.

"Oh, good, at least som-

"But I told my parents what happened three days after you brought me home from the woods," she finished.

It was almost a minute before Melinda finally responded.

"Why?" she croaked, regarding Yvette the way one might an unfaithful spouse.

"Because they're my parents and they deserved to know," said Yvette slowly. "If they couldn't handle it, no one could."

Melinda stared at her for a little while longer. Then, nodding, she slowly sat back in her seat. She took a deep breath, and exhaled, blowing aside a lock of hair obscuring her right eye.

"So, all this time," she murmured. "All this time, I was the *only* one who managed to keep our secret? Until now?"

Heidi and Lily shrugged diffidently, trying to avoid her gaze, Cynthia simply gave her one of her patented sour looks. Yvette's expression didn't change.

"More importantly," continued Melinda, glancing at Cynthia. "You were going to punish *me* for exposing myself to Phillip when *you* committed worse!"

Cynthia's sour look changed to a chilly, defiant one.

"At least we never bit anyone," she retorted.

"That's enough," cut in Yvette before things could escalate. She drew a deep breath. "Maybe we should have been more honest with you, Melinda, but you can be a little...inflexible."

There was silence.

"I guess..."

"Sorry..."

"Whatever..."

"Sure, sure..."

For a while, the only sound in the restaurant was the whirr of the soda fountain's cooler. Then, after what seemed an eternity, Yvette cleared her throat.

"There's something else we need to discuss," she said in a quiet voice tinged with discomfort.

"Yeah, what now?" said Melinda.

"It's about the wolf's bane, the *Aconitum vulpara*."

"What about it?" said Melinda.

Yvette shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"I tried it," said Yvette.

"You what?"

"I tried eating a little bit," said Yvette, gazing down at the table.

"You ate wolf's bane?" said Melinda, rising from her seat.

"The good news is, it works," said Yvette. "I haven't been able to transform since."

"No way, really?" said Cynthia.

"The bad news is it nearly killed me."

The group fell silent once more.

"First, I started vomiting," continued Yvette, her tone not wavering in the slightest. "Then I felt really...bad, I don't know how else to describe it. My skin burned and felt numb at the same time, I could barely breathe, my heart wouldn't stop pounding. I remember my mom and dad saying something about calling 911 and then I passed out." She paused. "My dad said I went into cardiac arrest. He managed to get my heart working again but if he hadn't, well..."

"Why didn't you tell us about this!" exclaimed Heidi.

"You had enough on your mind; I didn't want to worry you," said Yvette.

"Jesus, Yvette," cried Melinda. "I mean, this is your life we're talking about. You shouldn't hav-"

"You were willing to do it," interrupted Yvette. "And if you had there's a good chance you would have died. Isn't your dad an accountant? Besides, I'm the strongest werewolf here, remember?"

Melinda opened her mouth, and then shut it.

"When I woke up the paramedics were there," said Yvette. "Believe it or not, I was more frightened of going to the hospital than dying from the wolfsbane. You see, I didn't feel sick after I woke up. I guess the poison doesn't last long if it doesn't kill you. I managed to convince my parents and the paramedics that I was fine. They checked up on me and, well, I was right. It still took a lot of talking and my dad got in trouble. So did I." She paused. "I'm still a werewolf. Silver still hurts. I can still smell and hear better than I could before I transformed and heal really quickly. I just think my ability to change has been...suppressed. I don't know when it will come back."

"So, that's why you went to see Yvette," said Cynthia.

"Yes. I wasn't going to give it to her. I just wanted her to know it was an option. I wanted her to think about it on her own before the rest of you had a chance to...weigh in."

Melinda flinched. Subtle as it was, it was a fairly harsh reprimand by Yvette's standards.

"Wow," said Lily, shaking her head.

"It was...I mean..." stuttered Cynthia in a rare loss for words. "...It was a really stupid move," she said finally. "But it took a lot of guts to try. And it's a good thing you refused to go to the hospital. No telling what they would have found after testing your blood and other shit like that."

There was another, awkward pause.

"So, no go on the wolfs bane, then?" said Heidi sadly.

"Maybe as a last resort," sighed Melinda. "It sounds like you barely survived, Yvette. Sophie seems pretty strong but I don't know if it's worth the risk."

"At least we learned something, Melinda," said Yvette.

"Yeah, we did," agreed Melinda. She looked Yvette directly in the eyes. "Don't ever pull a stunt like that again."

"I won't."

"I...think we should call it a day," said Melinda. "We can search for Sophie tomorrow after the dance. We should probably make a list of all the people we confided in, too."

Heidi bit her lower lip.

"Melinda," she began. "Let's say we do find Sophie and she refuses to take the wolfs bane. I wouldn't blame her if she did. What then?"

"I don't know," admitted Melinda, shaking her head. "I don't think we can ask her to hide out in the preserve any longer. She's alright with it, but it's not a long term option."

"Well, fair enough, but what else can we do with her?" said Heidi. "It's not like we can send her home to her folks."

Melinda nodded, frowning, then suddenly looked thoughtful.

"Her parents," she murmured more or less to herself.

* * *

The call came while she was driving home.

Irritated, Melinda dug into her pocket, using her free hand to keep the wheel steady while eying the road the entire time. Traffic wasn't bad, but Melinda was a cautious motorist and loathed those who yammered away on their cell phones in the car. It was already getting dark out, too.

"Hello?" she said brusquely as she carefully maneuvered her vehicle into the bike lane and alongside the curb.

"Hi Melinda," came Phillip's cheerful voice.

"Oh, hey sweetie," said Melinda, smiling weakly, feeling a surge of emotions.

"I just wanted to know if you've decided whether you're coming to the dance," said Phillip. "Seeing as, well, tomorrow's the night."

Melinda grit her teeth. The dance! She'd forgotten that Phillip had invited her.

"Yeah, about that," said Melinda as her car slowed to a halt. "I hate to do this, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to make it."

For a moment, she heard nothing but faint static.

"I'm really sorry," she added, meaning every word of it. "Something came up at the last minute."

"I know, I know," sighed Phillip.

Melinda frowned. He didn't sound angry at all. Not one bit. It was almost insulting.

"It was kind of stupid of me not to realize it," continued Phillip. "It's the full moon, right? When you told me you'd probably be able to make it I thought there was some way you could get around the whole...you know, werewolf thing, but I guess not."

"No, no, it's not that," said Melinda quickly. "The next full moon's still two weeks from now."

"Oh, duh!" laughed Phillip. Then, his tone turned puzzled. "Then, why can't you come?"

Melinda's mind raced.

"There's, uh, something going on with my family - minor emergency, that sort of thing." She winced as she finished the sentence. As excuses went, it was pretty lame.

"Oh, um, sorry," said Phillip.

There was an awkward pause. Melinda got the distinct feeling that if Phillip were sitting in the car with her, he'd be scratching his head.

"It...I might be able to make it," she blurted.

"Really?" said Phillip.

Melinda hesitated. It was possible - however unlikely - that Sophie could be found before the end of the night. She *had* been looking forward to her first real dance.

"Yeah," continued Melinda. "It, uh, depends on how long it takes to resolve the problem. It could be over before the dance ends."

"Cool. So...how should we do this?"

"I dunno," said Melinda. "I'll call you when and if I'm ready. You can pick me up at my house."

"I'll be going to the dance either way," said Phillip. "The band will be playing there, remember? I convinced Mr. Morrison to let me off the hook halfway through so we could actually spend time together," he continued. "We can meet at the dance, and if you don't show up I'll just keep on playing. Works out better, really. You won't have to sit around for an hour waiting for me to finish."

"Um, great," said Melinda.

"And afterwards, I was wondering if we could...uh," Phillip trailed off.

"What?" said Melinda, eyes narrowing.

"Talk about your, um...condition," said Phillip. "I mean, I'm not afraid of you, and I sure as hell don't want to break up, but I want to know more." He paused. "And I'd kinda like to see the, ah, werewolf you again."

Melinda chuckled.

"Maybe," she hinted.

"Sweet. Talk to you later, Melinda."

"Bye sweetie."

Melinda shook her head - sadly or happily; even she wasn't certain - as she pocketed the cell phone.

* * *

"Remind me again why we're doing this," asked Cynthia, glancing back at Melinda's car, which was parked along the street.

"Don't tell me you're scared," said Melinda, glancing at a passing motorcycle.

Cynthia shrugged. "Scared of coming here? Maybe a couple of months ago, but now? Nah. Any creep who messes with us is going to regret it."

Melinda said nothing, but smirked. Crescent Heights was, for all intents and purposes, the bad part of town. Not exactly a slum, for it wasn't dense enough to be a slum; more a rambling expanse of rickety two-bedroom homes and mobile home parks surrounding the abandoned industrial park near the highway. For the moment, however, the urban squalor was veiled in the hazy orange glow of the setting sun. It was striking, if not exactly beautiful.

The two girls made their way across the lawn of yellowing grass. As they approached the front door Cynthia looked at Melinda askance.

"Melinda, I know what you're thinking," said Cynthia. "Hell, it's the first place I'd go." She sniffed the air. "But I don't smell Sophie anywhere, and you know-

"I wasn't expecting to find her here," interrupted Melinda as she trotted up the stairs leading to the porch. "We would've picked up her trail if she entered town coming from the woods."

Cynthia sighed.

"Then why the fuck did we come here?" she asked.

"Two reasons," said Melinda, reaching for the doorknocker. "First, I had to be sure she hadn't gone home. It wasn't impossible, just very unlikely." She paused, frowning. "Second, well, we know so little about Sophie. Maybe if we learn more about her we'll understand why she can't change back. I know it's a long shot, but we have to try."

"Wouldn't you already know a lot about her? I mean, you spent a lot of time with her before she disappeared."

"She didn't like talking about herself," said Melinda. "Every time her personal life or family came up she changed the subject." She shook her head in self-condemnation. "I should've realized something was wrong."

"Okay, how about this: why am I here?" asked Cynthia.

"Because everyone else is busy and I didn't want to come alone."

"Don't tell me you're scared," parroted Cynthia.

"Actually, it was Yvette's idea," admitted Melinda after a short pause.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"I'm still pretty pissed about what you pulled at the restaurant," added Melinda quietly.

Cynthia rolled her eyes.

"Okay! Fuck it, I'm sorry! Happy?"

"No, you're not," sighed Melinda. "But I appreciate you saying it." She rang the doorbell.

A few seconds later there was a sharp clicking sound. The door slowly turned inward. A wrinkled, pug-nosed, middle-aged woman with messy, graying hair poked her head through the door. She stared at the two girls, regarding them with far more suspicion than circumstance warranted.

"Mrs. ...Mason?" said Melinda, startled.

"Yeah, you found her," replied the woman.

Melinda opened her mouth to speak, and shut it as a now all-too-obvious dilemma dawned upon her: She hadn't even considered what she would say to Sophie's parents to gain their confidence. No story, excuse, or fabrication seemed apt or indeed cogent. She certainly couldn't tell the truth. "*I'm sorry, Mrs. Mason. My friends and I accidentally changed your daughter into a werewolf*" wouldn't cut it.

"Well? Whaddaya want?" snapped Sophie's mother.

"Ah, um, you're Sophie's mother, right?" stuttered Melinda for want of anything better to say.

Mrs. Mason's expression turned...wooden. She gazed briefly down at the ground, lips tight, and then looked back up at Melinda.

"She ain't around," said Mrs. Mason as coldly as a glacier. "If'n ya'll excuse me, I'm busy."

The door began to close.

"Scuse us, madam" said Cynthia, stepping forward and pushing Melinda aside in a single motion. "We're just here to pick up some books we lent Sophie."

The door stopped.

"Books?" said Mrs. Mason. Her voice still had an edge to it but was now tinged with bemusement.

"Sorry," said Cynthia, flashing her sweet-sixteen supermodel smile. "I'm Cynthia and she's Melinda. We are...er, were in Sophie's U.S. history class."

Mrs. Mason slowly opened the door, though she maintained a firm grip on the knob.

"You friends of Sophie?" she said. Melinda detected a degree of incredulity in her voice.

"Um, well, sort of," said Cynthia as though embarrassed. She smiled again. "We were grouped together for a class project a couple months ago. Can't say we got along at first, but we got used to each other." She chuckled, but her grin quickly soured. "We really miss her, Mrs. Mason."

Mrs. Mason just stared at them for a moment. She glanced over at the side yard, absently scratching her head. Then, she sighed. Her fierce scowl sagged into a haggard frown. She nodded dumbly.

"Any word?" asked Cynthia.

She shook her head.

"Darn," muttered Cynthia under her breath. She gave Mrs. Mason an apologetic look. "I hate doing this, Mrs. Mason. We almost didn't come down here, bu-"

For the first time since they met her, Sophie's mother cracked a smile, albeit a brief one.

"Shit, gals, you didn't have to put on such a big act," she said almost cordially. "I'll get yer books. It's going to take a while to sort through her shit, though."

"Mind if we come inside?" said Cynthia more than a little eagerly.

"Uh, sure," said Sophie's mother, who turned and motioned for them to enter.

The two teenagers stepped through the doorway. As soon as Mrs. Mason's back was turned, Cynthia turned to Melinda and smiled smugly.

"Nothing to it."

Melinda fumed, but said nothing.

The interior of the Mason residence was not what Melinda had expected. Later, she would chide herself for making assumptions in the first place, but for now she was, frankly, astonished by how clean everything was. True, the carpet was worn and the furniture was the cheapest kind, but everything was immaculate. Melinda doubted there was a single particle of dust in the whole house. A faint odor of surface cleaner lingered in the air.

Mrs. Mason emerged from the kitchen carrying a plastic tray with two ceramic mugs on top. One had an image of a cartoon puppy staring at the holder with big brown eyes. The other had the words "I Love New York" written on it in bright red font. She set the tray down on the worn coffee table beside the beige sofa where Melinda and Cynthia were sitting.

"Y'all like iced tea?" she asked.

"Oh, um, thank you," said Melinda. She took one of the proffered mugs.

"I'm good," said Cynthia.

"Suit yourself," said Sophie's mother. "I'll go check Sophie's room." She hesitated. "Now, uh, which books were you looking for?"

"Oh yeah," said Cynthia. "*The Last Unicorn*, and, uh...."

"*Momo* and *Spellsinger*," supplied Melinda.



"Alright," said Sophie's mother. She scratched her head. "I thought she already had a copy of the first one, but uh, I guess y'all would know. Back in a flash."

As she left, Cynthia leaned towards Melinda.

"Okay, we're in," she whispered. "Now what, oh alpha bitch?"

"Quit calling me that," hissed Melinda. "We're not a pack of animals."

"Could've fooled me," said Cynthia. She leaned back on the sofa stretching her arms over her head.

Melinda harrumphed. She rose from her seat and glanced around the room. Her gaze drifted to a collection of photographs arrayed along the wall. She approached and examined them. One photo depicted a tiny, rambunctious looking dark-haired girl sitting beside a wooden barn, grinning mischievously as only children can. To its left was a picture of the child - Sophie, Melinda realized - a younger Mrs. Mason, and a tall, rugged looking man with a bushy mustache standing together in front of a field of yellow grass; fields of corn and silos stood in the background.

"I guess that explains the accent," Melinda murmured to herself.

"What was that?" said Cynthia.

"Wha-?" said Melinda, glancing over her shoulders. "Just looking at these pictures," she gestured at the wall.

The rest of the photos were portraits of family members. There were numerous children of every age and many uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents. The Mason clan was obviously quite large. Oddly enough, Sophie was not prominently featured. Indeed, there was only one other picture of her - a class photo by the looks of it. She was smiling bashfully, almost apologetically, at the camera.

Melinda took the picture off the wall and examined it. There was still a half-ripped barcode sticker on the back. She sniffed it.

Hmmm.

Melinda placed the portrait back on its hook. Sighing, she walked over to Cynthia and flopped down on the couch next to her.

"Why can't she change back like the rest of us!" exclaimed Melinda, rubbing her temples. "This whole disaster would almost be a moot point if she could just...arrgh, it's driving me nuts!"

Cynthia shrugged.

"Something is fucking with her head," she said. "We both know that strong emotions can bring out the beast in people. Only with us, it's literal."

"Yeah, but I can't think of anything so intense that it would keep it out indefinitely," said Melinda. "Yvette was an emotional wreck after I bit her but she was only stuck as a werewolf for a couple of days. Something else is going on. That's what we're here to find out."

"Hang onto that thought," said Cynthia, rising, "I gotta use the bathroom."

Mrs. Mason passed Cynthia as she entered the living room carrying a pair of paperbacks. She placed the books on the table in front of Melinda.

"I found *Spellsinger* and *The Last Unicorn*. Not a sign of th' other one," she said.

"Oh, um, thank you," said Melinda, mildly surprised. She reached over and examined the two books, flipping through one of them. They were rather sad, tattered things, their covers and pages torn and dog-eared.

"Funny thing is, I reckon these belonged to Sophie," said Mrs. Mason mildly, slipping into a faded recliner facing the sofa. "I don't know about *Spellsinger* but, uh, I bought the one about the unicorn for her when she was thirteen. Just remembered."

Melinda froze, and then slowly looked up at Mrs. Mason, who was maintaining a carefully neutral expression. Melinda steadied herself and regarded her with what she hoped passed as innocent bemusement.

"Uh, you must be mistaken," said Melinda. "I've uh, I've had this book for ages."

"Then why does it have my daughter's name on the back cover," replied Mrs. Mason in an icy voice.

Those words struck Melinda like a knife in the gut. She glanced down at the book and flipped through the pages. Sure enough, there was Sophie's name - written in the upper right corner in faded pencil.

"Now, why don't you cut the bullshit and tell me why you came here?" growled Mrs. Mason.

Melinda withered under Mrs. Mason's glare. The shame of the deception coupled with the anxious despair that had haunted her since Sophie's desertion left her speechless and numb. A tiny corner of her brain told her to come clean; if anyone deserved to know what happened to Sophie, she was her mother.

"I...didn't mean to trick you, Mrs. Mason," stuttered Melinda.

"Oh no, I'm sure you meant to," replied Sophie's mother nastily. "You just didn't do a very good job ya little lying cunt."

Melinda's temper flared. As bad as she felt over deceiving Sophie's mother, she didn't like being insulted. She nearly responded with an unflattering comment of her own but stopped herself just before the words reached her lips. *No need to aggravate the woman any more than I already have*, she told herself grimly. Besides, Mrs. Mason had every right to be angry with her. More so than she knew.

"...I'm sorry Mrs. Mason," she managed. She cleared her throat. "It's just...well..." she tried frantically to come up with something to say "...Cynthia and I really miss Sophie and, um..."

"What?" barked Mrs. Mason.

"...We were wondering if there was something about Sophie's disappearance that wasn't reported on the news. I mean, was there a ransom note or...or signs of a struggle or anything? If it's a matter of secrecy I swear I won't breathe a word to anyone. So will Cynthia. Please?"

Mrs. Mason stared at her for a moment. Then her demeanor softened slightly.

"If that's why ya'll come then why'd you lie?" she asked.

Melinda took a deep breath.

"We...weren't sure how to approach you," she said. "We've never met before and Sophie...Sophie kept quiet about things at home."

There was a pause.

"That don't surprise me none," sighed Mrs. Mason. "No, no, don't go thinking her dad or I slapped her around," she said upon seeing Melinda's reaction. "Stan and I have been... having issues over the last couple years and Sophie usually wound up in the middle." She sighed wearily. "Course, I wish that girl spent her time doing something other than sitting in her room all day reading those damn hobbit books."

"Hobbit books?" said Melinda, puzzled. It dawned on her. "Oh, you mean fantasy books."

"Yeah, all those books with elves and goblins and wizards and shit," said Sophie's mother disdainfully. "Given the choice I reckon she'd live in one."

"Be careful what you wish for," muttered Melinda.

"Eh?"

"Uh, nothing," said Melinda.

"Well, since y'all asked nicely - *eventually*," added Mrs. Mason meaningfully. "No, I really can't tell ya anything else about Sophie." She deflated a bit. "She just didn't come home one night, that's all. The cops said they found some evidence she ran into the woods near the school but they couldn't find any trace of Sophie out there."

"Any idea who took her?" asked Melinda, pokerfaced.

"Don't even know if someone took her. Could've ran away, could've gotten run over...Christ, don't make me go through this again!" snapped Mrs. Mason suddenly. "I just got over worrying about her and am well into grieving. She's gone; that's all there is to it."

"S-Sorry, Mrs. Mason," gulped Melinda.

"Yeah, whatever," grumbled Mrs. Mason. She rose from her seat. "Unless there's something else y'all want to know you'll forgive me if I ask the two of you t'leave."

"...Of course, Mrs. Mason," said Melinda, hanging her head. "I...we'll leave right after Cynthia finishes using the bathroom."

Mrs. Mason nodded with a grunt. She stalked off towards the kitchen.

At that moment something inside Melinda snapped. She leapt from her seat, determined to tell Mrs. Mason the truth. She wasn't sure what drove her. Guilt, anger, frustration, sadness, fear - it all blurred to an indistinct, garbled mess. All she knew was she couldn't stand to deceive Sophie's mother any longer.

"Wait!" cried Melinda louder than she meant.

Mrs. Mason turned and gave her a sour look.

"Oh fer Christssakes, what now?"

"About Sophie, she's..." Melinda faltered as Mrs. Mason's indignant gaze stole a goodly portion of her resolve. "She's...there's still a chance she's alive," she said lamely.

Mrs. Mason's face turned bright red. At first it looked as though she were about to explode. Then, she slumped. All signs of anger slowly drained from her like air escaping a balloon. She shook her head.

"Honey, even if she were still out there she'd be in pretty bad shape," said Mrs. Mason, almost kindly.

"That's not the same as de-"

"No, no, you don't understand," interrupted Mrs. Mason. "Sophie..." she hesitated, then chuckled humorlessly. "Well, now that she's gone I suppose there ain't no point in keeping it a secret." She took a deep breath. "Sophie...wasn't quite right in the head."

"What?" said Melinda, taken aback.

"I think the shrink called 'em manic episodes or something. One moment she'd be normal then she'd start babbling and yelling and running around naked." She chuckled mirthlessly again. "Okay, that's exaggerating it a bit. She wouldn't usually go crazy 'less she was already scared or nervous. Other times, she'd get so down on herself that she'd...she'd talk about jumpin' in the river. Anyways, they set us up with some pills that mellowed her out. Had a couple of side effects, though."

"Oh."

"Explains a lot, don't it?" said Mrs. Mason, almost sardonically. "The drugs got better over the years but no one would ever mistake her for little-miss-sunshine. Anyways, the point is without those pills she can't look after herself."

That last remark completed a rather disquieting chain of thought that had been winding its way through Melinda's mind ever since Mrs. Mason had mentioned Sophie's mental state. The effect was analogous to a burning fuse finally reaching a stick of dynamite; the outcome had been obvious from the beginning, but still packed quite a wallop when it finally hit.

If Mrs. Mason noticed Melinda's reaction, she didn't let on.

"So, how long do these pills last?" said Melinda.

"'Bout a couple of days at most," said Sophie's mother. "After that...well, she'd still behave herself for the most part. The shrink said it'd take a couple of days before she'd start acting looney again."

"I...see."

There was the sound of a toilet flushing. A few seconds later, Cynthia emerged from the hallway. She stopped, looking first at Mrs. Mason, and then at Melinda. She frowned.

"Something wrong?"

Melinda coughed nervously.

"Er...I told Mrs. Mason why we really came," she said.

Melinda took a few moments to relish the look of panic on Cynthia's face before continuing.

"Everything's fine," assured Melinda. "She understands we just wanted to know if there had been any news about Sophie."

Cynthia's expression instantly turned from alarm to relief. This time, the transition didn't require any acting on her part.

"Sorry, Mrs. Mason," she said. "I, er, we didn't know how to approach you on this so-"

Sophie's mother waved her hand dismissively.

"Yeah, yeah, it's alright," she said. "Look, it's getting late and this ain't exactly a nice neighborhood. Y'all best skedaddle." She hesitated. "Um, we'll be holding Sophie's funeral at the Southgate Cemetery two weeks from now," she added, scratching her head. "Y'all are welcome to come."

The offer elicited cold, somber silence. Melinda shifted her legs uneasily while Cynthia coughed uncomfortably.

"We'll...see," said Melinda, smiling weakly. "I...I guess we should get going, right Cynthia?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

Pausing for a moment to nod politely at Mrs. Mason, the two turned and headed towards the door.

"Should I go ahead and send ya the invites?" called Sophie's mother.

"Um, we'll stop by later to pick 'em up," said Melinda, looking at her over her shoulder while Cynthia opened the door and trotted down the front porch.

"Oh, alright," said Mrs. Mason, staring glumly into space.

The harmonics of despair in Mrs. Mason's voice would have been evident to anyone. Now, as a werewolf, Melinda could sense her misery as though it was her own. It was not a pleasant experience.

"Come on, Melinda," called Cynthia.

Melinda paused. She looked at Cynthia, who was standing in the yellowing front yard, waiting, her back to the doorway. Melinda silently mouthed something and then turned and stepped back inside.

"Just a sec," she called.

Mrs. Mason hadn't moved from her seat. She gazed woodenly up at Melinda as the teenage girl re-entered the living room.

"What now?" sighed Mrs. Mason.

"I...have kind of an odd question," said Melinda. "Just curious."

Mrs. Mason shrugged.

"Whatever."

"Exactly what kind of medication was Sophie on?"

Mrs. Mason was silent at first.

"Huh, that is an odd question," she said, snorting. She hesitated. "Erm, can't exactly remember their name. It was...technical - never could pronounce the damn things right. Made picking 'em up at the pharmacy a pain in the ass." She pointed a thumb down the hallway. "Just...just check the yellow bottle in the bathroom down the hall. You can't miss 'em. Just stay the hell out of Sophie's room."

Melinda nodded.

A minute or so later, Melinda emerged from the Mason home.

"Well, that was a waste," remarked Cynthia as Melinda approached her. "Kinda feel bad for her mom."

"Yeah," said Melinda quietly. She took a deep breath. "The last bit, anyways."

"Huh?" "I think I finally figured out why Sophie's stuck," said Melinda. For the first time in a while, there was a timbre of hope in her voice.

"What? Was that why you hung back there?"

"Let's get the rest of the girls together and start searching for her in the preserve," said Melinda, already marching towards her car. "We'll look under every rock and behind every tree and we won't leave until we find her."

"You do realize the dance is tonight?" said Cynthia, hurrying to catch up with her.

"This is more important," said Melinda firmly. "Don't give me that look. I want to go just as much as you do; I have plans with Phillip."

"Fine, fine," said Cynthia, reaching for the car door. "I wonder what your loverboy is doing now."

* * *

Phillip paused to wipe a trickle of sweat from his brow before turning to the next sheet of music. Behind him, the drummer had started his solo. Every beat, every crash of the cymbals pounded Phillip's already throbbing ears like a mallet. Phillip straightened his shoulders and flexed his fingers along the burnished surface of his saxophone, stoically enduring the aural bombardment. After what seemed an eternity the drum dropped to a softer, insistent beat; soon joined by the winds, then the bass, until at last Phillip lifted his saxophone to his lips and belted out one final, explosive chord.

Scattered applause filled the room. The ensemble rose from their seats as one. Individual sections - the winds, the brass, the bass, and percussion - were recognized, bowed, and cheered until at last the conductor himself turned and bowed. A few seconds later, the clapping abated, leaving only the happy murmur of the crowd.

Phillip slumped gratefully in his chair. His eyes stung from the harsh glare of the stage lights, his back ached from the uncomfortable seats, and his ears...well, the less said the better.

Still, what a night!

He glanced around, duly impressed by the transformation the auditorium had undergone. The school had spared no expense to make this year's dance a night to remember. It helped that Dairyville happened to be a part of the wealthiest districts in the state, remarked Phillip's inner social pundit.

Eager to get off the stage and join the festivities, Phillip started packing up. He wrapped his saxophone in its silk cover, set it in its case, folded his stand and slipped his sheet music in his folder. He glanced up at the clock on the far wall. Two-and-a-half hours into the dance and Melinda hadn't arrived. Unconcerned, but curious, Phillip reached into his pocket for his cell phone, cursing softly as he remembered he had left it in his backpack, which was in his locker - on the other side of the school.

"Hey, dude," he said, addressing one of his fellow saxophonists. "Could you drop my sax in the band room? I gotta grab something from my locker."

"Uh, sure man."

"Great, back in a sec."

Phillip jumped off the stage and wove his way through the crowd, heading toward the exit. He gently pushed the bulky double doors aside and slipped out of the auditorium. Campus was technically off-limits for the duration of the dance but he doubted anyone was enforcing the edict, let alone patrolling the building.

The hallway proved to be completely empty, silent and unlit. Only the faint light of the moon shining through the windows, reflecting weakly off the glossy surface of the lockers arrayed against the west wall, precluded total darkness. Phillip glanced back the way he had come. The door to the auditorium was a sliver

of light against an unmoving pool of shadows. He hesitated for a moment, then chuckled, embarrassed at his own nervousness. The door disappeared behind him as he turned a corner.

Phillip loosened his collar as he walked. The auditorium had been hot as hell and the stuffy suit he'd been forced to wear for the occasion hadn't helped matters; tiny stains of perspiration dotted his chest. He momentarily entertained the idea of stopping by the bathroom to tidy himself up. This was - might be, he corrected - his first date with Melinda since the night she had inadvertently revealed her secret to him.

The memory was enough to make him stop mid-step. Despite what he had told Melinda he was still a bit overawed by the fact she was a werewolf - a little nervous, truth be told. Who could blame him? Aside from the piddling fact that the revelation had altered his perception of reality, having a girlfriend who was covered in fur, ten times stronger than him and wielded claws capable of ripping through steel was a little...intimidating.

Kinda sexy, too.

Blushing, Phillip quickly brushed the stray thought aside. He still couldn't believe how taken he was by Melinda's alter ego. Certainly she was beautiful in a purely aesthetic sense - few would argue otherwise - but a small yet significant part of his brain kept calling foul. Fur and fangs aren't supposed to be sexy! He desperately hoped the attraction on his part stemmed from his love for Melinda and not some nascent fetish. *Probably both*, he thought grimly.

Another, more troubling thought occurred to him. While he certainly wasn't planning on dumping Melinda anytime soon things would get complicated if they ever did part ways - especially if the breakup was less than cordial. A werewolf ex could be a terrible thing. More to the point, would she trust him with her secret after they separated? Would she ultimately transform him against his will?

Lost in thought, Phillip continued down the hallway. The shadows grew thicker as he ventured deeper into the building, passing the cafeteria and teacher's lounge. The only sound was the squeak of his black dress shoes against the smooth vinyl floor. As he walked, he realized he'd need some kind of light. While he was capable of navigating the hallways by memory alone it wasn't easy. More to the point, he couldn't open his locker in near pitch darkness.

Suddenly, Phillip slapped himself on the head, chuckling. He dug around his pocket and produced a tiny flashlight attached to a keychain. He flicked it on experimentally. A small halo of pale blue light appeared in the gloom. Phillip frowned. It didn't provide much illumination. Still, it'd have to do.

A loud clang filled the hallways. Phillip yelped in surprise. He lost his grip on the flashlight and spent a few seconds fumbling for it in the air. Once he regained his hold on it he frantically scanned the space ahead of him. He saw nothing. Then there came a distant, frantic rattling. Phillip cocked his head, puzzled. It was vaguely familiar. It almost sounded as though...

...As though someone was trying to force open a locker door!

Righteous indignation filled Phillip ordinarily placid soul. Two years ago someone had broken into his locker and stolen his iPod. The thing hadn't been worth much, truth be told, but the memory still infuriated him. Phillip started walking - quietly but determinedly - in the direction of the sound. He wasn't sure what he'd do if he actually caught the thief. Hopefully he would just run for it. If not, well, he'd have a word with him. Phillip pounded his fist in his hand, nearly dropping the flashlight in the process.

Phillip turned a corner and stopped dead in his tracks.

A torturous metallic screech pierced the air as the intruder ripped the locker door from its hinges and hurled it to the ground. It hit the floor with a violent bang and skidded wildly away, reverberating like a broken cymbal. Phillip watched as it slid nosily into the shadows. He swallowed, and then turned back.

It wasn't human - not a chance. It was bipedal, but the proportions were all wrong and its hulking frame filled a space that could have accommodated three people. His flashlight's feeble beam could only il-

illuminate a tiny section of its massive back, which appeared to be covered in thick dark fur. He couldn't make out any more details and was strangely grateful for this fact. Whatever it was, was digging through the contents of his locker, breaking and tearing everything it could get a hold of - papers, pencils, books, pens, markers, and more.

Trembling, Phillip took a step back. He absentmindedly brushed his sideburn after he felt something small and heavy whiz inches away from his ear and hit wall behind him. Then, as though a switch had been flipped in his head, he relaxed. This wasn't the first time he'd stumbled upon a giant furry beast.

"Melinda?" he said with bemused relief.

The creature froze. Its head slowly swiveled. Two baleful, glowing red eyes narrowed. There was dull thump as it stepped forward, pivoting its enormous body to face him. Startled, Phillip shone his flashlight in its face, revealing the snarling, contorted visage of a lupine monster.

The relief evaporated. It wasn't Melinda.

The creature took another step. It blinked irritably and raised a paw to shield its eyes from the light. Not wanting to aggravate the beast in any way Phillip immediately flicked the flashlight off.

Darkness fell like a curtain. Phillip stood there - too afraid to move or even think. He could feel his heart throbbing in his chest and hear every breath he took, but his attention was entirely focused on the two savage red eyes suspended in the void. They moved closer, bobbing in a disconcertingly gentle wave in concert to the creature's booming steps. The craggy black wrinkles encircling the beast's eye sockets were just visible in the hellish red glow emanating from its eyes.

Phillip had lived a fairly sheltered life - a world where all needs were provided and few demands were made. He didn't understand danger. Not in the true sense. He knew violence, hatred, and death only through books and television. But now - standing in the dark mere feet away from a bloodthirsty werewolf - he understood. He wasn't just holding his life in his hands; it was slipping through his fingers, and if he didn't catch it soon he'd be lost. No one would catch it for him.

Phillip began backing away, taking each step as though expecting the floor to crumble beneath his heels. He moved down the hallway, keeping his gaze locked on the creature, which followed neither closing nor widening the precious gap between them. Every second passed with agonizing slowness. Phillip risked a glance behind him and saw only the dim, empty expanse of the hallway. All the classroom doors were locked and he seriously doubted he could beat the creature to one of the exits. Sooner or later the thing would tire of the game and attack. His only real option, he realized with a sinking heart, was to try reasoning with it. Assuming, of course, it could understand him. And be persuaded not to kill him.

He opened his mouth, searching for the words.

"I...I...please, don't hurt me."

His words had no apparent effect on the creature, which continued to advance.

"Do you understand me? Please. If you do, say something, give me a sign, anything!"

The creature hesitated this time. Its glowing red eyes flickered out and into existence as it blinked. Then with a renewed growl it continued its slow pursuit.

"You can understand me, right?" continued Phillip, drawing hope from the creature's momentary uncertainty. "I know you're a werewolf. I...I have a friend who's a werewolf. Her name is Melinda."

There was silence. Then, the beast issued a murderous snarl. Phillip barely had time to whisper 'Oh sh-' before it charged, ramming into him with the force of a speeding truck.

Phillip heard something crack as his body hit the hard vinyl floor; he wasn't sure if it was the floor or one of his bones. Regardless, it hurt like hell. But that pain was nothing compared to what came next. The beast tore at his chest and then bit into his shoulder. Phillip screamed, uselessly punching the monster's body.

The thing's jaws were like a hydraulic press, crushing skin, sinew, and bone with impunity. He could feel blood coursing down his torso and neck.

Then, Phillip heard someone call out his name. At first he thought it was just a hallucination or even the voice of dead relatives welcoming him to the afterlife, but the creature, apparently hearing it as well, froze. It released his shoulder and slowly turned in the direction of the voice. To his everlasting relief he felt the thing's ponderous bulk lift off his body, leaving him sprawled on the floor, broken and bleeding.

Phillip slowly rolled over on his side so that he was no longer resting on his ravaged shoulder. Dazed, half-conscious, tears rolling down his face, he peered up at the hallway and squinted. His glasses had been lost in the melee so the world around him was a constellation of blurs. Suddenly, a bright light appeared, emanating from down the hall. Grimacing, Phillip shielded his eyes and tried to make some sense of the scene before him. It looked like the beast was standing a couple of yards ahead, staring at the source of the light.

"What the fuck?" cried a voice.

Phillip's eyes widened. It was his sister, Christine!

To his horror the beast roared and loped down the hallway after her. There was a scream followed by the sound of frantic footsteps. The light vanished.

Phillip tried to get up but searing pain erupted in his mangled shoulder the moment he moved. He slumped to the floor, hissing through his teeth. He gazed miserably along the length the dirty, blood-splattered floor.

Then, he spotted something peculiar. There was a tiny flashing red light about a foot away from his face. Squinting his eyes, he made out the outline of a small rectangular object. The red light seemed affixed to one of its corners.

His cell phone.

Phillip slowly extended a shaking arm. The effort was excruciating, but he still managed to snatch it off the floor. Laughing deliriously, he tapped its screen, bringing up the main menu. Though dizzy from blood loss he managed to navigate his way to his contact list and selected Melinda's entry. He gingerly placed the device next to him and lowered his head. The ring tone played once. Twice.

"Hello? Phillip?

"Melinda?" he croaked.

"Yeah? Phillip? You okay?"

"...Emphatically no."

"W-What's wrong?"

Phillip felt...sleepy. His head was nodding.

"...Werewolf...at the school...attacked me," he wheezed.

"What?" cried Melinda from the other end.

There was no response.

"Phillip? Phillip! Say something!"

Phillip wasn't moving. The screen glowed forlornly in the darkness of the hallway for a moment and then slowly faded away.

* * *

Lily bent over and lowered her nose to the leaf-strewn ground. She walked along on her hands and knees, sniffing furiously. Cynthia, Heidi and Yvette silently watched her from a couple yards behind. Nobody laughed; they'd long since grown indifferent to the spectacle. Lily glanced back at the group and motioned them to follow. The three girls exchanged glances and complied.

"It's getting stronger," muttered Lily. "I...Sophie may have been hiding out here." She paused. "She followed the river to the school...backtracked a little west...and wound up here. I'm not surprised you didn't find her, Yvette. The area's too close to the school to risk searching it as a werewolf but too far away to smell her from the school as a human. But this is the first time I've come out here so, well," she shrugged.

"Clever bitch," remarked Cynthia.

"I think she did it by accident," said Heidi. "She wasn't stupid, but I wouldn't call her 'clever'."

"I'm just glad you smelled something before we transformed," said Yvette. "Otherwise we would have spent all night searching through the preserve an-"

"GIRLS!"

The four teenagers whirled around and saw Melinda running towards them.

"It's Phillip!" she shouted. "He's...I think Sophie's at the school and she attacked him!"

"What?"

"I got a call from Phillip and he...he said something about a werewolf and then he...his phone just went dead," she exclaimed, wringing her hands.

"Why the hell would she attack...oh shit," groaned Heidi.

"We'd better call the police," said Lily nervously.

"You don't think half the school already called 911?" said Cynthia. "We need to get down there and sort this out before the cops show up. Otherwise things are really going to get messy."

"Well, come on! Let's go!" cried Melinda, frantically waving in the direction of the high school.

The five of them started running.

Minutes later, the forest abruptly gave way to the empty green expanse of the soccer field. The girls stepped onto the grass and stared up at the cloudless night sky. The stars were plainly visible and, though not as bright or numerous as they might have been in the wild, quite stirring. The moon had waxed to a truly impressive size and had acquired an orange hue. However, their collective gaze was gradually and inevitable drawn downwards. Pinebrook High loomed before them, its dark form punctuated by a smattering of bright yellow lights situated near the parking lot.

Melinda hurried onto the field. Yvette followed after barely a moment's hesitation, soon joined by Lily, Heidi and Cynthia. If anyone had been watching, they would have been taken aback at their speed. They reached the school in under a minute.

"Okay, we know she's around," said Heidi, slowing to a jog as they approached the building. "The question is where."

"Umm..." said Lily, pointing. All heads turned.

The side entrance had been thoroughly smashed. The heavy wooden door lay several yards away and the wall around the frame had been torn apart. Concrete and drywall littered the grass.

"This just keeps getting better and better," said Melinda grimly as she stepped through the gaping hole.

The corridor was deserted. Distant, panicked screams and shouts could be heard in the direction of the auditorium. Almost as one the girls turned in the opposite direction of the commotion, sniffing the air.

"It's blood," whispered Lily.

"Phillip!" shrieked Melinda, who then shot down the hallway.

"Wait!" cried Yvette.

Melinda ignored her. After a moment's hesitation, Yvette chased after her, soon followed by the other three girls.

She found him on the floor slumped against the base of the lockers, surrounded by blood. She crouched down and extended a shaking hand, gently stroking his chest. Phillip stirred. He lifted his head, peering through squinted eyes. He scrabbled around the floor for something, presumably his glasses.

"Hello?" he croaked. There was fear in his voice.

"Phillip!"

"Oh thank God," he whispered, reaching out for her.

Melinda leapt forward and embraced him, inadvertently slamming Phillip into the hard metal locker doors.

"Easy, easy!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Sorry!" whimpered Melinda, instantly releasing him.

"Geez, deja-fucking vu, huh?" he muttered with more humor than anger.

Melinda stared down at Phillip. He looked as though he had been run through a meatgrinder. His shirt was now little more than a shredded mess stained crimson from the cuts covering his body. His left arm was broken or worse.

"Oh no," she moaned. "No, no, no..."

"It looks a lot worse than it is," said Phillip quickly.

"Bullshit," cried Cynthia. "You're lucky to be alive!"

Phillip glanced vaguely around. Several figures had appeared clustered around Melinda.

"Yeah, that thing really fucked me up," he conceded. "But I don't...think any of it is life-threatening. We need to get everyone out of here!"

"Too late for that," remarked Lily, looking over her shoulder down the hall.

"What...who was that anyways?" asked Phillip.

"Long story, so I'll give you the short version," said Melinda, resting her arm on bent knee. "It's a werewolf, but it's out of control."

"Out of control?"

"Yeah, we're going to..." Melinda hesitated "...Take care of things," she said, sighing. She turned back to the girls. "Somebody call an ambulance."

"As if about a dozen of those aren't already on the way given the ruckus," said Heidi nervously.

"Actually, I don't think he's going to need one of those," said Yvette.

"Are you crazy, Yvette?" exclaimed Melinda, glancing back at her. "Look at him!"

"I know," said Yvette quietly.

"You...you think he's going to die?"

"No, I didn't say that," said Yvette, shaking her head.

Lily, who was standing next to Yvette, suddenly started sniffing the air. Her eyes widened.

"Oh," said Lily.

"What? What?" shouted Melinda irritably. "What the fuck are you going on about?"

"I'm going to turn into werewolf, aren't I?" whispered Phillip, who had apparently been listening in.

Melinda slowly turned towards him. Her expression went from shock, confusion, relief, and then alarm in the span of a second. She reached down and tore his shirt and undershirt off in a single deft motion.

"Ah! Jeez, Melinda!" protested Phillip.

His lean, pale chest was an ugly crisscross of wicked claw marks. She ran a shaking hand along his chest.

"Damn it," she hissed. She took hold of Phillip's hand with her own and placed it on his chest.

"Here, feel," she said.

Phillip gingerly rubbed the ravaged tissue. He frowned, mildly surprised by how shallow the cuts were.

"Lycanthropic regeneration," said Melinda, her voice dire, her expression deadpan. "That's how you survived. It's already begun. I...you're not actually going to change yet; the next full moon is a couple of weeks away." She hesitated. "But if you've already started healing you should be fine in a couple of hours. Can...can you stand up?"

"I...I'll try."

Melinda nodded. She grabbed Phillip by the shoulders and lifted him - gently, but hastily - to his feet. She took a deep breath, and let him go. Though he teetered a bit at first Phillip managed to stay upright.

"Good. Get out of here as fast as you can," ordered Melinda.

"Wha-wai-....hold on," stammered Phillip. "What are you going to do? What if that thing finds me?"

"Stop the werewolf and if she finds you...run away."

"I...okay, fine," murmured Phillip. Suddenly, a look of panic overtook his face again.

"Sis!" he half-screamed.

"Sis?"

"My sister! Christine!" said Phillip frantically. "She saved me from that thing! She...she heard me screaming and...it left me and went after her! You gotta save her! There's no way she can outrun that thing!"

Melinda stared at him. Another distant scream echoed throughout the hall.

"How long ago was this?" she asked.

"I-I dunno...I think I blacked out after it went after Christine," Phillip gulped. "You don't think she's..."

"Don't even say it" hissed Melinda angrily. "We'll find Christine! Now go!"

"I...I'm coming too!"

"You're still too hurt. I know Christine is your sister but the best thing you can do for her now is stay alive. I'll call you when and if I find her."

"But..."

"Enough!" barked Melinda. She gave him a light push. "Get out of here!"

Her tone left no possibility for argument. Phillip reluctantly turned and started limping away. He had taken no more than three steps when he felt someone tap him on the shoulders.

"Almost forgot," said Melinda softly.

Her arms drifted over his shoulders. Smiling, she pulled him towards her, holding him gently by the back of his head. Before he could utter another word she pressed her lips against his. Phillip's body instinctively stiffened, then softened to the consistency of jelly. The terror and pain of the last hour were briefly subsumed by pure bliss.

Melinda slowly pried herself off of Phillip, who nearly fell over.

"Feel better?" she asked, steadying him.

Phillip nodded.

"Good. Now go!"

* * *

It didn't take long for them to locate Sophie. Scent aside, the screams, snarls, and inhuman growls coming from the auditorium gave ample indication to her whereabouts.

They were halfway down the hall when Cynthia stopped running.

"Hang on!" she called.

The other four girls skidded to a halt.

"What?" said Heidi.

"We should all change. Now," said Cynthia firmly.

"Here?" said Lily nervously. "At school?"

"How else are we going to stop her?" said Cynthia.

"She's right," said Heidi. "I mean, you've seen her, Melinda. I don't think any of us could beat her on our own." She paused. "Cept Yvette."

"But I can't change, remember?" said Yvette.

"Shit, that's right," hissed Heidi. She turned to Melinda. "I'm not sure we can do this without her," she said nervously.

"The four of us can't handle one newbie werewolf?" sneered Cynthia.

"You haven't seen her," said Melinda. "Let's try to talk her down first."

"Are you nuts?" said Cynthia. "You heard her mother. The girl is literally mentally unbalanced. Besides, you can't talk down a nine-foot tall, kill-crazy werewolf. I mean-"

"It worked once," said Yvette quietly.

Cynthia paused mid-tirade, staring at Yvette. She deflated a bit.

"Come on," said Melinda. "We're wasting time. I just hope she hasn't actually killed anyone."

With that she rushed down the corridor. The four girls exchanged uneasy glances and followed her.

Melinda staggered under her inertia as she turned a corner, nearly colliding with the wall. She saw the entrance to the auditorium at the end of the hall. The doors were wide open. A faint blue light emanated from within.

"Wait up, Melinda!"

Melinda half-flew half-fell through the gaping double doors. She slowly gazed upwards.

The student council had selected "Night Under the Stars" for the theme and had made impressive use of the allotted budget. The entire auditorium was bathed in the soft, azure glow of several stage lights. Near the center of the room a small disco ball had been hung between the rafters by an absurdly long string; tiny motes of scintillating white light dotted every surface of the cavernous room. A large, pale-yellow cardboard moon had been posted above the bleachers. Rows of tables laden with food and drink lined the east wall while clusters of small tables and chairs lay scattered around the west side. The center space was empty - presumably to function as the dance floor. All this barely registered with Melinda. Her attention was focused on the occupants of the room, and one in particular.

Whether not she had in fact grown since their last encounter was a moot point. Sophie towered...no, she *loomed* over everyone and everything in the auditorium. Her ebony-furred body was as dense and massive as a concrete slab and her arms and legs were like tree trunks. Enormous, leathery paws sporting bone-white talons danced menacingly in the air, poised to strike. Her slow, rhythmic breathing sounded like steam escaping a locomotive. She had cornered a group of students near the rear exit. They stood huddled together in abject horror, several couples hugging, staring at the monster through tear-filled eyes. Two of the braver students had stepped forward and spread their arms as though to shield the group from the inevitable attack.

Melinda felt a wave of horror engulf her juxtaposed with a bizarre tingle of excitement.

"Don't get any closer," she whispered.

"Wasn't...planning on it," came Heidi from behind.

Melinda swallowed as the rest of the Lycanthrope Club filed in around her.

"What do we do?" murmured Yvette.

The group stared at Sophie. She hadn't moved. She hadn't noticed their presence and had her back to them in any case. She seemed intent on her prey.

Melinda sniffed the air. Her eyes drifted downwards, instinctively drawn to a dark shape lying mere yards away. It was the body of a brunette girl lying face down on the floor. Melinda crouched and cautiously approached her, keeping her eyes on Sophie.

It was Christine.

Heart pounding, Melinda hurried over to her and knelt. She rolled her over and stifled a yelp. Christine's chest and neck had been torn open. She was lying in a pool of her own blood. Melinda pressed an ear against her chest and shut her eyes. To her everlasting relief she heard the distinctive lub-dup of a beating heart. It was quite strong, actually.

"I guess you and your brother do have something in common now," muttered Melinda.

"Melinda!" hissed Cynthia. "Is she alright?"

Melinda glanced back at the group and smiled weakly. She turned back to the auditorium, and froze.

Sophie was staring directly at her. Her feral red eyes blazed like demon suns crowned by devilishly pointed ears. She lurched forward, her ponderous footsteps shaking the auditorium.

"Sophie...listen to me," said Melinda, slowly rising.

Sophie didn't respond. She continued to advance.

"Whatever you're feeling right now you don't need to do this," said Melinda, raising hands. "I know you've been through a lot and you don't deserve it, but you don't have to hurt anyone. Please! We're here to help."

Sophie growled ominously, her deep, throaty voice echoing throughout the auditorium. The soft, jazzy music playing on the sound system somehow made the situation all the more terrifying.

"Shit!" hissed Melinda under her breath.

Melinda noticed that the group of trapped students were edging towards the exit as Sophie no longer seemed concerned with them. One by one the students slipped out the door and into the night. Somewhat to her horror, Melinda saw that more than a few of them were brandishing phones and had clearly been photographing or videotaping the whole affair.

Forget it. It's not the end of the world. We'll deal with it later.

Melinda turned her attention back to Sophie.

"Yvette," she began, keeping her eyes focused on Sophie. "Grab Christine and get her out of here," said Melinda, voice quivering yet charged with resolve. Her lips moved silently. "Everyone else, start changing."

Yvette nodded. She carefully sidestepped over to Christine, bent down and started pulling her towards the exit.

Then, Sophie charged Melinda.

The force of her attack sent the two of them tumbling across the floor slamming them into the bleachers, which shuddered violently under the impact. Sophie gripped Melinda's shoulders with her massive paws, pressing her against the metal surface. She leaned in closer, snarling, her rage-contorted lupine face mere inches from Melinda's.

Heidi was the first to reach them. The redhead hit the Sophie with a flying tackle. She might as well have tried to pull down a mountain for all the good it did, but it distracted Sophie. Lily came next. She ran up, grabbed Sophie by her right arm and twisted it in a complicated circle. Sophie yelped and dropped Melinda. Just as she was turning to deal with Heidi, Yvette appeared and rammed into her. Though smaller in stature than Heidi, Yvette actually managed to push Sophie back a foot or two. Cynthia soon joined the melee.

Melinda rose shakily to her knees and swore. She crawled a few feet away and then collapsed in a heap, clutching her chest. She winced once and then twice as her ribs popped back into place. She gazed up at the fight.

Cynthia, Heidi, and Lily were rapidly growing in size and stature, muscles bulging beneath their tightening clothes. Their hands were morphing into grotesque paw-like intermediaries between man and beast while their canines had lengthened into full-fledged fangs. However, their metamorphosis was not giving them an edge over Sophie. If anything, the pain of the transition was slowing them down; Yvette, though unable to transform, was still faring better than the other three.

Sophie bucked wildly, sending Heidi sprawling to the floor. Dazed, Heidi staggered to her feet only to be knocked senseless by a back-handed swat from a paw. Sophie turned, seized Lily and, even as the embattled girl gnawed at her arm, threw her to the floor and stomped on her, eliciting a blood-curdling crack. Cynthia sidestepped Sophie and started slashing at the enormous wolf-girl's back with her burgeoning claws while Yvette leapt up, grabbed a hold of Sophie's neck and managed to force Sophie down to her knees. For a moment it seemed as though Sophie had lost the advantage. Then with a roar that shook the foundation of the school Sophie reared back and sent both Cynthia and Sophie flying with a single, massive swipe of her arm. The two girls rolled along the hardwood floor a good ten feet before coming to a stop; neither of them

stirred when they did. The massive she-wolf growled ominously and started lumbering towards their unmoving forms. Her face was a mask of hate.

Melinda's own lips curled into a growl.

Sophie lifted a paw to strike. Suddenly, there was a sound somewhere between a snarl and a bark.

Melinda had risen. She stood there, panting, chest heaving up and down. There was series of agonizing cracks as her jaw bulged grotesquely. Her nose peeled back and stiffened, growing dark and coarse. Then, her entire face - her chin, cheeks, nose, and forehead - stretched like putty molded by unseen hands. Melinda lifted two trembling arms and felt her warped face. She broke into a manic, inhuman grin and started chuckling hysterically.

The growth traveled down her arms, inflating her triceps, biceps, and hands to twice their previous size. Her shoulders and back swelled, adding inch after inch to her height. Melinda felt her T-shirt pressing against her chest, clinging to her like an undersized wetsuit. Tighter and tighter it grew until she could take no more. Melinda tore the shirt from her body, brushed aside its tattered remains and examined herself. There wasn't an inch of fat or flab - only tight, sinewy muscle. More and more articles of clothing - jeans, bra, panties, shoes, socks - exploded from her bulk as she grew. Before long she was completely nude. Ebony fur blossomed all over her expanding body - thick, luxurious fur, dark as midnight. Her ears twitched, folded into sharp points, and traveled up her head. Twin yellow flames erupted in the darkness as her eyes changed color and started to glow with an inner light.

By now Melinda had transformed more times than she could count, but this was *different*. She stared down at her hands. Tiny bulges appeared on her fingertips. At first they seemed innocuous enough but then they started to grow, turning the surrounding skin an angry red. Her fingers stretched outward while her thumbs curled back. Blood seeped out her nails. Then with a sickening crunch Melinda's claws burst from her fingers. She curled and uncurled her paws, watching in fascination as they emerged and retracted from their sheaths.

Melinda laughed.

The change progressed. Her feet lengthened, pushing her heels farther up her legs until fully digitigrade. She felt her skull contract as her jaw and nose lengthened in tandem. A tiny nub appeared above the small of her back as her tailbone pushed its way out of her body, ultimately forming her tail. There was pain, yes - excruciating pain - but Melinda didn't care. She drank in every sensation of the change no matter how terrible, savoring it, cherishing it.

Then, like a beautiful dream slowly but inevitably giving way to wakefulness, the transformation came to a close. Melinda lifted her head and bayed in triumph.

Sophie crouched low, snarling, regarding the newcomer with caution. Melinda stared at her, bared her teeth, and returned her snarl. The two werewolves began circling each other. In the dim blue light of the auditorium they were all but each others' mirror image. Only their eyes - Sophie's a fearsome scarlet red, Melinda's a deep, feral yellow - and difference in size distinguished them. Then, as though prompted by some unseen signal, they charged, colliding in a tangled mass of fur, flesh, talon and fang.

A cacophony of bellowing roars and inhuman snarls echoed throughout the auditorium drowning out the soft music still playing through the speakers. Claws flashed in the air drawing explosions of blood. Teeth gnashed against muscle eliciting brief but pained yelps. There was no finesse or restraint. They twisted and snaked around each other with reckless abandon, seeking that one final, fatal bite.

At first they seemed evenly matched. Then, slowly but surely, Melinda began to take the advantage. Although stronger, Sophie was already injured and couldn't match Melinda's speed, agility and sheer ferocity. For every blow she landed Melinda answered with two. For every blow she dodged Melinda evaded three. And every time she managed to get a hold of her Melinda would simply wriggle out of her grasp. Blood

dribbled down her fur from cuts so deep they had yet to fully regenerate. Pain was making her slow and clumsy.

Sensing her opponent was weakening, Melinda leapt at Sophie. Too tired to dodge or deflect the attack Sophie reached out and wrapped her arms around Melinda as she smacked into her. To Sophie's mild surprise Melinda made no attempt to escape. Not questioning her good fortune she hefted Melinda into the air and *squeezed*. Ignoring the mounting pressure around her ribs Melinda leaned forward and clamped her jaw around Sophie's neck.

The two of them stood there for a moment, quivering. Then, Melinda felt Sophie's arms slump. The massive she-wolf crumpled to the ground with a dismal whine.

Melinda glowered over Sophie's unmoving body. She raised a blood-splattered talon and licked it. Her black lips slowly curled into a wicked smile. Her ears twitched. She glanced down at Sophie's recumbent form and listened quietly. She could hear breath - shallow as it was - quite clearly.

Melinda dropped to all fours and padded over to Sophie. She sniffed her cautiously. Satisfied that she was incapacitated she leaned in closer. Her eyes ran up her stomach, her chest, her shoulders, her neck, and finally her face. Sophie's left cheek was battered and bruised and her forehead and muzzle were marred by a pair of long, ugly claw marks.

Sophie stirred. Her eyes fluttered open. Melinda's own yellow orbs widened in surprise, and then narrowed. She seized Sophie by the throat and pressed her against the floor. Sophie gurgled incoherently, utterly helpless.

It could have ended right there and then. Melinda could have snapped Sophie's neck and killed her. It was that close.

But then, the glow in Sophie's eyes faded. Melinda looked down and caught a glimpse her image reflected in twin pools of red, and froze. Heart pounding, she stared down at her. She felt no pulse. She heard no breath. There was a...stillness about her.

All rage, bloodlust, and frenzy evaporated in an instant.

"No..." whispered Melinda hoarsely.

She released Sophie's neck. She gently ran her trembling paws along Sophie's body. Somehow, she knew there was still life left in her. But not much. And it wouldn't last long.

Terrified, uncertain, guilt-wracked, Melinda glanced around and behind her. There were some figures in the auditorium but they seemed miles away, unable to help. She turned her attention back to Sophie.

"I didn't...I mean, I was trying to protect my friends and...it was instinct and I..." she stammered, tears budding in her yellow eyes. "Maybe...maybe the pills?" she murmured. "No...No," she shook her head. "Too late now. No point."

"Come on, damn it," she shouted suddenly, glaring down at Sophie. "You're a werewolf! I've seen werewolves get disemboweled and survive! Don't give up! You deserve better than this."

Not knowing what else to do, Melinda reached down and hugged Sophie's body, barely managing to wrap her paws around the wolf girl's torso.

"Please," she pleaded. "Don't go. Don't go..."

As she laid there, sobbing, a bizarre sensation enveloped her. It was akin to the drowsy vertigo occasionally felt while falling asleep. Yet it was somehow deeper, more intense, as though some unseen force was at work rather than simple lethargy. She resisted the pull for a moment but then, out of desperation, dependency or some combination of the two, gave in. The last thing she experienced before blacking out was Yvette's frantic, distant voice.

* * *

A breeze wafted in the dry afternoon air, sending wave after wave of bent wheat stalks rolling across the plain. Endless fields stretched on as far as the eye could see. Above, the radiant yellow sun hung in the cloudless blue sky. It was always summer here.

Melinda was walking along a small dirt road that lay between two fields. Ruts could be seen running along the path's cracked, umber surface though there was no vehicle in sight. Aside from the whisper of the wind and her own footsteps, all was silent.

Melinda slowly came to a stop. She gazed around in bemusement, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare.

"What in the...?" she whispered.

She had no idea where she was, how she had gotten here; indeed, why she was walking along the road to begin with. The last thing she remembered was staring down at Sophie's prone, bleeding form. Now she was in the middle of a farm, ranch, or some other rural setting heaven knew where. She was vaguely aware that she should be shocked or even panicking. Yet for some reason, felt remarkably unperturbed by the bizarre turn of events. Her mind simply wouldn't register the gravity the situation.

She took a couple steps towards the field on her left and stood on her toes, trying to peer over the wheat, but couldn't see anything beyond. Giving up, she lowered herself and turned back to the path.

A small farmstead had appeared out of nowhere several yards ahead.

"Okay," said Melinda slowly. Everything here felt hazy, indistinct, and uncertain. Come to think of it, was she still a werewolf? She glanced down where her hand should be and saw nothing. Well, not exactly. There was something - a palm and five digits - but she couldn't articulate whether it was a hand or a paw.

Melinda shrugged and headed towards the farm.

The place seemed completely deserted. She glanced over at the barn, the chicken coop, the mailbox, and the house. The scene was...vaguely familiar.

She trotted over to the barn and peered inside. The shadowy interior held little of interest -collapsed bales of straws, barrels, rusted pitchforks, metal troughs, and other accoutrements. She circled around the building. There was a field of wizened yellow grass facing the opposite end of the barn and a field of corn beyond that. Two silos loomed in the distance; Melinda was certain they hadn't been there a few seconds ago.

Then, she noticed someone was standing in the grass staring at the cornfield. The figure appeared to be a short, female teenager wearing a dusty but serviceable pair of overalls over a white long-sleeve shirt and a straw hat. Look up the term 'country-girl' and one would probably find her portrait.

"Sophie?" said Melinda, bewildered.

Sophie didn't respond.

"Sophie?" repeated Melinda.

"Go away!" cried Sophie with a fierceness that startled Melinda.

"I..." Melinda paused, uncertain what to say. "Sophie, you...you have to come back with me."

"Why should I? said Sophie petulantly. She still hadn't turned to face Melinda. "Y'tried to kill me!"

"Well...in all fairness, so did you," said Melinda, smiling weakly.



"No!" snapped Sophie. She whirled around. For the first time in nearly a month Melinda saw her human face. It was full with sadness and hate.

"You caused all this! You turned me into a werewolf!"

Melinda felt her stomach turn to ice.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Sophie," managed Melinda. "But I told you; I had no choice!"

"Bullshit!" growled Sophie.

Melinda, to her surprise, was taken aback by this. It occurred to her that Sophie rarely, if ever, swore, giving the expletive far more impact than it usually warranted.

"Maybe...maybe I did, but I was...I was..." said Melinda, struggling to find the words. "You were trying to keep me away from Phillip!"

There was silence. The hot summer breeze picked up again, filling the air with the sound of rustling stalks of corn. Melinda mulled over this, confused and bewildered, until at last it dawned on her.

"Oh," she said.

Sophie turned to Melinda. Tears were streaming down her freckled cheeks. She was blushing.

"He doesn't know," said Sophie, answering Melinda's unspoken question. "He doesn't even know I exist."

"No, Sophie!" said Melinda frantically. "It's not like that!"

"S-So you and him ain't an item?"

"Well, um, yes."

"I-I know. I smelled y'all up in your b-bedroom that one night," said Sophie resentfully.

"You were...oh, that explains the backpack," said Melinda absently. "But that's not the reason I transformed you!" she added quickly. "It was that stupid rule we...I made up. We got rid of that rule, Sophie, an-"

"Y-You knew! You saw me talkin' to him under th' bleachers!" accused Sophie.

"I had no idea! Honest!" exclaimed Melinda. "I...I barely noticed you."

There was silence.

"That don't surprise me none," said Sophie quietly, losing some steam. "Nobody ever does. Phillip didn't. I finally worked up the nerve to talk to 'em and then you swoop in, miss super athlete, miss popular. Ain't fair."

"Miss popular? Sophie, a year ago I was a social outcast. Trust me, I know what it's like."

Sophie glared at her but there was glimmer of curiosity in her demeanor.

"So, what changed?"

"What changed? I became a goddamn werewolf!" exclaimed Melinda. "I mean, it wasn't that simple. The transformation helped. A lot. But I...up until then I never put myself out there. I never took any risks, never joined any clubs, never took the time to meet new people. I'm really not sure if it was the change itself or the...or how it happened."

"How it...happened?" said Sophie, confused.

Melinda sighed as unpleasant memories resurfaced.

"It was almost two years ago," she began. "My family and I went on a camping trip and I got lost in the woods on the very first night. I fell into this sinkhole trying to find my way back and there was this...thing down there. I guess it was a werewolf. Maybe the last one on Earth." Melinda shuddered a little at the recollection. "Can you imagine it, Sophie? Falling down a deep, dark pit in the middle of a forest at midnight? Lying there, you hear something breathing and see two giant red eyes staring at you?" She chuckled humorlessly. "Stupid question. Of course you could. You've been there. But this thing, it tried to kill me, Sophie. I'm sure of it." She shook her head. "But it only managed to bite me. I changed into a werewolf the next full moon, but even before that, well, it made me appreciate just how little I'd actually lived. I guess that's what a near-death experience does to a person. Remember what I told you out in the preserve? Life can get better just as quickly as it goes bad and the only way to lose is quitting when you're down."

"But things can't get better for me!" wailed Sophie. "Even if I came back I'd just be stuck as a werewolf." She paused. "It weren't all that bad, I admit," she added. "But I'd still be alone most the time with you and the rest of the gals livin' your lives. I don't want to be alone anymore."

"You won't be alone and you won't be stuck," said Melinda. "We've figured out why you can't change back!"

Sophie looked up at Melinda, her expression flickering between hope and skepticism.

"You have?" she said.

"It's your medication, Sophie," said Melinda. "You haven't been taking your pills - it's that simple! It's been messing with your emotions, which has been messing with your ability to transform!"

"A-Are you sure?"

"...Pretty sure," admitted Melinda. "But even if we're wrong we've found another way! It's risky, I won't lie, but it *will* work! And you're not alone - not anymore. You're one of us now. You're part of our pack!"

"Some pack," murmured Sophie. "All y'all do is quarrel and yell. Just like ma' and pa'."

"That's what people do when they're afraid, Sophie," replied Melinda, wringing her hands. "We were worried about you and what might happen if we couldn't change you back. It means we care about you! All of us!"

Sophie frowned. She clutched her left shoulder with her right arm, looking away.

"I'm sorry things...didn't work out with Phillip," said Melinda, lowering her head. "If I had any idea you were interested I..." she hesitated, and then shook her head. "No, I really, really like him. He's a great guy, Sophie, and I don't blame you for hating me for taking him." She took a deep breath. "But don't do this. Come back. If not for us, for your parents. For your mom. I met her and, well, she misses you. She misses you a lot."

Melinda extended a hand.

There was a moment of silence. Sophie gazed at the hand. Then, she looked up and slowly smiled at Melinda.

* * *

The whistle's shrill cry cut through the excited cries and catcalls. The team stopped mid-play and turned to the coach.

"That's enough! Practice is over. Wrap it up!"

The lacrosse players lowered their sticks and started moving off the field, converging around bleachers. All except one.

Melinda looked up at the sky. It wasn't a particularly pleasant day. The sky was dull and dark and a chill wind was blowing in from the west. Winter was fast approaching. There had been some concerns over the scarcity of prey again, but Melinda wasn't worried. In any case, she was looking forward to romping through the snow.

"Hey Melinda!"

The call had come from the opposite end of the field. Four girls were standing at the edge of the forest surrounding the campus. Melinda smiled brightly and waved at them.

"I'll be right there!" she cried.

She hefted her stick over her shoulders and hustled towards them. She was halfway there when a different voice came from behind her.

"Hey, where you going?"

Melinda glanced back at Christine. The brunette teenager was standing there several yards away in her lacrosse uniform, frowning, hands on her hips.

"The pack," said Melinda, gesturing ahead.

"Oh!" said Christine, suddenly excited. "Hang on, lemme put my stick away. Here, I'll take yours."

"Thanks," said Melinda, handing it to her.

"So, um, this is it," said Christine with nervous cheerfulness as she tucked the two crosses under her arm. "I'm, uh, I'm going to turn into a werewolf."

"Hmmm-hmm," confirmed Melinda.

"Does it, uh, does it really hurt that much?" asked Christine with a degree of trepidation.

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't," said Melinda carefully. "But it'll be a lot easier for you than it was for us. Definitely not as bad as what happened at the dance. And we'll be there to help you through it."

"I hope not," shuddered Christine. "That whole...thing with Sophie won't happen to me, right?"

"Are you on any medication or have any psychological issues?"

"...Does a fear of heights count?"

"You'll be fine," laughed Melinda.

Christine smiled.

"Kay. See ya!"

She sprinted off. Melinda's ears twitched. She sniffed the air.

"You know, she's a lot like you Heidi," said Melinda, not bothering turning around.

"Hah, she wishes."

Melinda smirked as Heidi, Cynthia, Lily, and Yvette approached.

"So, how'd it go down with your parents," said Cynthia.

"Better than I thought it would," said Melinda quietly. "My dad took it a lot harder than my mom. Wasn't expecting that. Anyways, we went through this whole 'you're still our daughter' routine and they promised to keep everything a secret. They're still not too thrilled about my, er, um, moonlight excursions. They've given me a curfew."

"You're kidding!" snickered Lily.

"Nope, 'fraid not," sighed Melinda. She shivered slightly as a gust of cold wind swept across the field. "Two o'clock - one o'clock if it's a school night."

"Could be worse," said Yvette.

The girls stood together in silence, grinning faintly, their gazes drifting everywhere but each other. Even with the dismal sky and icy wind, it was a perfect moment. Life's horizon was clear and all their troubles were behind them. They were not so naïve to think all would be well from here on, but for one magical moment they felt confident they would meet any future challenge no matter how daunting.

"So, you think Christine's ready?" said Cynthia.

"Ready as she'll ever be," said Melinda. "I'm a little worried about Rachael, but I think she'll be alright."

"Ten new members," said Heidi, whistling. "Not including Sophie. How's she doing, anyhow?"

"Great," said Melinda. "Though, if she doesn't stop apologizing to everyone I think I'm going to have to do something drastic. Her parents, well, Sophie says they're making progress. The family counseling is helping." She smiled. "The ironic thing is they would have never started resolving their problems if Sophie hadn't gone missing. Guess one good thing came out of my stupid rule."

"What about the cops?" asked Cynthia, turning to Yvette.

"They're still investigating Sophie's return and the incident at the dance," said Yvette, shrugging. "I'm not sure if they believed our testimony - especially since it conflicts with half of the other witnesses' accounts - but I think we're in the clear. A couple of photos and videos of the dance are still online but over half the people who've seen them think it's a hoax. Who's going to believe that a bunch of werewolves tore up the school?"

"Yeah," laughed Lily.

"Oh, one more thing," said Melinda. "I'm...not going to be joining the rest of the club tonight."

She was met with surprised stares.

"You can't skip out on this!" exclaimed Heidi, almost angrily. "It's new member night! Besides, where else could you go?"

"Oh, no, I'm going to the woods alright," said Melinda. "I just won't be meeting with the rest of you. Phillip and I, er...I'm going to walk him through his first full moon...privately."

Their astonished scowls were instantly replaced with knowing, leering grins.

"Not one word," said Melinda, preempting any insinuating remarks.

"Aww, you're no fun," said Heidi, folding her arms in an exaggerated pout.

"Anyways, we need to get going," said Cynthia. "Catch you later."

The three cheerleaders walked away, leaving Yvette and Melinda by themselves.

"Have you figured out what happened between you and Sophie?" inquired Yvette.

"No, not really," said Melinda, shaking her head. "I mean, I want to say we spoke...telepathically, but it didn't feel like that."

"How would you know what telepathy feels like?" asked Yvette rhetorically.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," said Melinda. "It was...as though we were both taken to a different plane of consciousness or something. I don't know how else to describe it." She chuckled humorlessly. "That certainly wasn't in any of the legends. After all this time, after everything that's happened, we still barely understand what we really are."

Yvette took a deep breath, then sighed. "Melinda, what do you think will come of all this?"

"Huh?" said Melinda.

"Us, Cynthia, Heidi, Lily, Sophie, Christine, Phillip, everyone who has been touched by this power," said Yvette, suddenly dead serious. "Haven't you realized what has happened here has the potential to change the course of human history?" She motioned at the girls. "What will happen when they marry and have children? Or when their children have children? We're the start of a whole new generation, Melinda - a whole new race." She paused. "The decisions we make now will determine the future of millions of people."

There was silence.

"Any decision has the potential to affect millions of people," said Melinda in a distant voice. "None of this would've happened if I hadn't gotten lost in the woods." She sighed. "Still, you have a point. We have to start thinking on a larger scale. We need to start acting like...like..."

"Adults?" supplied Yvette.

"Hah! Right," said Melinda. "And that's enough philosophical musing for one day." She gave Yvette a little salute. "Sayonara."

"See you tonight," said Yvette, grinning. "Or rather, I won't."

* * *



That night, two dark forms danced and played among the trees until the morning light filtered down through the branches and warmed the earth. The two lovers sat together, watching nothing in particular. They could feel the creep of time pulling them back to the world, but for now they just laid there. The future didn't frighten them anymore.

The End

