

## **A Night to Forget**

—Blood pumped swift and hot under the bright moonlight. He pushed his way through branches and brush, feet pounding into the dirt as he sprinted through the forest. The wind froze the sweat on his face like ice, his flesh burning with the fire of exertion. Thought failed him, instincts of fear and survival pushing him to sprint without even considering what he ran from. Like a drum sounding a war beat, his racing heart joined pace with his steps, the world flying past as he met the wind and flew unerringly over the natural land. Night shrouded the forest around him, but he avoided roots, logs, and hazards deftly, luck and instinct guiding his steps.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a tree half-fallen and leaning against another. In a moment of unprecedented clarity, he dashed to the side and dove into the hollow left by pulled roots. For a while, curled up in the claustrophobic dark, he hid his breath and heard only the crashing of his pulse in his ears. He closed his eyes and let the rush fade, sinking into the dark of the cloudy night as he hid.

Eyes adjusting to the darkness, he collected his thoughts. Though he ran as though the gates of hell opened behind him, he knew not what pursued him. He searched his memory for what spurred the chase but found only an empty nothingness. Moving silently, he glanced from his cover and looked for hunters behind him. Thinking on it, he could not recall how the chase began in the first place.

“Where the hell am I?” he murmured to himself. Wracking his brain, he found nothing. It seemed as though his life began mere moments ago mid-sprint. Cold sweat dripped from his brow, his mind whirling with confusion. He slapped himself across the face once, blinking and finding himself not in a dream. Even so, no memories reached his mind, his past an enigma even to himself.

Grasping at straws, he produced his phone and wallet. His license showed Alex Nathaniel, a twenty-three-year-old man with a young face and dark-brown hair. It seemed an unfamiliar face, but with another thought, he realized he had no idea what he ought to look like. Elucidating the matter, he clicked on his phone. He punched in 5781, clicking unconsciously... *How did I remember that code?* He wondered, the motion so ingrained that it did not require memory. *Could a similar strategy bring me home; or somewhere familiar?* No, his sense of direction was thrown, the surrounding forest unfamiliar.

Pale blue light filled the hollow space, the screen at full brightness and stinging his eyes in the dark. However, his camera proved the picture on his license correct, if slightly outdated. Dirty and marked with sweat and little cuts, he raised a hand to his square jaw, blue eyes searching around alien features. An unzipped red sweater hung from his shoulders, an orange t-shirt stained by leaves and mud beneath it. *I suppose I'm Alex, then.* It seemed right, but finding his own named did a great deal to satiate the void of his past.

Alex wore no visible head wounds, nor did he have the dizziness of drugs. The only thing out of the ordinary was a mark on his forehead. Like a dripping thumbprint, a black stamp was affixed above his brow, seemingly drawn with dark ash. He licked his finger and wiped at it, but it remained a part of his skin like a tattoo. Furrowing his brow, he wondered what had possessed him to get such ugly ink.

As suddenly as the light from his phone filled the space, it blinked out. "Dammit!" he hissed, furiously pressing every button on the device before accepting that it was dead. "Come on!" he shouted, resisting the urge to throw it against the ground.

He could follow his name and license to find who he was. But now, that was little help. Something forced him to sprint through these woods, and he could not shake the feeling that it still threatened him. Keeping himself low, he crept for an area ahead. A crack behind him and a low growl confirmed his fears, freezing him in place. Searching the darkness, he met the glint of two predator eyes.

“I don’t know how you’re still alive. But don’t think you’ll escape me again, rat!” a voice growled, emerging from the wolf-like eyes.

A shiver ran down Alex’s spine, primordial instincts simultaneously locking his knees and pushing him to flee. Joints stiff, he managed a step backwards, searching the shadows for the creature that stalked him. Unconsciously, he grasped a thick, dead branch beside him, the closest he had to a weapon.

The action only seemed to amuse the beast. Rising from all fours, it stood almost eight feet tall, even with a hunched posture. It stepped forward, foliage giving way to a cowering form and dark-russet fur glinting in the moonlight. Off-white fangs shone through the inky blackness as a smile formed on its muzzle. Alex could hardly believe his eyes as the beast of fables stepped unignominously and inarguably into the open. Neither animal or man, the werewolf stood on its hind legs with back hunched and head lupine. Its eyes shone with an intelligent, malevolent light, body inhumanly large and powerful.

“So that’s what the hex did... interesting,” the creature mused, his voice rough and guttural as if twisted unnaturally from bestial mouthparts into human words. Snapping the branch from the tree, Alex held the stick defensively, ineffectually holding it out like a spear. “Hah, what’s the matter, Alex; can’t use your own fangs?” he laughed, pausing with amusement. “Don’t worry, I’ll

gladly give you my claws if yours are missing,” he said with a smirk, flexing his muscular arm, pointed with lethal black claws.

As the beast stepped forward, Alex took up a combat stance, breath catching with fear even as his subconscious seemed prepared. A glance showed how one-sided, but running seemed just as pointless. With murderous intent, it stepped within reach and drew back an arm.

*A swipe from the left, aimed for my neck.* Alex knew not how, but he could predict the attack before it could begin, as though he had seen it a hundred times. Arm raised to block the blow, he attempted to dodge, but his brain worked faster than his body could. A yelp escaped his throat as the claws tore into his arm. The pain echoed deep into his body, flesh and muscle torn as hot blood spilled into the mud. Thrown by the force of the blow, he struck the tree beside him. However, his attack connected as well, the branch cracking against the beast’s face. It growled and stumbled back, Alex putting pressure on the wound and gritting his teeth through the pain.

Spurred by the hot agony in his arm, he ran directionless from the predator. Blood trickled from the open wound, glimmering in the moonlight like a trail of coins towards him. It was hardly needed, the swift, enraged steps of the creature following behind him. *He’ll pounce once he’s close enough.* Again, he wondered how he knew its hunting patterns, but pushed the worry aside and focused instead on survival. Over his panicked panting, he heard the bounds of the wolf closer behind him.

Close enough, a chill ran down his spine, and he dove right. Perfect timing, as the werewolf pounced for him, missing and sailing into the brush as Alex dodged and stumbled away. Stumbling and briefly falling into the mud, he made distance and pushed through brush and branches. Such a maneuver would not work again. Hiding from the beast’s superior senses would be difficult, but

outrunning it impossible. Ahead was a large, mossy boulder standing within the forest, the woods only thickening beyond it. A brief window existed before the pursuing creature would see him, and he ducked for the stone, crawling into a cramped hollow beneath it.

Quieting his breath, he felt his heart pounding and sweat pouring from his face. The mud covering him concealed his scent and stymied the blood seeping from his arm. Curled up with his knees against his chest, the stone around him scraping and crushing him in the tight space. Nearby footsteps froze him, his heart pounding so loud that Alex worried it was audible. He clamped a hand over his mouth and peered out the little opening, seeing only a patch of shrouded birch trees. Even so, he could hear the sniffs and steps of the hunter near his hiding spot. Not seeing the creature almost made it worse, knowing it searching for him, just out of sight and ready to kill.

“Slippery mutt,” the werewolf hissed, standing so close to the stone that Alex could almost smell its thick odor. Nose pointed upwards; it stalked past searching the forest beyond. Relief flooded Alex as the werewolf departed, a sweet breath easing his racing pulse. Only after he was sure the creature had left did he crawl from his cave and creep away. He took back the way he came, hoping the woods wide enough that he could lose the hunter.

Careful not to rustle the leaves or branches, he searched for any sign of civilization or safety in those wilds. He felt light, caught between the excitement of escaping the werewolf and fear that it might return. That a creature of fables existed no longer surprised him, but that gave him no answers. The monster knew him, but he had no memory to make his past any clearer. Answers could wait until he was safe.

The babbling of a stream caught his attention, flowing along through a clearing. Clouds parted, and the light of the full moon illuminated the world in pale-blue. Adrenalin fading,

exhaustion fell upon him, and his legs turned to rubber. He all but collapsed into the river, kneeling on the shore and looking into the reflective, slow water. Little cuts and smears of mud covered his face, branches and stains stuck to his red sweater. He placed his arm into the cool flow and sighed, but then his brow furrowed with confusion.

Only minutes ago, the wound would not allow itself to be ignored. Now, he washed away the dirt and grime and found the injuries mended, the flesh red and scarred as if healed long ago. Stunned, he looked up to the sky, the night air carrying a pleasant chill. In the moonlight, he smiled and felt the little aches of his cuts fading, the wounds sealing under the light.

At this rate, he suspected that by sunrise, he would have accrued a hundred other questions without a single answer. He washed the sweat from his face and drank until his throat no longer felt like sandpaper. Even afterwards, he still wore a single mark at the crest of his forehead, that same black-ash smudge that seemed rooted deeper than even his skin. Perhaps a tattoo, but he did not believe so; something about the shape turned his stomach. It radiated a subtle malevolence that crawled under his skin and needled mind. He scrubbed until the skin was raw, but could not so much as dull its color.

Checking himself for similar blemishes, he removed his coat and shirt. He was a skinny boy, not a twig, but on the thin side. However, he found no splotches of similar form. Instead, there was a tribal line tattoo on his right shoulder. He actually liked this design, somehow knowing it supposed to be there, unlike the smudge on his brow.

Behind him, an owl hooted loudly and took off, its form momentarily imposed onto the moon. The sudden sound made him jump, crouching low and searching the surrounding trees for the werewolf. He donned his clothes in a hurry, reminded of the present danger. Figuring out the

mark could wait. Until then, he started walking back for the woods, the songs of crickets and nightingales joining him in the gloom.

Alex's deliberate pace took him onward for what felt like hours. It brought him to a clearing of trees, the forest opening into a field. Within was a half-constructed skeleton of a building. A large dwelling three stories tall, its lowest floor walled with plywood and plaster, no more than a frame and scaffolding on its upper levels. Beyond it, a dirt road stretched into the forest, with luck leading him to a town of some sort.

A strange aura seemed to surround the building, an essence that warned him away like a miasma of evil. He knew better than to stay near the concealing forest. Trusting his brain over his gut, he reached the building, sticking close to the walls while watching the tree line.

Stealth had proven his best defense against his hunter. This would prove difficult, as he suspected its sense of smell powerful enough that it could still be following him. Fortunately, he found a patch of wild sage growing around the scaffolding post. He stuffed the leaves into his jacket pockets, hoping the pungent herbs could conceal him if he required it again.

The decision soon proved wise. Alex could see well in the dark, noticing movement in the far bushes. Reacting quickly, he pressed himself against the wall and crept for an entrance to the building. Pulse rising, he felt his stomach rising into his throat. The wolf did not reveal itself, but the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. *He's watching from there. The hell did I do to piss this thing off?* Eyes on the distance, he backed inside and searched for a place to hide. Through the holes in the wall, he could see the beast drawing closer on all fours with his nose to the ground. He kept his footsteps as quiet as he could, half-constructed planks worryingly creaky.

Remaining close to the walls, he attempted to keep his steps silent. Wordlessly, he begged that the creature would believe he went down the road, leaving the lodge and he behind. A sudden sniffing sound made his heart leap, almost forcing a loud gasp from him. Just beyond the thin, plywood wall, he heard the beast scenting the ground for him. Though not solid, the wooden frame blocked sight, and he stood still and close. Lowering himself, he attempted to stay out of sight should it move to one of the spaces between planks around him.

“I shouldn’t have expected anything less from him. Tenacious bastard, if nothing else,” the wolf muttered, speaking to itself. Alex shivered, less than an inch of pressed wood separating him from his hunter. The cold fingers of death rested on his shoulder, and he choked back a whimper of fear, human prey instincts screaming that he flee. “But the curse still holds him. By sunrise, it shall be Fenriz that seizes his place,” the creature Alex now knew as Fenriz chuckled. Alex remained quiet, but his mind whirled at the past he seemed to share with the monster. He pushed them down as he heard it take a breath, curious about what it would say now. “Of course, a rat can only run so far. I’ve got you now, Alex.”

Blood running cold, Alex realized himself detected. His reaction proved just fast enough, ducking low just as a clawed hand burst through the wall. “Fuck!” he hissed, jumping away and sprinting for a staircase across from him. He could hear growling and struggling behind him as Fenriz’s paw caught in the splintery hole. Climbing in a dash, he dared not look back, loud crashes sounding through the building as it broke through the wall after him.

Panting as his feet slapped against the floorboards, he heard claws scraping behind him, joined by enraged growling. Alex understood now why the lodge seemed so wrong to him. Only a bound away, confronting the beast was inevitable. Survive or die; fate had convalesced so that it would all be decided here.

Upon reaching the third floor, he turned right, shooting down a hall under construction, ducking under a leaning beam and jumping over a half-built counter. Less agile, the snarling beast faltered against these obstacles, putting a bit of distance between them. He slid into an unbuilt patch of floor, dropping onto the lower level. Only inch behind, it lunged, jaws shutting close enough to pull a hair from him.

A hole in the second floor almost caught him, the opening only bridged by a single loose plank. Tumbling onto the plank, it bent but did not break, allowing him to scamper away. Fenriz jumped after him, too large for the flimsy board and breaking through onto the first floor. Alex's ankle ached, twisted by the fall. He could ignore the pain, but he cursed to find his stride slower. Darting through the maze-like halls, he heard it following on the floor below. Like a cat and mouse, he dodged and doubled back, attempting to lose the heavy steps. Losing himself to the rush of excitement, he moved without pause.

For a moment, he thought he lost his pursuer, its steps taking a right from him. That moment ended suddenly. He looked over to see a hole of unbuilt floor, one the beast easily jumped through. They locked eyes for a moment, amber eyes filled with glee and murderous intent.

*I will not die here!* Alex vowed internally. He dove into a room beside him, locking the door in a swift motion. A slam knocked him deeper into the room, hinges rattling and lock cracking from the impact. Another blow would break it open, but he found a saving rope from heaven. He stood in a supply closet, its back wall missing, opening to an empty stairwell, nothing more than a dark pit to the basement. But what mattered was a tool within the closet, a wireless buzz saw.

“No more running!” Fenriz snarled, frothing and shaking splinters from himself.

“Fine by me,” Alex hissed with a sneer. Spinning blade roaring, he shoved it against the beast’s extended clawed. Sickening wet grinding filled the room, immediately joined by a prolonged yelp of pain and surprise. Red mist sprayed against the two, the blade slicing fur, flesh, and muscle. Before it could reach bone, Fenriz swiped with his other arm, the claws painfully raking his face. A painful set of cuts, but nothing life-threatening. What endangered him most was the force behind the swing, throwing him back to the lip of the steep stairwell.

“Still a fighter, aren’t we?” Fenriz muttered, any excitement or joy from the hunt drained as he clutched his deep wound. Alex glanced for any options, the saw tossed aside and his only exit blocked by the beast. “A scar to remember you by. Goodbye, Alex.”

Grabbing desperately for anything, Alex pulled the leaves from his pocket and raised his arms defensively. Fenriz grabbed him and bit for his throat. Struggling and throwing blows, Alex cried out as fangs painfully pierced his neck. A final push and a shake from the wolf’s head loosened the grip. Hot blood burning his neck like a molten scarf, Alex briefly felt weightless, stomach turned with disgust as he saw its satisfied smile. Air rushed past, and he fell down the dark shaft of the twenty-foot stairwell.

Inky blackness surrounding him, he crashed into a barrel and crumpled to the floor. Rock salt spilled from the fallen bin, painfully stinging his open wounds. Ragged, drowning breaths barely escaped his chest. Cold overtaking him, he felt his lifeblood pouring out and warm tears streaming from the corners of his eyes. Vision fading, the shadows of the basement slithering and dancing around him like a fog of ghosts waiting to drag him away.

It wasn’t fair. Alex barely knew his own name. Did he deserve this, who even was he? Why? Why?

*—Blood of cursed and blood of the curser, and a packed is reached. Salt and sage, and curse is broken.*

The blood of two and the purifying compounds all mixed as Alex's head slumped to the side. As they touched his flesh, the black mark on his brow dulled and faded. After a moment, the seal vanished.

Gasping and sputtering, Alex rose to a seat, clawing at his neck with lingering terror. Now scars marked him, but the wounds were healed. He remained dizzy from blood loss, but far stronger than he knew he ought to be. Baffled, he looked up to see Fenriz gone, the shaft open to the air. Directly above, the full moon shone down on him like a merciful eye, beautiful pale light filling the night sky with deep blue.

His hunter would return soon, but he would not be found in this pit. Fenriz would want proof, possibly even a bite of his kill. Alex paused, wondering how he knew this. He raised a hand to his forehead, a great weight feeling like it was lifted from his shoulders. Even without seeing it, he knew the mark gone. Chuckling, he remembered the curse, sealing his memory and power, now soon to return. But he could search his returning memories later.

Crouching low, his legs tensed, and he set his eyes on the ground floor out of his reach. He could make it; he knew this. The leap carried him higher than should be humanly possible, legs bulging the moment before his jump. He reached the stairwell's side, scrabbling for leverage before springing off and onto the first floor. Smirking, he looked back and admired the superhuman feat, the concrete wall marred with claw marks where he scratched. Glancing back at his hand, he saw black claws receding and dulling back into mundane human nails.

Chuckling to himself, his heart soared to escape the musty pit. Newfound confidence surged through him, a boil to his blood that told him that he would survive. A howl above gave him pause Fenriz calling up to the moon. The sound made him cautious, but no longer instilled a paralyzing fear in his very core.

“Finally get to celebrate a victory, Fenriz. I almost hate to take it from you,” Alex murmured to himself. Memories returning slowly, he knew the werewolf a frequent challenger, one who sought to take his position for himself. Though Alex did not yet know the power they struggled for, he vowed that this would be their last battle for it.

Something about the highest floor called to him; he would need the howling fool to move to reach it. Two fingers in his mouth, he whistled as loudly as he could muster, the song above ceasing. Using the distraction, he snuck towards the actual stairs. He could hear slow steps as the russet beast made his way back, confused and suspicious. Blood formed a coagulating pool at the base of the stairwell. Even as he left, the pungent, metallic scent would create a beacon for Fenriz.

Alex’s ears seemed attuned, picking up the beast’s distant footsteps, the sound joined by the wind ringing through the construction and the crickets in the surrounding field. A sly smile formed on his lips, hearing the creature’s steps move away towards the stairwell. Stepping close to the walls to keep quiet, he hurried upstairs for the highest floor.

Climbing in a rush, he burst into the open air, surrounded by the sea of stars and the endless expanse of nothingness beyond. He smiled at the cool wind running through his hair, a pleasant sensation against his flushed and sweaty face. Moonlight shone down on him like that kind rays of morning sun, providing a gentle warmth. It all felt good, even the dizziness of blood loss fading as his strength returned.

Like a baptism, the moonlight washed over him like cleansing magic. For a moment, that pale disk was reflected like a mirror in his eyes. When he looked down, the light seemed to stain his eyes, the blue within them turned golden. His left hand itched; as he looked down at it, his nails darkened to black and lengthened to sharp claws. At first, it seemed his skin was turning grey. However, as he ran his other hand over it, he found instead that a thin layer of colored fuzz grew separate from his human hair.

Even without his memory returning, he understood the changes. Locked behind the curse was a much stronger form, one which felt just as natural as his human shape. Like a savage beast with its cage finally open, this form took him quickly, summoned by his fear and anger.

With a smile that showed his teeth sharpening into pearly fangs, Alex heard Fenriz's searching footsteps. His earlier surprise to see a beast from so-called fables amused him. The curse may have suppressed this half of himself and wiped it from his memory, but with hex dispelled, the truth was laid bare before him. *Here there be monsters.* But he was not some hapless explorer chased of things that snarl and skitter. What ought he fear, when his fangs were sharper?

These woods and the town beyond were his territory, his alone to hunt and guard. Behind him, he heard footsteps ascending the stairs towards the second floor; Fenriz, an interloper looking to take the territory for himself.

Fur spread across his skin in fluid clouds like ink dropped into water—a short, storm-grey coat which he knew would soon grow longer. The pelt itself felt natural, as comfortable as clothes, though they were pressed and uncomfortable beneath his tightening shirt and pants. His flesh stretched and tightened, his heart pounding with newfound strength. His transformation began in

earnest; eyes fully taken by golden color, fur increasing in length and body, and height increasing. It filled him with nostalgic excitement, one he had experienced before but did not remember.

A persistent ache in his spine doubled him over, his entire body overcome by growing pains. Dizziness and unbalance dropped him to the ground, bent as his bones popped. His lips drew back, and his jaw clicked, mouth extending slightly into a half-formed muzzle. Like cracking his knuckles taken to a greater degree, his spine seemed to stiffen then relax. It brought a growl from him as it painlessly broke and extended into a short, fleshy tail. Forced against the seat of his pants, he squirmed with the sensation of his spine compressed.

Curling up, he clenched his jaw as the tail only grew. His pants tightened around the waist, the garment forming something of a reverse tent over his tail. The tightness became rather painful as he struggled to remove the clothes. Yet as he grew, the jeans only held tighter against him. Whining, he felt the cloth pushed to its limits.

Following the stretching came a sound not unlike a zipper. The seam of his pants stretched and opened, its string snapping one stitch at a time. The noise culminated as the pants ripped. Pushed too far, the fabric tore open into a noticeable hole. His newly furred tail burst out into the open air. He sighed with relief as the appendage relaxed, wagging slightly as the wind through its grey and white fur.

“How the hell are you alive?” Fenriz gawked, climbing the stairs with intimidating focus. Fur bristling, he bared his teeth and flexed his clawed hands, eyes narrowed as he looked down upon him. Healing quickly, his arm carried a deep wound, now healed into a raw pink line. “Too hurt to stand? Don’t worry. I’ll put an end to that pain.”

“Not tonight. Not ever,” Alex boasted with angrily, rising to his feet. He stood taller in the moonlight, yellow eyes practically shining in the darkness. Baring his fangs, he took a step forward, making Fenriz step back worriedly.

Though Alex was larger under the full moon, his transformation was incomplete, and he stood smaller than the fully formed werewolf. “My curse... It was to remove the wolf from these woods,” Fenriz murmured, his voice filled with cautious disbelief.

“It did, and you still weren’t strong enough to kill me. Now the black mark is faded, and you’re left to fight a trueblood. How do you think that’s going to work out for you?”

Empty words. Alex could see his threat affecting Fenriz, but not enough to send him fleeing. For all his courage, Alex knew he was not yet a match for the beast. He would not be given time to complete his change, and he was not strong enough in this shape to win. Stepping sideways as if circling prey, Alex searched for any options he might have. Though weaker, the human form had its advantages. As he found a small piece of loose rebar, he hid it behind his arm, using a finger dexterity and subtlety not possible for a wolf.

“The curse may be gone, but that doesn’t mean you’re back,” Fenriz hissed, charging forward with a bound.

Reactions improved, Alex dodged to the side and riposted with the sharp metal rod. The pounce missed by inches, and he drove the rusty rebar into the Fenriz’s shoulder. Yelping, the beast clutched at the wound, a small spurt of blood escaping as he pulled it free. Alex took the opportunity and dashed for the ledge. With greater speed, he reached the building, looking down three stories towards gravel. Planks creaked beneath his feet, and he jumped.

After a brief moment of weightlessness, his hand tightened around a metal post. He pulled himself back and rolled onto a scaffold beside the second floor, turning back towards the ledge. For a second, he waited for Fenriz to follow, ready to push him back over the edge. The footsteps above followed but leapt far too early. Rather than follow the way Alex came, he jumped and kicked the thin planks, breaking through above Alex.

They fell atop one another, Alex surprised and caught off-guard, pinned beneath the larger beast. Fur standing on end, Fenriz opened his jaws for a kill. Alex thought faster, raising his knee and landing a powerful blow to the creature's groin.

As Fenriz crumpled, Alex rolled away. Before he could escape, Fenriz lashed out and hooked his claws into Alex's shoulder. Grunting in pain, he pulled and thrashed but could not dislodge the huge claws. In petty retaliation, he sank his fangs into the offending arm. Wincing, Fenriz angrily snapped his powerful jaws over Alex's shoulder, vice-like strength to touch bone.

Fangs pressing ribs, breath became difficult through pained gasps. Alex clawed desperately for at his side. Though his hands found only rope, his feet reached the wall of the building. His claws cut through the cable, shaking the scaffolding as its binding snapped. Teeth scraping his ribs, he used the biting beast as leverage, pushing against the building with all the force in his legs. Panic pushing him forward, he felt the muscles in his legs harden and grow, his transformation rushed in the dire circumstances.

Unstable without a mooring rope, the scaffolding groaned and cracked. It tilted noticeably, and Fenriz loosened his bite. Freed, Alex darted into the space between the wall and their leaning ledge. He pushed and heard the poorly constructed steel beams bend and fall. With a swift strike, Fenriz seized Alex by the ankle, anchoring himself to the floor with his claws. Alex attempted to

pull away onto the second floor but lacked the strength to break free. *Dammit!* He hissed; hands pried from the planks as he fell.

Both screamed as they fell, scaffolding screeching as it collapsed. Head spinning, he plummeted two stories towards the unforgiving ground. They struck the ground suddenly, the construct crashing loudly around them. Vision clouded and world whirling, Alex's entire body hurt, and he heard groans of pain nearby. He tried to stand and run, but even rising from his seat wracked him so much that he collapsed back into the rubble. Several bones were fractured or bruised, a cloud of dust irritating his lungs as he panted.

Blood boiling from the fight and moonlight shining down upon him, he healed quickly. Soon, he stood with bones still mending, his limbs feeling stiff and sluggish as though he had just woken up. Fenriz was still recovering, injured beneath a small pile of rubble. Tomorrow, he knew the physical stress of healing and transforming would leave him immobile with exhaustion. *But tonight... I will be unstoppable.*

Hunched over, he called a new wave of changes to ripple over him. His skull ground and cracked. It pushed shorter and longer, fangs emerging from his mouth before his lips caught up with the changes. Noise cut out briefly, but returned shaper and clearer than before as his ears migrated up to become pointed and tipped with dark fur. Nose black and becoming wet at the end of his muzzle, he breathed in deeply, the air seeming to fill his entire snout before reaching his lungs. He detected the sweat and presence of construction workers from earlier that day, the dirt and foliage from the forest, and most pungent, the blood spilled by he and the interloper.

With a final snap, his muzzle grew to full length and his skull solidified into that of a wolf. Grey fur spread over his skin like fire, lengthening into full pelt. A snarl and a bark escaped him

as his head took on a fully lupine form, culminating into a long resounding howl towards the moon. The sound seemed to cow the forest, birds and beast alike silencing before the song. Wind rustled the forest leaves like water, seemingly in response to his sustained call.

Alex felt at his face, relishing the new changes. With this, he discovered that his hands were now twice the size they were before. The transformation continued down his extremities. His shoes became entrapping and tight, his ankles pulling upwards and forcing him unbalanced onto his toes. Dull, stabbing pain reverberated through his feet as his toenails sprouted out into claws. His shoes offered more resistance than his jeans, but not enough so to prevent the same fate.

With a loud snap, the front tore open. His hooked, black claws pierced first, digging into the soil as his toes protruded from the broken front. Their expansion unceasing, his feet pressed further out of the shoes and against its sides. After the initial rip, the rest followed quickly. Rattling and clicking, the sole tore away and split the shoes in two. He kicked the scraps away, his paws uncovered and coarse pads sinking into the dirt. Neither wolf nor human, his digitigrade feet bearing only four short, clawed toes with a fifth partway up his ankle.

As he grew taller, he twitched slightly, his muscles briefly tensing as the transformation overcome most of his body. Shoulders broadening and with his body, his once loose clothes clung tight around him. His fur thickened into dense, soft pelt, grey on the back, and dusky-white on his front. Previously lean and weak, his body filled out and hardened.

His muscles only became more defined as he grew, short clothes no longer able to cover the ends of his arms and legs, or his midriff. This form foggy in his memory; he smiled at the appearance of his beastly form. Not to be dissuaded by thin sheets of fabric, he continued to grow and strain the clothes.

Fur itchy underneath his shirt and pants, his superhero-like build, stretched the garments to their limits. Clenching his jaw, the tight clothes restricted his breathing and gripped his groin. A particularly deep breath made a string snap like the pluck of a guitar string. His jeans broke seconds after his shirt but ruined all the same.

Clearly outlining his form, his clothes strained and thinned. Holes popped open along his collar and thighs, fur springing free through the apertures. Seemingly spurred on by the little windows of freedom, the speed of his growth only redoubled. The seams of his clothes further split, holes lengthening into lines as new ones formed parallel to them. Shortening and stretching, the clothes continued to break. Tears spread further and longer, leaving the garments more ragged scraps than actual clothing. The tatters hung loosely off him, now held together by nothing more than tenacious threads.

Dry stretching sounds reverberated from his remaining clothes. With a flex, he snapped the strands and ripped his shirt down the middle. Now nothing but a vest, even by the loosest definitions, it hung from his shoulders, leaving his toned chest visible. A swipe of his claws tore away the uncomfortable remains of his pants. All that remained was his red hoodie, wrapped tightly around his arms, but unbroken.

In the pale light of the moon, Alex stood fully transformed. He removed the rags of his clothing, struggling to doff the tight sweater. A werewolf stood on his hind legs, admiring his claws, surrounded by the ruined human construction's rubble.

Recovered from his injuries, Fenriz rose from the scattered wood and stones, grunting in pain as he lifted a steel beam from himself. Both wolves approached one another amongst the rubble, fur standing on end as they tensed for a fight. "If you couldn't kill a human, what makes

you think you can fight a wolf?” Alex growled, looking down at a beast a full head shorter than himself. Both bared their fangs and measured one another. Alex could not help but smile, finally larger than his opponent.

“I don’t give up that easily. You haven’t won yet, and fangs are still sharp,” Fenriz boasted, snarling as he took a low, defensive pose. No fool, Fenriz recognized the difference in strength between them immediately. He knew how wolves fought, posturing and growling before any bites were dealt. With a lunge, he struck first, slashing and snapping for the throat before their fur fully bristled, or they readied themselves.

After all the curses and underhanded tricks, Alex would have been shocked if Fenriz fought with any honor. Expecting a sucker punch, he remained light on his feet. Fenriz was quick on the attack, his claws drawing thin streams of blood from Alex’s shoulder. But Alex jumped backwards, responding with a bite, taking a piece of the offender’s ear.

He would not give Fenriz a chance to recover. Alex lunged and sank his fangs into his opponent’s shoulder. Unable to escape, Fenriz could only raise his arms to defend against the scrapes and punches. It worked at first, but the overwhelming strength soon created openings, pauses where Alex could sneak a strike to the gut or snout.

Yelping, Fenriz broke free, guarding his injuries and bruises. But Alex would grant no clemency, finishing with a slash to the face. His claws would leave a lasting mark, four lines across the face. Deep enough to be remembered, but not blinded. He smirked as blood dripped from his claws into the soil, Fenriz scrambling away, whimpering. A snarl was all it took then to send the weaker beast running to the forest.

“This valley is my territory! If you ever forget that again, I’ll be happy to remind you,” Alex roared, soon alone in the forest. He smiled and basked in the moonlight, newfound freedom and power coursing through his veins, his true form feeling more natural than his human shape. Placing a hand on his cuts, he sighed tried to ignore their sting. The night was still young, and he intended to enjoy a good hunt.