

The Forest

A city just like any other – barely more than a town in the eyes of most people: there were no great landmarks, no real nightlife (this place was surely a city that *did* sleep), neither the home nor the birthplace of any famous people, never a major sporting or cultural even; all it had to its name was a collection of the most creative and desperate municipal slogan writers in the land.

The one reason anyone ever came to this backwater – other than the demands of business and family – was to see the great forest which bordered the town on three sides: it stretched far beyond the reaches of the human eye, further than any horizon one cared to observe, populated by thousands upon thousands of pines, firs, and other conifers, as well as a smattering of other species that stood as tall and proud as any despite their minority. Paths wended their respective ways through these trees in all directions, though barely a handful did more than loop back towards town after a few kilometres. Thus, the overwhelming majority of these hundreds of thousands of acres was untamed, uncharted wilderness to which the sight of a human face was a most alien occurrence.

There were, of course, many tales dating back to the arrival of the first people in the area telling of wild men, monsters, demons dwelling among the ancient trees, ready to feast upon unwary travellers who stray too far from the safety of civilisation. Created, altered, and recounted around the campfires of centuries past, few beyond young children still believed in their truthfulness, though still they lived on, preserved for their history, their cultural importance. When repeated nowadays, so often with tones of deep scepticism and irony, the common habit was to conclude with a mysterious ‘but who knows what might be out there...’

Night was falling. The sun’s last rays were glimmering weakly on the western horizon, handing over the task of illuminating this portion of the planet to the best human technology had so far devised. Lights were flickering on across the dull, boxy cityscape, illuminating the homes and businesses of the hundred-thousand-or-so inhabitants; most were either in their houses or apartments already or were heading in that direction, a few were working on into the night – by choice or otherwise, while some were venturing out to enjoy what little evening entertainment the settlement thought fit to provide.

One lone figure, however, was shunning the light and warmth, instead venturing away from the houses on the edge of the land where humans ruled and entering nature’s waiting embrace. They slunk unseen into the shadow of the trees that stood sentinel on the border between civilisation and wilderness, quickly lost from the view of any would-be snooper. They eschewed the routes carved out through the forest, even those which led to its far edge, favouring a path which they, and they alone, knew: this was an important night, and no regular human knew – or could be allowed to know – the destination of this journey.

On and on they walked, the darkness deepening around them with each purposeful stride away from the town which was becoming ever more distant. No more could the sounds of traffic be heard, no belching factories, no pumping music: this was truly nature’s domain.

After several hours, by which time not a trace of human proximity remained, they had reached a clearing centred about a hillock: the first noticeable change in terrain since the journey’s outset. Stepping out from the shade of the trees into the post-dusk, the figure revealed themselves to be a young man, casually dressed – some might have said ‘provocatively’, given the spikes adorning

his jacket's shoulders – and apparently not in the slightest prepared or equipped for the predicament in which he had put himself; surely, something amiss was occurring here.

Up the rise he strode, only stopping once he had found its low summit. This place, this very spot, was of utmost importance to him: it was here he came every month, here where it happened, here where he revealed his true self to the world, here where that self could be accepted without question.

Gazing eastward, a sliver silver had appeared and had been growing all the while. The young man's eyes were fixed upon the glow as it revealed more and more of its eerie, pockmarked visage with every passing second. The shadows, which had vanished at sunset, reasserted themselves under Luna's watchful eye, stretching like ghostly fingers across the circle of open ground at the centre of which he stood, waiting. Any moment now. Any moment...

As she rose above the very top of the tallest tree, revealing herself in all her celestial glory, a jolt shot down the man's spine, fear and excitement coursing through him at what was an instant from beginning: he would suffer, oh, yes, how he would suffer, but it had never not proved worthwhile to endure a few short moments of pain.

It was only at the moment he became bathed from scruffy-haired head to sneaker-clad foot in moonlight that the changes began: all were simultaneous, yet somehow seemed individually observable to him through both his real and metaphorical eyes.

He knelt briefly, hastily untying his laces with fingers that were growing ever less dextrous by the passing second and tossing them aside: he had learned the hard way that cramping his feet during his transformations made for unnecessary and avoidable agony. Even within the few seconds it took to loosen the knots his feet had begun to stretch, filling the insides of their shoes and making it no easy task to prise them off. Once free, they continued to grow longer and longer though remaining just as broad as ever; his toes in particular lengthening to the point where they bore all his weight.

He toppled forward, catching his fall with hands which, too, were growing a little bigger and considerably stronger. His fingernails were extending also, thickening and sharpening as they did until they passed the threshold to becoming claws; they dug into the soft earth, gouging four short, shallow trenches in the lush green grass which would be laden with dew come morning.

His pants were being torn asunder as his legs, like so much else, were lengthening and strengthening, forcing the feeble, inadequate fabric to yield to their demands for greater space. His waistband was pushed down over his hips as a tail erupted from the base of his spine, sprouting short, dark fur across its surface.

It was sad that his favourite jacket had to meet the same fate as the pants for which he had somewhat less affection – its seams split open as his shoulders and chest broadened, thick with rampant, feral muscle – yet it felt only right that something of such sentimental value should be sacrificed on such a night, that its last outing to be experiencing the thrill of the hunt.

Though every element of the transformation was painful, the garbled yowl that erupted from his throat was borne from the most agonised part of his body: his head. His entire skull was reshaping! His ears were sliding up the sides of his head, becoming longer, pointed, and significantly more receptive to the sounds around them. The lower half of his face was pushing outwards, extending into his field of view where he could watch as his nose darkened, becoming like a twitching mole upon his snout. The teeth lining his gums were sharpening to deadly points, four of

them extending far beyond the others to become the fangs that would pierce the flesh of his hapless prey.

With a great snarl, he dug his newfound claws into the frail fabric of his shirt, ripping it to shreds with terrifying ease. The points of those erstwhile blunt, flimsy nails caught at the toughened, fur-covered skin of his chest; his blood dripped once, twice, three times to the ground, the first to be spilled that night.

He collapsed onto the soft grass, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he panted. His transformations were never easy – mentally as well as physically – and never failed to sap him of energy; he would need a few minutes to recover, to become aware of his surroundings and his senses, to let his new consciousness take over.

When he was ready, his eyes snapped open: keen, golden, wolfish eyes. He raised his head, he listened: to a human, the clearing would have been silent but for their own breathing and the whisper of the breeze through the branches of the nearby pines; to him, though, the stillness was alive with sound, both from his own body and the surrounding forest.

He sniffed the air: there was prey close at hand, an ample supply at that, both easy pickings and creatures which would pose a greater challenge for him.

He sniffed again and smelled the others, his fellows who had likewise ventured deep into the untouched forest this night to transform. He would run with these wolfish friends. He would hunt with them for a time, share the spoils with them, before returning to his solitary stalking of the territory that was his for one frenzied night every month. He knew not who these others were when in their 'normal' state, nor did they know him: each would return to the lonely transformation spot they had picked out for themselves to reluctantly return to their weak, puny human bodies before beating a private retreat to their homes among their unwitting neighbours, dishevelled but exhilarated.

His ears pricked, standing to attention as he heard a distant call from one of his kin, the first to be ready to begin the night's work, the evening's play.

"AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" he yelled to the dark heavens, head tilted skywards, back arched.

All around him, his fellows answered one after another until the air was filled with the cries of wolves eager for the monthly romp to start.

A flash of grey on the edge of the clearing! One of his neighbours was already on the prowl. With his mouth hanging open in an eager pant, he took off after the other wolf, following along in pursuit of the first kill of the evening.

The hunt was on!