

“Sooo, Marjorie! Big promotion, no? How’s it feel to be higher up?”

Champagne glasses clinked at the next table over as Marjorie leaned in, looking around exaggeratedly to drive the point of faux secrecy home. “Come on, Kel! You’re always so loud!”

The entire table laughed, Kelly looking mockingly offended.

“Oh, come on, Marge! You can’t just drop a bombshell like that and expect us to *just ignore it!* Spill the tea, sis!”

“Alright, alright! So pushy, you never did change, huh?”

Kelly nodded enthusiastically, and another round of laughs rang out. But instead of starting to explain, Marjorie grabbed her glass, signalling a toast. The other four girls raised their glasses in unison.

“To us! To our girl’s night!”

“To us! To old habits!”

And five glasses clinked, as high and lofty as the current mood.

*La cabra asada*. The Roasted Goat.

It had been an old tradition dating back to high school. Every Friday night Marjorie and her friends would all make a big deal of hanging out, occasionally go visit each other’s houses and usually end off with dinner. As teenagers they hadn’t had much, so the local fast food joints (and sometimes home-cooked meals from another member’s family, if they were lucky) were usually enough to sate them.

Then, they graduated. Got career jobs, with career pay, and career hours. Became adults with responsibilities and bills and separate lives, and eventually, due to work and college, the group eventually had to abandon the tradition, although remaining in touch for all those years since.

Now, over ten years later, Kelly had reached out, trying to rekindle old habits. And she’d chosen one of the nicest restaurants in the downtown area, indicative of just how far they’d gone from their teenage years.

Marjorie had somehow gone all those years while hiding the wolf in her closet, though. Quite literally.

She took a deep breath at the ornate double doors, quickly checking her watch.

8:34. She still had time.

Finally gathering her courage, she opened the door.

Somehow, the restaurant was even more elegant from the inside.

Red velvet seemed to carpet every surface, adorned with highlights of silver and chrome. She assumed the walls were dark oak panels, but it could easily have been some expensive wood she had no idea existed before. Everything, from the fancy paintings hung everywhere to the faux lace chandeliers, and even the soft lighting over everything, felt unnecessarily fancy.

It didn't take her long to notice Kelly waving her over from a table to her left. She'd clearly gone out, styling her blond hair in a distinctly professional yet luxurious way, one that fit perfectly with her tuxedo and squarish glasses.

"Marjorie! We were starting to get worried, what took you so long?"

Flashbacks to planning the route, planning her timing down to the minute, making sure there were no sidewalks and dark, shaded areas along the entire route home.

"Uh- traffic ended up backing up. Made crossing the street an absolute *nightmare*."

Kelly nodded, seeming to accept the answer. Marjorie breathed an internal sigh of relief. "So, Marjorie! It's been a while, hasn't it? You gotta tell us, *something* exciting had to have happened these last ten years!"

It took her a moment to recognize Alexis, she'd changed so much. Taller, more athletic... where had the shy, nerdy little girl from Junior year gone!? And Rachel, right next to her- Marjorie remembered reading something about her in the paper. She'd apparently landed a job as the face of Colgate, at least here in Portland, and quite frankly, she'd always had the looks to pull it off. Marjorie was secretly glad she'd also had the manners and common sense to match.

"Right... Uh, I recently got a promotion? So yay? Other than that, nothing much, really. College, actually landing a job, nothing much."

As the nearby waiters whisked back and forth, going about their daily duties, Rachel gasped from across the table. "You went the microbiology route, right? I heard about that corp you got a job for, ScionTech? Didn't they just branch out recently?"

Marjorie nodded. "Yeah, ever since all this magic stuff started popping up they've been trying to get their hands in that. Something about pioneering a new field? Which, that's not what I signed up for, but oh well."

The others shook their heads, clearly in disbelief.

"Mm. Still can't get over that, magic is real? And it can do things to people? I mean, look at those two archaeologists a while back! Doesn't one of them live in Seattle?"

Harmony. The most rambunctious and rebellious of the group back in the day, by far. Many times Marjory and Alexis had to hold her back from throwing a punch at a creep, and more than once they turned a blind eye as she went through with it. Now, though, it looked like she'd tampered down on that energy, at least outwardly.

"Yeah, the really big one! Can't remember his name, but he looks so *soft* and *squishy*- Oh, I'd love to meet him, if only just once! I hope people are treating him right."

Kelly tried (and failed) to stifle a laugh. "I'd like to see the idiot who messes with a dragon, Harmony, especially one that big. You'd have to be an absolute *dumbass* to go that far!"

A round of agreement, punctuated by a couple "Mm-hmm"s and "Damn straight!"s.

After the waiters took their orders, delivering a round of drinks and disappearing back into the kitchens, the talk only got more lively from there. Kelly had landed a job as a software developer for a game company, working on a big name AAA title Marjorie didn't recognize off the top of her head. Alexis and Rachel had moved in together in Seattle, Rachel confirming her status as the primary Colgate model, with Alexis still in med school to get her MD. Harmony, already climbing her way up the Union ladder at the local steel plant, was the only blue collar worker yet she somehow made the most out of all of them.

After much casual conversation, discussing various personal happenings over the last decade over the meals their server brought out not soon after the career talks.

9:19.

"Sooo, Marjorie! Big promotion, no? How's it feel to be higher up?"

Glasses clinked. Toast was made.

10:27.

"You still didn't answer the question, Marge! You holding out on us?"

Marjorie managed a small, fake laugh, trying not to let the panic into her voice.  
“No! It’s just- complicated to explain, is all...”

Kelly snorted. “More complicated than compiling a game engine with several different teams globally? Puh-lease. Complicated is normal, Marge. Lay it on us!”

The others around the table voiced their agreements, and Marjorie had no choice but to go through with it.

She cleared her throat.

“Like Rachel mentioned, yeah, ScionTech just branched out. With all that magic... stuff... They wanted to find a way to take advantage of that. Try and use the scientific approach to it. So they made several new departments, and I’m apparently head of R&D for the new Development of Experimental Recombinant Genetics branch. The higher-ups think it’s soooo funny shortening the name to D.E.R.G. Ugh, I will never understand some people.”

A small sound, and she shot Alexis a stern glance over her champagne glass. “Got something to say, Alexis?”

“Sorry- *D.E.R.G.*? Someone knew exactly what they were doing, Marjorie, I hate to break it to ya.”

She just rolled her eyes as the others laughed, taking another bite of her steak.

“So, what does this new branch do? You mentioned other ones, too-”

Marjorie swallowed, somewhat caught off guard by the question. “Ah- sorry. Yeah, my specific branch is trying to engineer magic into serums, something about ‘bringing the magic home to the customer in the form of transformation.’ Yeah, they really took notice of those two dragons on TV. Damn corporate greed.”

“Marge, I think that’s awesome! Just being able to buy a syringe, pop it in and voila! Instant animal. I think that’s so *cool*, and you’re so lucky to be in charge of a project like that!”

Marjorie didn’t respond, only giving a slight huff as the others agreed. After a moment, Harmony brought up something about the recent sports game, and she was relieved to finally get away from this touchy subject.

It was 11:52 by the time they finally exited the restaurant.

Kelly lived nearby, only a few minutes walk. As it turned out, so did Marjorie, which meant the both of them were stuck walking home together on the sidewalk, neither of them having taken their car to the dinner.

Kelly didn't seem to notice as Marjorie glanced at her watch, completely missing her worried, almost frantic expression.

"It feels so good to be able to get the gang back together, huh, Marge?"

"Huh- oh, yeah. Been a while, for sure."

The two walked in silence for a little bit, Kelly finally picking up on Marjorie's vibe.

"You- alright? You've been a little off the whole night."

Marjorie sighed.

"I- I shouldn't have come tonight. I was stupid, I should've stayed home-"

"Hey! I'm definitely glad you came out, and I'm not the only one! We haven't seen each other in a decade, and we live right across the damn street!"

Marjorie managed a weak smile at Kelly's words. "Yeah... it's... hard to explain. Personal problems. Need to be home by a specific time, and it's almost then-"

"Oh, you'll be fine. What's a few minutes? Besides, I can just call an Uber or something if we get lost. Not like we're in *downtown Seattle* or anything, no?"

Kelly glanced back, stopping when she realized Marjorie wasn't there. She pulled out her phone to send her a message, but only managed to catch the time before her screen went dark, her phone dead.

12:01.

"H-hey? Marjorie? Where'd you go...?"

A retching sound, coming from the alley they'd just passed. Another. Sounded like Marjorie, that was for sure.

"Marge...? You alright?"

Slowly, cautiously, Kelly stepped into the alley, out of the harsh light of the streetlamps and into the silvery tones of the moon.

Marjorie was crouched behind a dumpster, trying to hide herself from the view of the road. Another retch, this time quite... wet. Ew. Kelly took another step, almost within arm's reach...

"Marge...?"

All of a sudden, Marjorie snapped up, sending Kelly reeling back in shock.

Her eyes.

Her eyes were *glowing*.

“N-no- Kel- Get- back-”

A violent *crack*, and Kelly managed to scoot herself away as Marjorie howled in pain, ducking back down behind the dumpster. Kelly watched, horrified, as her best friend began to mutate in front of her own eyes.

The dumpster blocked most of her view, but one of Marjorie’s legs was in clear view. Clear view as it spasmed, kicking the high heel off violently as her foot cracked, elongating, toes swelling and congealing-

One of Marjorie’s hands grabbed the top of the dumpster, not a moment before a growl. She clenched her fist, slightly deforming the metal as sharp black claws silently pierced through her fingers, also swelling and congealing just like her toes. Or, what *had* been her toes. For, as her ankle kept cracking and realigning, she most definitely had *paws* instead.

*Paws.*

Kelly tried to push herself up, tried to get away, but the alley was still slick from last night’s rain and she only succeeded in getting her tux even wetter. She was forced to watch in horror as Marjorie’s dress, already pushed to its limits by her growing muscle mass, started to rip at the seams, thick fur starting to sprout from the tears. She reared her head back with a vicious growl, giving Kelly a full view as her face lengthened, taking her nose with it.

Kelly didn’t know what to do. Her phone was dead, she didn’t have the traction to get up. She feared what would happen if she tried to yell for help, would that set Marjorie off...? As her friend continued to change and mutate, Kelly only watched in horror, watched as Marjorie’s legs finished changing to digitigrade, that thick fur covering them. Watched as a thick tail burst through the back of her dress, a naked thing about as long as her arm had been. Watched as her hand finished morphing into a handpaw, thick, wickedly sharp claws digging into the metal and gouging it.

Dress tearing, almost fully destroyed. Last little bits of fur growing in, covering her face, her tail. The pops and cracks slowed, then stopped.

The transformation was over.

An eerie silence fell over the alleyway, now that her friend’s bones weren’t realigning. Kelly managed not to squeak in horror as Marjorie stood up, panting, a couple of feet taller than she had been- not Marjorie. But the thing in front of her wasn’t Marjorie... some wolf-like beast, taking the place of her friend. The beast wiped away the grime from its face fur, glancing down at its handpaws with a whine.

Kelly didn't breathe as it finally noticed her.

*'This is it- this is where I die. I had a great run-'*

She screwed her eyes shut as the beast approached, not willing to look her death in the face.

A moment.

Two.

Nothing.

No, wait- a whine. A... rather sad whine, too. She risked a peek, and was surprised to see the beast simply... standing there, ears down... looking pitiful.

A moment passed, and Kelly managed to push herself up. The beast, seeing this, offered Kelly a handpaw to help her up, and after a moment of panicking, Kelly decided she had no choice but to accept. Surprisingly gentle, the paw pads on its fingers the roughest part of it.

Silence.

Another whine, as the beast stared down at Kelly.

Suddenly, it didn't seem so scary...

"Marjorie...?"

Ears flicked, and the beast managed a nod.

So she was still in there, then. She, not it.

"C-can you talk?"

Another whine. No.

Kelly glanced back towards the road, relieved to see it was still empty. She didn't know what was happening, seeing her best friend transform into this... thing, black fur blending into the alleyway, the only indicators she'd ever been human being the scraps of blue sequined fabric still clinging to her much larger, much more muscular frame.

"... Werewolf...?"

Another nod.

“But... Marjorie... Why didn't you tell us? Why hide it?”

A major reaction. Marjorie managed to lean down, whining and burying her head into Kelly's (much smaller) hand. The pitiful look she gave told her everything she needed to know.

*'How would you have reacted? Why should I have to go through that?'*

Marjorie gave Kelly's hand a small lick, and Kelly couldn't help but giggle, despite her lingering fear.

“Alright, alright! You're still friendly! We- we need to get off the streets. My house is closest, we can crash there for the night. Just- promise me you'll try not to break anything?”

Marjorie's ears perked up, and her tail started wagging. Good signs. Taking one of her handpaws, Kelly then proceeded to lead the way out of the alley, turning left towards safety, towards privacy.

Her best friend was a werewolf.

What a world.