

The First Moon

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Gavin didn't consider himself a dreamer. Certainly, there were things he aspired to, but when it came to slumber, it wasn't often he found himself in some fantastical dreamscape. It was almost an unnerving occurrence, having a dream, and having one that stood out from the miasma of sleep, persisting in his memories far beyond the manner of dreams, was even more unsettling.

His relentless evening distraction was as crystalline in its clarity as it was vague and indistinct. There were almost no concrete images. He was always trapped in a fog of blurred colors and fragments of sound. What he always remembered was a feeling that he was sharing in another's experiences. He felt himself, but he also felt something else. He would feel contented joy, always. It would then spike into elation. He could feel a heart that was not his own thudding against its prison in anticipation. Then would come the pain. It was so distant, but he felt it as sharply as he had ever felt anything. He couldn't cry out or collapse. He was trapped. He was drowning in alien emotions, fear, anxiety, but below it all, he felt a dark, brooding hunger. It would strike at him last, and he always realized its existence an instant too late to stop it from shocking him awake, and it always did so violently.

This evening had been no different. He had lurched from his bedroll with a sudden jolt and a terrified yelp before he could begin to get a grasp of his surroundings. He'd almost brought his small tent down on top of him as he thrashed from his blanket and staggered out into the open. A sharp, biting wind had nearly frozen him on the spot. He was drenched in sweat that only made the frigid night seem even more inhumane, and though he was clothed and huddling under his blanket, he shivered desperately as he tried to stoke what was left of his campfire back to life.

He was so tired. He hadn't gotten anything resembling a full night's sleep in weeks. The days stretched on endlessly, his fatigue dragging down his mood and motivation, and it was only to just have the same thing happen night after night. He wished he understood what was happening. He felt cursed, but was certain that he had been subjected to nothing of the sort.

With a little doing, he managed to breathe a little life back into his campfire, and he shifted closer to shelter himself from the subtle but chilling breeze. He'd found himself in a lightly treed area between villages, and the sparse wood was doing as little to shield him from the wind as the barren, skeletal canopy was doing to hide him from the light of the moon that was hanging full and heavy in the sky.

Glancing up, he had to screen his eyes against the glare of the huge, gravid disk that sat so low in the firmament. A light haze of cloud blurred the bright, circular outline, but the wind must have been harsh so high up, because the thin wisps were quickly torn to shreds, leaving the moon cold and bare, free to cast a host of sharp shadows across the forest floor.

He turned away, choosing instead to stare into the heart of his meager fire. It must have been early in the morning, because the moon was sitting almost directly overhead, and it seemed like anything more intense than a glowing ember was enough to hurt his tired eyes. He couldn't remember a moon casting so much light. It seemed to blanket the whole of the world around him, casting a pallid, silvery glow that easily outdid the muted yellow-orange from his fire.

Letting out a weary sigh, he scrubbed at his eyes with his knuckles, trying to rub a little vitality back into them. When the wind died down, he let his blanket slide off of his shoulders and stood up, trying to stretch some of the tension out of his stiff muscles. Combined with the cold, his lack of meaningful rest and sleeping miles from the amenities of even a barn loft had allowed him to develop quite the ache across his shoulders and down his back. As he shrugged off the remaining dregs of sleep, he wished he could get a half decent massage out in the middle of nowhere.

In the process of raking his fingers through his short, messy mop of sandy-blond hair, he was stopped by a slow, creeping chill that swept up his spine. It was something entirely different from the natural chill that pervaded the air. It was more akin to a dull, creeping dread that prickled at his skin and left the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. It almost felt like there was something watching him, and he spun in a wary circle. The trees in this area were hardly ancient, withered things, and they were spread too thinly to provide any real hiding place for some nebulous beast, especially given how brightly the moon illuminated everything. If anything, it only seemed to be getting brighter.

His brow furrowed in confusion, he looked upward, wholly unexpecting of what he saw. A sharp gasp caught in his throat, and he took a numb step backward before he could even begin to digest what had happened. The moon appeared to have swollen in the sky. The pale sphere was enormous, unnaturally, impossibly giant, and it burned down on him with a light unlike any he'd ever seen. That same sensation crawled under his skin once again, and he knew in an instant that something was very, very wrong. Anxiety tightened his chest, squeezing his heart up into his throat as he took another step back, stumbling over an exposed root but remaining transfixed and upright.

There was nothing wholesome about the way that cold, judgmental orb glared down at him. It outshined every other point of light in the sky, eating up the blackness until harsh, almost painful, mercurial light was all that he could see. It was as if a dread, alien god was leering down at him from some throne, mocking him for some perceived weakness. His heart began to race, and a fresh wave of clammy sweat left him shivering in a pool of light that felt brighter than a midday sun.

Gavin felt like there was something bearing down on him. Something pressed in on him from all sides, shortening his breath. An unwelcome heat blossomed in his chest, leaving him feeling worryingly warm in the icy breeze in spite of his shakes. Something was happening; he could feel it. He was far from a particularly sensitive mage, but even he could feel some magic at work. He could sense the conflux of energies warping the space around him, and the knowledge that he was at its center was doing little to allay his concerns.

He wanted to flee, but his legs no longer had the ability to move under their own power. He was held there, and he could no longer even pull his eyes away from the angry, silver disk that seemed to be consuming the universe around him, washing everything out with its baleful radiance. The light seared at his eyes, and it surprised him to still possess the ability to close them against it. That couldn't save him from it, however. He felt it pressing down on his skin, forcing itself upon him, light that was almost solid with its own unrelenting pressure. He clenched his teeth, wondering if his pounding heart would simply explode from how violently it pushed heated blood through his veins.

It was as if the universe was trying to crush him. Gavin felt as though his body would simply crumple under the pressures to which it was subject. Strain etched itself into his expression, and he groaned as his every muscle was drawn taut by the struggle to hold himself

together. He balled his hands into fists and pressed them inward against his temples as he bent forward onto himself. Fear threatened to overwhelm him. He felt like he would be destroyed by the sheer torrent of power that whirled invisibly around him. A list of regrets came to him, people he would never see again, joys he would never be able to know, and in a fit of stubborn defiance he summoned the will to work his mouth, and he shouted the most powerful dispelling incantation he knew, pitting himself against whatever it was that held him trapped.

He nearly blacked out with the strain of summoning such energy unprepared, but it almost seemed to work. In an instant, the heinous pressure was gone, and in the time it took to blink in shock, the moon had receded, snapping back to its proper place and leaving him shivering in the night, afraid and alone. He was dripping with sweat, so much that it made his hair cling limply to his head. The unwelcome heat that had been stoked in his body persisted, making his skin crawl and leaving him with the urge to tear his clothes off just to cool off, to stop the damp fabric from sticking uncomfortably to his body. All that was quickly overwhelmed, however, as whatever force that had bewitched him, perhaps infuriated by his resistance, decided to punish him for his petulance.

Before he had even had the chance to pull a full breath of air into his lungs or straighten his back from his hunched position, every scrap of rational thought was robbed from him as a pain more vicious and horrible than he could have ever imagined ripped through his torso. Gavin let out a hoarse scream as suddenly boneless legs dropped him unceremoniously to the ground. He writhed through the dirt, clawing at his chest as what felt like fingers made of fire reached into him, wrapped over his heart and lungs, and began to crush them with unforgiving strength.

He couldn't breathe. It truly felt like something was constricting his organs from within, a horrific sensation that spread through the rest of his body, filling his chest before bleeding out through his spasming limbs. It stabbed into his bones, and he felt some unknowable, unflinching force crushing him even as it tried to pull him apart. Gavin felt like he was simply being mangled by some invisible giant's hands, twisted and compressed and stretched on some phantom rack, and his every breath escaped him before he could turn it into anything other than a tattered scream. And even then, when each throbbing pulsation of gut-wrenching agony seemed to peak, it only found more of him to torture.

It was like he was being unmade from his sanity outward. There was nowhere he could hide from the pain. In that moment, he was rendered down to every creature's basest state, that of a desperate, terrified animal. His skin burned like the light of the moon staring down at him from overhead was the fiery retribution of a righteous deity. His muscles stood taut under his skin, straining to the point of simply tearing under their own frantic strength. His bones were on the edge of breaking from whatever incandescent energy had invaded his body and turned it into a single, seared nerve.

And then it happened. His frail form surrendered. With a sickening crunch that echoed between the trees, he felt his bones breaking one after the other. Each one brought with it a profound, unique agony that could have only been superseded by that which followed it. One of his hands wrapped over his stomach as he felt his organs shifting, and the other clapped down on his chest as his ribcage crumpled noisily. Instead of collapsing inward, however, he let out a ragged cry as his chest surged abruptly within the confines of his shirt, stretching it suddenly taut over his now misshapen body.

He wished that the extra room given to his heart and lungs could ease his torture, but instead he only felt more acutely the dire pounding of his heart as it grew ever more violent. He

could feel his own flesh writhing under his hands as he curled inward on himself with the dimming hope that he could stop what was happening to him by simply holding himself together.

It was too late though. Every square inch of his skin tightened and screamed at him as the muscle and bone and sinew beneath it twisted and bunched and shuddered, snapping and popping and almost deafening him to his own screams. He felt like he would rip open, but the only things that split were the seams of his shirt as his body swelled, beginning with the bones in his chest and working outward in rippling surges that quickly robbed him of his breath and rational thought.

He spasmed frantically as every tendon in both of his arms went utterly rigid. His eyes nearly rolled out of his head as he watched as much as felt the delicate bones in his hands crunch, briefly deforming before taking on a larger, sturdier shape. It worked its way up his trembling limbs and under his sleeves, and he felt fabric tighten further over the whole of his upper body as his physique caught up with the rest of his morphing frame. The tough, wiry muscle that he possessed twitched and bulged, surging as the agony in his voice redoubled. He could almost feel the light of the moon on the skin of his back as his torso shuddered broader, tearing rents in his shirt while inhuman strength wrapped over him. He slapped a hand over the opposite arm, feeling his bicep swell with unwholesome vitality, spreading his fingers wide over it as the bone underneath it stretched longer with the rest of him.

In the couple seconds it took for his arms to begin to tear his shirt apart over their sudden might, Gavin had screamed himself hoarse. He could only writhe and grunt and gasp and wheeze as what felt like a vice clamped down onto his fingertips. He clenched his teeth as his fingernails pinched in, reforming at the roots, hardening and thickening and turning into sturdy, bestial claws. Hands that were no longer his own scrabbled for purchase in the dirt, trying to find something to anchor him to reality as red hot pokers were jammed into his body, wracking him with waves of horrifying pain.

His chest barreled outward, shredding the rest of his shirt as his body deepened with slabs of taut, dense muscle. Unbearable heat mingled with the vicious, biting pangs of misery and left his skin shining in the moonlight, dripping as if his whole body was crying. His shoulders popped and pushed his entire frame wider with them, only giving his surging musculature more room to grow. A wave of intense pressure crushed the air from his lungs, and as he gasped desperately for more, his abdomen carved itself up, striating into a deep, heavy wall of stony strength that wrapped its way up into his obliques, thickening and growing and swallowing up what used to be his lean shape.

He didn't even realize what was happening to his legs until he heard his trousers start to rip open over the mass of his bulging thighs. The strength of his mutating muscle crushed his bones, and he felt them shift and grind as they lengthened, thickened, forced him larger, taller, broader. He felt his body spreading out across the dirt even as he contorted weakly. The agony peaked in his ankles, and his eyes pinched shut against the sensation as he felt them shatter and reshape. His feet grew unnaturally long as the flesh on their balls bulged painfully. The skin there grew tough and thick, and as his toenails sharpened into dark, wicked claws, he was left with what looked disturbingly like a pair of hairless, padded paws.

Had his mind been able to form a coherent thought, he still wouldn't have been able to understand what was happening to him. All he could feel was his body breaking and reforming time and time again, each time larger and more bestial. His legs, as they surged with sturdy, muscular power, took on a digitigrade shape. For a time, his ability to hear the outside world was stolen from him. He was left with just the sound of his heart battering his eardrums and the

crunch of breaking bone and shredding sinew as his ears slid upward along his head, growing longer and tapering to triangular, canine points.

He grunted as the change worked upwards along his neck. It thickened, bordered as it was by shoulders that rose up like hills of might, and when his hearing returned to him, a hundred times sharper than before, he heard with flawless clarity how his voice fell into his spreading chest, growing deeper and more powerful with the rest of him. There was something else that rumbled alongside it, however, something monstrous. As he changed, it too gained strength. It rose to match his original, thrumming along with it as he groaned. It, however, held none of the confusion or fear or pain that made its brother rise and fall in quivering waves. It was solid and menacing, dark and hungry as it shuddered in his chest. Both his voices mingled, intertwining until they could barely be told apart, and it gave the sounds that escaped his morphing throat a harsh, unnatural timbre.

He knew then what was happening. In a dull, pain-ravaged corner of his mind, Gavin knew what was happening. He was dying. The agony alone, that which shredded his body, pulsed it larger and more ominously inhuman, was going to kill him. He could feel it tearing him apart, and even if his body survived, he was going to be left nothing more than a soulless husk in the shape of a malformed beast. For a brief, infinitesimal moment, fear spiked within him, fear enough to supplant pain as the foremost sensation in his mind, and he latched onto it. He didn't want to die. He had friends and loved ones and people he cared about more deeply than his own well-being, and he felt a knot, and entirely natural knot of stubborn, human frustration form in the pit of his gut, amidst all of his shifting, boiling organs.

His fear turned to anger in just a fraction of a second. It burned white hot, a seething rage that brushed aside his pain and let him reassert control of his trembling form. He dug his claws into the dirt, righting himself, and it was with both his voices that he loosed a sharp, thunderous cry of defiance and forced himself up onto his hands and knees. Gavin gritted his teeth and refused to fall, even when the arms that bordered his vision snapped and popped and pushed him even further from the frigid soil. He could see individual muscle fibers splitting and multiplying beneath his slick skin, stretching it over new strength that compounded with every dire, crippling pulsation that throbbed through his straining frame. Still, he refused to be forced back down into the dirt by the weight of his misery.

It was far from over, however, and it seemed that with each second that passed his concept of agony was being continually redefined in new and horrifying ways. His skin itself burned like he had been dipped in boiling tar. That fiery heat rippled across the surface of his ever-thickening body even as it stabbed deeply into him, taking root and blossoming into waves of prickling sensation that grew more and more severe as he hyperventilated, feeding air into the lungs that pumped like bellows inside his cavernous chest.

When that same heat erupted, finding a shape to take, his voices found themselves once more, and he tilted his head skyward, screaming. Over a heartbeat that stretched on forever, his skin was pierced from within by a network of thousands upon thousands of fine, soft hairs. They began at the tips of his inhuman ears, but they quickly grew to envelop him with patchy splotches that spread and combined to hide his toughening hide. He felt each one lance up from under his skin like a flexible needle, and it seemed like he felt them one at a time, each giving him time to fully experience each individual bit of bristling torture before it could all combine in a blanket of hellish pain.

As if to mock him for his weakness, his new coat of animalistic fur grew thicker, insulating him from the biting cold that had been gnawing at his now naked body. It hardly

granted him any respite, however. It just served to highlight how his organs were roasting in his gut and how the heat in his rippling musculature left him trembling on the verge of collapsing into a limp heap. Blinking blearily down at himself, he watched the layer of light, sandy brown that was flecked with silvery grey hide the rest of his skin, and he couldn't understand how he wasn't steaming from the inferno that cooked him from within, sending cords of bulging, sinuous strength boiling up from his core.

In the one stable corner of his mind, he knew what he was becoming, but it was so deeply buried under his utter fixation on simply staying alive that shock as much as blinding agony bent him over as his spine, so far simply keeping up with the proportion of his surging frame, suddenly cracked like splitting stone and shifted urgently under his new fur. Pushing visibly from his body, bone powdered to make room for more. Vertebrae shifted and ground against one another as they piled up unnaturally and left a bulge below the small of his back.

It felt as though there was something primally violent trapped inside him, and as it raged, it destroyed him, remaking him in a parody of its own image. With a series of sharp, crackling pops, bones and sinew reshaped, and the worrisome bulge of flesh that had formed burst outward like a coiled, strained spring. Skin stretched over the new growth, and more bristling misery prickled down its length, giving it the appearance of a bushy tail that twitched unsettlingly as it grew to its full length.

Something built within him, something alien and incomprehensible. He felt a wash of strange sensations prickle across his furred skin and a host of vague emotions filtered through the dim recesses of his mind. Pangs of stabbing, torturous pain still wracked his form, and the continuing swelling of his body hurt no less, but there was now more to feel. His vision went white for a moment as his skull cracked and stretched at his skin as it took on a new shape. His flicking ears felt less out of place on the sides of his head. His tongue felt fat and heavy, too big for his mouth, a sensation that was mirrored by his teeth as they pushed further from his gums, sharpening into fangs that extended past his lips.

The force that was coursing through him fractured his jaw, and his nose flattened as the front of his face was pushed away from his skull, carrying his mouth and nostrils with it. His gums suddenly felt less crowded even as inch-long fangs grew longer still. He panted and groaned, pawing at his face with a hand only to feel it crunching under his inhuman fingers, stretching into a bestial, lupine muzzle. His tail perked up as a flood of fresh sensation poured through his mind, connecting muscle to nerves just to leave the furry length thrashing with the rest of him.

Just as his canine features finished taking their rightful shape, the haze of indistinct impulses and emotions that were warring for what was left of his attention suddenly came into flawless focus. A part of him finally realized just how much pure, crystalline power was pulsing through his body in time with his great, pounding heart. Something that had been imprisoned and dormant within him for so long was feasting, gorging on it, and from it he felt waves of bright, piercing euphoria, recognition of his own ferocious potential that was brilliant enough to drown out the pain of his metamorphosis.

Something ancient and driven entirely by instinct roiled up in his chest, and he stretched out a thick, trembling arm and clawed at the dirt, digging in and using it to drag a heavy, padded paw under him. He lifted his head, blinking through the harshness of the frigid light that bathed his fur. "No..." he growled. His voices snagged in his throat, and he grunted the last sound as his ribcage creaked and expanded, deepening even further.

He levered his bulky weight over his foot, and he stood, snarling through the vertigo that overtook him as he rose up onto his paws. Taking the mass of his body spurred his legs into new, shuddering spasms of growth, his thighs already like pillars of steely strength. He took a shaky, unpracticed step, ignoring the way he continued to surge and stretch, and reach out to lean heavily on the bole of a slender tree, causing it to groan ominously as it bent at his touch. There was no way to reconcile his indulgent, exultant glee with the seething pain that twisted through him. It ripped at him, trying to pull his mind apart, but his body knew what he was missing, and it seized at him as his heart drummed against his ribs, pouring eager fire through his veins.

The strength that cascaded through him had no right to feel so intoxicating. Still, he only just managed to stop his massive, clawed hand from raking down his front to where all of the unholy tension in his body seemed to be congregating. He balled his fingers into tight fists, tearing splinters from his supporting tree in the process, and forced his eyes closed. He didn't want to see what was happening between his legs. Feeling it was bad enough, the wild, feral virility that mingled with his blood and the deep, throbbing ache of straining, swelling flesh. It was almost more bearable to focus on the pain gnawing at his bones as they creaked and stretched, pushing him taller and broader still.

He clenched his enormous teeth, peeling his lips back and exposing a vicious snarl to keep himself from crying out. His knees threatened to buckle, and they trembled desperately as he tried to remain balanced on his paws. He could feel it pulling from him, and as the force that ground his bones and tore his muscle and sinew withdrew, it dredged up every last dreg of potential that had lain dormant in his body and made it manifest in the power that rippled under his sandy fur. It bent him over, and his claws tore strips of bark and wood from the tree before him as he sagged and nearly collapsed. He finished his terrible transmutation, and he felt his throat tighten explosively, like something had clamped over his windpipe. He spluttered and grunted, trying to drag in a breath past the plume of strain that filled neck, and as a last, trembling bloom of growth rolled through his frame, stretching his furred hide taut over a heavy, brutish physique he opened his slaving, fanged maw and released that disastrous tension in the only way he could fathom.

He roared. The sound that escaped the pit of his chest could be called nothing else. It shuddered within his lungs and ripped through his throat, and the strength that was carried between his twin voices rolled through the sparse wood with enough violence to carry what seemed like forever. He raged, venting himself at the universe as a whole as the pain that had consumed him faded away only to be replaced with a feeling completion, an unwelcome contentment with his new and utterly alien form. It only filled him with a deeper, more seething fury, and it made his vicious outcry rise in pitch as his broken, impotent anger filled the despaired hollow that had formed in his gut.

Finally, he let himself collapse to his knees, landing with a heavy *thud* on the cold ground. He pounded a fist into the dirt as his mind struggled to comprehend what had happened, and at some point during his inner struggle, his bestial vocalization rose to something even more distantly unsettling, a long, mournful howl that escaped him as he raised his savage, lupine features to the moon above. The light washing through his fur felt so much less cold and unfriendly than it had, and as a stiff breeze ruffled the coat of sleek hairs that covered his body, it almost felt warm and welcoming.

When his breath was gone and he was left there, bent over on himself and shivering, he didn't know what to do. He was afraid to truly look at himself in spite of his clear ability to *feel* what his body had become. He felt strong, so powerful. His limbs felt heavy as he sluggishly

shifted, but he was able to move them with ease that made it awkward. He didn't know what to do with his tail; he could feel it flicking to and fro as if it had a mind of its own and desired to explore its range of motion. The sensation coming from the new appendage nearly overwhelmed him, and he shut his eyes, trying simply to focus on the effort he needed to stand up after the fires of his transformation had left him so cold and empty.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself as he pushed himself upright once more. He wobbled on his paws for a heartbeat, reaching out and latching onto the trunk of his arboreal savior with a loud, wooden *crunch*. The battered tree held itself together, however, and he once more found himself leaning heavily on it as he dropped his eyes down to his unfamiliar body. He had to stare down the length of his canine snout, and he saw his nostrils flare around a sharp inhale as panic knotted in his gut.

Blinking in numb shock, he lifted a hand up to his face. His fingers were long and sturdy, capped with savage claws and cloaked with the same grey-flecked fur that covered the rest of him. His hand was huge and broad, and as he experimentally flexed his unfamiliar digits, he almost couldn't believe that they were still his own. He watched the tendons in his forearm shifting with each movement, leading up into the rest of the limb, which was thick with hard, corded muscle whose definition could be plainly seen through the sleek coat that clung to it. His bicep tightened as he reached across his body to give its opposite twin an awed squeeze.

Just to touch his own body was an awkward experience. Nothing was where it should have been, and yet he could feel his claws grazing through the fur on his arm just as easily as he felt the warmth of his sinewy muscle bleeding into his chilled fingertips. His chest was deep and broad, and it felt like it had been carved from stone even as it moved with his heavy, uneven breaths. He could feel his tail droop and his ears quiver atop his skull with uncertainty, and he took a shaky step away from the support of his trunk and truly looked out at the scattering of trees that surrounded him.

Everything looked so sharp, crisp and clean and fresh. The colors, even in the darkness, were clearer, and the shadows themselves seemed thin and insubstantial. He could smell his own sweat, heavy and unpleasant in his sinuses, but he also smelled the smoke from his fire, the sap from the gouges he'd left in the bole of the tree that had borne the brunt of his confused strength. He realized how raw he really felt, like a ravaged nerve that was sensitive to the slightest stimulation. His ears caught everything, swiveled towards unfamiliar sounds by instinct, the creak of wood, the rustle and rattle of skeletal branches in the wind. Even taking a step was a task that bore down on his awareness. He felt his great bulk shifting from paw to padded paw as he plodded awkwardly over to his near-forgotten campsite. He walked past his little tent and sagged next to his fire, slumping to the ground as close as he could to the comforting warmth and light.

The sound of his breathing grated at him. It was deep and heavy no matter how he tried to control it, like a smith was pumping at a huge bellows. The yellow-orange of his fire glimmered off of his thick fur, and he shut his eyes, burying his muzzle in his hands. Even then, he couldn't keep himself from running his fingers along the alien contours of his own animalistic features, from his pointed, lupine ears to the massive fangs that sat so prominently in his mouth, ready to snap and crush and tear.

The ground was warmer near his fire, and it helped to be near his things, his pack, his tent. Familiarity eased his panic, shrinking it into a simmering dread that gnawed at the back of his mind as opposed to the mindless terror that he, in all fairness, should have been drowning in. Gavin looked up, glaring at the moon as if to cast blame. That pallid light now seemed too

innocent, and he felt a growl tremble in his chest as he stubbornly shook his head. He needed to find out what had happened to him, and how to fix it.

As he stared down at the fire, only just beginning to comprehend the enormity of the events of the evening, he was roused from the depths of his thoughts by another prickling, unsettling sensation that lifted the fur on the nape of his neck. Once more, he felt watched, perhaps judged again, and he cast a baleful eye skyward. Surely there was nothing more his lunar torturer could do, and the moon agreed. It sat there, placid and as neutral as it had always seemed, but his uncertain anxiety wasn't decreased.

Stifling another growl, he pushed himself to his paws and scanned the sparse trees that surrounded him. He waited for another wave of agony, bracing himself for that profane heat that had broken and remade him, but it never came. And then he heard a voice.

"You survived." it said plainly. Gavin spun around, stumbling over his new feet as he practically leapt back and away from the unexpected sound. He fell heavily into the dirt, scrabbling like a clumsy newborn, but managed to right himself enough to peer suspiciously in the direction from which the unexpected sound had come.

He couldn't believe what sight greeted him. There, standing no further than twenty paces from his modest camp was a huge, shadowy creature. He blinked, trying to swallow back his alarm and force his mouth to work, but before he could, his guest took a cautious step toward him. "I was afraid you wouldn't make it... or that you'd go feral. Are you still sane? Can you speak?"

That voice... no mundane creature could make that noise. In spite of its wary softness, it thrummed with curious energy, deep and rich and wholly feminine. Its owner seemed to blur into the shadows, and it was only when it glided into the meager glow of his campfire that he saw why. It... she... she was covered almost completely in a coat of sleek, silvery grey fur that blended into the moonlight that washed over everything. Only when the timid yellow of flickering flame gave her shape and substance did he hiss in reply. "What... who are you?"

Her shoulders sagged with relief, and her steps lost much of their hesitation. Suddenly, she moved with prowling, predatory grace, walking silently on soft, padded paws. Her voices, velvety smooth, rang out again, louder and far more welcoming than his own sounded in his skull. "Thank the Gods you survived. I don't know what I would have done if you'd died."

With that unsettling statement, his lupine visitor paused beside his fire, staring down at him along the muzzle of a great, lovely wolf, one that had a curtain of silken, raven hair cascading around her face and down her back. Her body was long and lean and strong, muscled and inhumanly powerful, carrying luscious curves that dragged at his eye as she shifted her weight from paw to paw. She was shamelessly naked, and when he didn't appear willing to do much more speaking, she sighed and lowered herself smoothly to the ground beside the fire, her fluffy tail curled around her hip. "I'm sorry."

He blinked dumbly, and she watched him as he pushed himself up off of the dirt, wobbling dizzily. "Wh-what?"

Before answering him, she took a long moment to look him up and down. It occurred to him at that moment that he was no less naked than she, and he stooped to gather up a scrap of his ruined shirt to hang pitifully over his... unnatural loins. She smiled distantly at his modesty, but her continuation was a sober, sincere one. "I'm the one who did this to you. I'd hoped that it didn't take, that nothing would happen, but we all feel it when another is born, and I knew as soon as the moon rose that this would happen. I'm so sorry."

"What...?" he stammered, "Wh-what are you?"

She shrugged as she gestured broadly between them with a clawed hand. “This is what we are. I know that’s probably not really what you want to hear, but I don’t really know much more than that. I’ve only been like this for a few months.”

Gavin glanced anxiously around at the trees that surrounded them, half-expecting a dozen more wolf-creatures to materialize out of the shadows like this one had. “Are there more of you?”

To his surprise, she nodded. “Yeah, they’re around. The rest of my pack’s been watching you in case the pain drove you crazy. You weren’t really brought into the fold on normal terms, and even on the best terms, some people don’t make it. We didn’t really know what to expect. But... you made it, so you must be strong.”

His shoulders sagged, and he plodded over to the fire, set on some warmth at the very least. The she-wolf already lounging near the flames put in perspective the reality of his situation. She dwarfed everything about his campsite, his little tent, his tiny bedroll mangled next to his pack. She must have been well over seven feet tall. And then he stopped. As he neared her, he realized that despite her monstrous proportions, next to him, she appeared... delicate. He slumped next to the fire, tail lying listlessly in the grass, and mumbled, more to himself than anyone, “What happened to me?”

“I don’t really know if you remember,” the other wolf murmured, “Sometimes it’s hard to remember anything on the first night. You were playing your instrument at an inn—I can’t even remember the village’s name—and a friend of mine and I were there. I’d scratched out a little wooden flute and I was sitting outside with her. You offered to play with me...”

His brow furrowed deeply in thought, and perhaps seeing the beginnings of recognition in his eyes, she continued on, ears folding back in shame. “You were so kind—in a sort of helplessly charming way—like you were helping me impress someone I like without even realizing. I kind of got caught up in the moment, and it was too close to a full moon. I’m so new to this, and I... lost control. I almost shifted right there in the open, in broad daylight. Everything’s kind of fuzzy after that, but I guess you tried to help me, and I... bit you.”

A chill boiled up his spine, making the fur on his neck stand straight, and the back of his hand, the spot where that youthful, awkward woman’s teeth that left that shallow, bloody wound, tingled furiously. “You... I remember you. That was when all this started. The dreams...”

She nodded and stared into the fire, unwilling to make eye contact with him as his eyebrows threatened to climb off of his head. “Yeah...” she mumbled, folding her knees up and into her chest. “The dreams, the phantom pain, never being able to get enough sleep, being able to smell and hear and see so much more than normal. That’s how it starts.”

“Wait a minute...” he said, interrupting her as a glimmer of hope germinated in his chest. “You were human... You were human! You can fix this! How do I fix this?!”

She pulled her expressive, green eyes from the flames and fixed him with a stare that, without a word, crushed his hopes before they could blossom into anything meaningful. There was distraught, ashamed misery in that gaze. “No. There’s no cure. There’s no coming back from this. The most you can look forward to is living a lie.”

“But... but you were human. You can-”

“No!” she snapped with a snarl, jabbing a finger at him as if he’d made a dire accusation, “I clearly wasn’t! So what if we can cram ourselves in some human-shaped costume for a while?! *This* will always come back out! Every time! Every moon what you are, what you will be for the rest of your life, will come back out, and we do *not* like being caged like that! Look at

what I did when I thought it was safe! It's probably best if you just let everyone you know think you died, that some horrible monster was the end of you on some dark, lonely road."

He was laughing at her before she'd finished her statement, and it wasn't any false, mocking laughter. He bellowed rich, genuine laughter that took even him by surprise. He was scrubbing a tear from his eye by the time he could take a mellowing breath. "I understand you don't know my friends, but faking my death isn't an option. They'd turn the country inside-out to find my "killer." And what about my family? The people I love? I can't just turn my back on them. If I have to find a way to live with this *condition*, then I will. If I have to chain myself to a wall to keep people safe, I will. You just tell me what I need to do, and let *me* worry about the rest."

Her ears cautiously perked back up, and she frowned thoughtfully at him, as if seeing him for the first time. "I... I don't really know how to explain it, but... come with me. I'll take you back to my pack, and if they can't convince you then... they can help you."

With that, she quietly stood and started stalking away, deeper into the woods. He blinked, watching her receding back for a moment before renewed hope galvanized him into action. He called out for patience while he sloppily bundled up his things, kicked out his fire, and staggered after her, still unaccustomed to his unwieldy bulk and animalistic gait.

She slowed, but didn't stop, only peeking back over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't going to trip over his own feet. With each step he took, he felt more and more confidence, and he wasn't sure if he liked the sensation, but at least he no longer felt a clumsy step from filling his mouth with turf. "My name's Alexis, by the way," she informed him when he finally caught up.

"Gavin," he replied, "Gavin Hawkins. My friends call me Hawk."

"Creative," she mused skeptically. "Are you sure they're worth it?"

He just gave her a look that should have quite succinctly answered her question, and her ears folded back once more. "I'm sorry. None of the rest of my pack really had anything to lose when the wolf took them... I'd never really stopped to consider that you might... I'm sorry. I hope all this works out for you. I really do."

He sighed, trying to put aside the uncertainty that gnawed at his innards, and stared in the direction they were walking, toward Southcliff, to friends and home. "It will," he tried to convince himself. "I'll make it work."