



Russell

*Emily
Veinglory*

Here Comes
THE SUN

ECLIPSE OF THE HEART:
HERE COMES THE SUN

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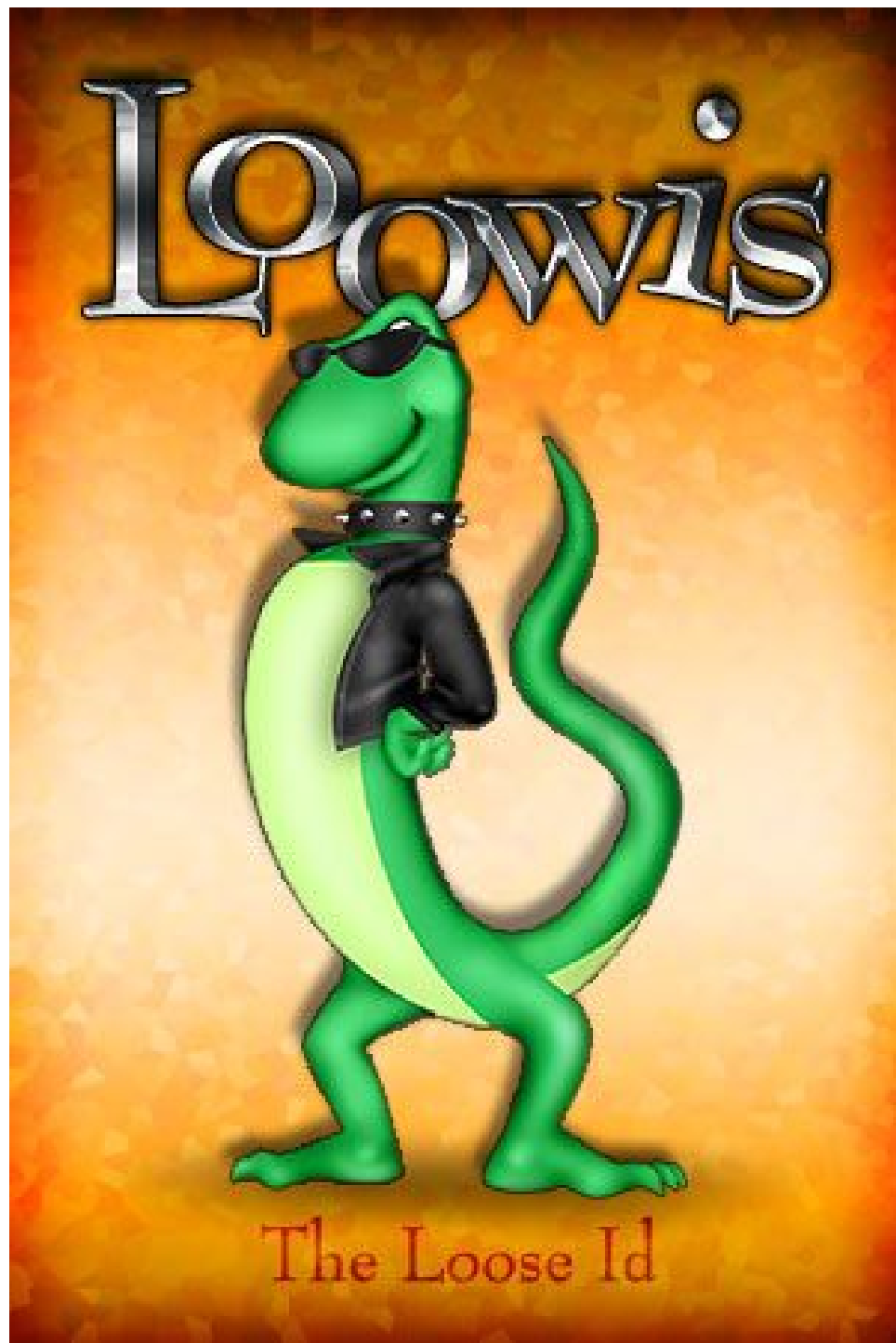
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Chapter One

When a man makes eye contact with another man in a bar, it's either a pickup or a fight brewing, and trouble either way. Mason grimaced. It was less than an hour 'til closing, and for a small-town bar, the crowd had been pretty good. He hadn't had to bounce anyone, just some light shooing of those who had had enough or were too young to have any at all. Greyfriars was pretty much unique in this campus town for actually enforcing the drinking age. It aimed for an older, richer, and more hometown demographic.

The band was breaking down, and being acoustic, they were doing a pretty quick job of it. The crowd was thinning out, heading variously for the bar, the toilets, or the door. Because of the live music, the customers were running a little younger than usual, but this potential troublemaker was an exception. He was lounging against the counter at the far end of the small performance space, a fortyish-looking man with a gaunt face and long red hair streaked with gray. About the only thing remarkable about him was something in his eyes, an intensity that made Mason want to look away and meant he knew he couldn't. Greyfriars was a small, generally well behaved sort of place. They only had one man on security midweek, and he was it.

So I can't stand here all night staring at this bugger.

Finally he gave the guy a scowl that he hoped communicated fair warning, then turned away. No point really escalating things just because he didn't like the guy's eyes -- dark, nasty pinholes that they were. He went to help behind the bar for the last rush. Not serving, but getting out more glasses, reloading the washer, and restocking the spirits. As he flipped a fresh bottle of vodka into the rack, he could see the redhead strolling over, coming to stand right across from him.

"You gonna get me a bourbon?" the man said. Something in his tone made it sound like an insult. In fact, he was betting that voice could make pretty much anything sound like an insult.

"I'm the muscle, not the mixer," Mason said mildly. "Laura or Barry will sort you out in just a sec." Up close, it was clear the guy was short. Maybe five-three and change, and not exactly buff, either.

"Be with you soon, hun," Laura said, hands full of frosty bottles of alcopop destined for the gaggle of girls who were watching them from the corner of the bar.

"You don't know how to pour liquid from a bottle into a glass?" the man asked belligerently.

Houston, we have a dickhead.

But there was something about him -- a stance, a static, the way he stood full-on with his body tense, and closer up, those eyes... A fucking werewolf. Shacking up with a were had opened Mason's eyes to a whole new -- and, for the most part, damned unpleasant -- secret subculture in town. But this wasn't one of the town pack; he didn't have their stature. In fact, Mason had never seen a wolf that was this small in human form. And besides, the redhead was on his own. The Hameltown wolves were never seen without a few bros in tow. So who the hell was this guy?

This I do not need. Mason gave an insincere smile and leant his palms on the smudged top of the wooden bar. "So, dog," he said, "are we going to have trouble?"

The guy looked him up and down. Mason had about a foot of “up” on him, but that didn’t mean much with were. The girls started giggling again, and some of the other patrons seemed amused too. It must have looked like a pretty uneven match. But that didn’t stop the tremor in Mason’s arms or the fear that was probably stinking off him. He still had the scars from the last time he’d tangled with wolves. But he stood still, and he waited. He’d make a fight of it if he had to.

Finally the guy pushed back from the bar. “I should think we *are* going to have some trouble,” he said acidly. He turned and made his way out of the bar to the subtle mocking of some of the bystanders making exaggerated *ohs* and *oh, nos* of fear.

The were went out onto the street, showing no sign that he heard or cared about the crowd’s reaction. He cast one glance back through the glass as he walked off down the street -- one glance and a smile. Mason felt the threat of it hit him in the chest, making it hard to breathe. He remembered the hot breath of the wolf pack once they’d had him down on the ground, feeling his own flesh rip and start to tear away from his bones.

“Cocky for a scrawny little fuck,” Laura said blithely as she slid past him.

Mason had heard the phrase “like someone walking over your grave.” This was the first time he really understood what it meant. Something was going on, something he didn’t know about, something that involved him. They’d been lucky to go so long without trouble since that big showdown between the town wolves and Lan’s friends, the deer. The Were Council had depended on getting the support of all the other weres, strengthening their position before the pack regrouped. But the other, less amiable, shifters were still out there and probably making plans of their own.

Something told Mason that this red-haired were would not only like to walk on his grave; he’d be more than willing to put him in it first.

Chapter Two

It was around three in the morning when Mason crept up to his front door, trying to shake off the tension of seeing the strange were. He slid the key soundlessly into the old brass lock with one hand, while holding a wine bottle, car keys, and wallet crammed together in the other.

It was ridiculous, really. When your boyfriend is a werewolf, there isn't much chance of sneaking into the house unnoticed, and certainly not into the bed. Besides, the old cottage never failed to give him away. The door stuck, as usual, and he had to give it a good shove with his shoulder to get it open. The hinges squealed, and the warped wooden frame creaked as the door finally burst inwards.

The hallway was dimly lit by a plug-in nightlight. Lan had put it there because Mason kept stumbling over the hall table on his way in after work. It was a thoughtful act, but somehow also a scolding one. Mason tried to push that thought away; Lan was just trying to be helpful. Of course, Lan didn't have this problem -- he could pretty much see in the dark.

Mason stepped into the hallway and placed the nearly full bottle of wine, a perk of the job, on the sideboard, along with his other stuff. He dropped his denim jacket on the polished wood floor; a miasma of stale cigarette smoke wafted up from it. Mason grimaced.

As much as he just wanted to get to sleep, he was going to have to shower first. Lan was forever nagging him to give up smoking, and Mason had said he would. But he'd taken a quick, illicit cigarette break at work, standing in a narrow alley full of all the other smokers doing the same. He was going to be caught in that lie.

Lan came to the bedroom doorway, naked. His eyes were bleary and his sandy hair tousled. Mason smiled. Seeing Lan, he remembered the moment they'd met and how it had changed everything in his life. Lan had been living next door in a seventies breezeblock apartment building. Mason had been eyeing up his shabby-but-sexy neighbor for a few weeks before they finally met properly. Lan was slightly built and baby-faced, easily passing for someone ten years younger than his real age of thirty-five. He had a sort of tentative way of acting and a gentleness, a vulnerability, that most men would try to cover up.

One day, as Mason had been going past Lan's door, he had seen a big thug pushing his way in and punching Lan hard in the face. Mason hadn't hesitated to grab the man, a pushy ex, and put him down. Mason had privately thought of himself as Lan's protector from then on, and Lan, for his part, seemed to welcome the security and support Mason offered.

Of course, Mason hadn't known then that under the demeanor of a diffident professor lurked the innate ferocity of a werewolf. Once Lan got over what Dr Phil would probably call "self-esteem issues," he really wasn't going to need much protecting from anything -- and then where would Mason be?

"Go back to bed. It's late," Mason said, taking one step forward. He stopped short, knowing he was covered not only in smoke, but sweat and a good number of drinks slopped and spilled on him in the jostling crowd. Lan yawned and rubbed his face. With a sigh, he stepped into Mason's embrace.

"Lan, I stink," Mason protested.

He wouldn't be so fastidious for himself, but he knew Lan was cultured enough to be particular and wolf enough to have sharper senses than most. Lan's body fit into his arms. A

few inches shorter and far lighter than Mason, he was just right, like the next size down in a set of Russian dolls.

Lan pulled him towards the bedroom, his intent immediately clear. For a long time at the beginning of their relationship, Mason had always been the one to make the first move. After they'd moved to Hameltown and Lan had become involved in the Were Council, he had started to show new confidence in all areas of his life. But it was still a sporadic boldness that fit awkwardly with his habitual character.

For a moment Mason was reluctant. Lan worked during the day, lecturing psychology at the university, and Mason worked at the bar most nights, straight through from six p.m. to two in the morning. In an effort to get their lives to overlap as much as possible, they ended up missing a lot of sleep. It was a compromise that was causing them both problems, but it seemed like neither of them wanted to be the one to bring it up. They tried to bridge the widening gap physically, but lately even their sex seemed fumbling and stilted.

Yet as Lan stripped Mason's T-shirt up and off, the merest brush of his fingers and puff of his breath turned the tide of Mason's weariness and pushed all those doubts aside. Lan unfastened Mason's jeans, then pushed them and his underwear down. Mason wanted to grab Lan, to feel him yield to his advances and to... He deliberately held back. He had nagged at Lan to be less passive, had sometimes not been sure whether Lan even welcomed his advances. So he tried not to fall into the habit of taking control.

Mason managed to pull off his boots by standing on the edge of one and lifting his foot out, then using his bare foot on the toe of the other boot. Kicking off his sagging jeans, Mason was standing unbalanced when Lan pushed him backwards. Mason flailed in the darkness and thumped onto the mattress.

"Bloody hell," he exclaimed. Lan was already following on top of him, lithe and predatory. Mason felt a surge of alarm. Lan didn't seem entirely...himself.

It was disconcerting to be on his back. Mason's job -- Mason's nature -- was to be in control. He held himself back with tangible effort and just pushed back with his arms so he lay spread out across the bed. Lan straddled him, looking down, his face hidden in the shadows. His stance was tense, even aggressive, not the usual deferential, cautious Lan that Mason knew and loved.

Mason stifled his reaction; he loved Lan as he was, even as changes unfolded from him. When Lan had first revealed his wolf nature, Mason has been shocked, shaken...and had deserted him. Only for a few days, as it happened, but it was a betrayal Mason still struggled to atone for and learn from. He had to be a better man than that. *I would love Lan no matter what.* But that felt more like a hope than a certainty. Maybe Mason simply didn't have that in him, no matter how much Lan deserved it.

Their kiss was hard, Lan pressing down, almost challenging him. Mason pushed up to meet him, bending his knees and pulling Lan down towards him. But his lover was awkward and resistant in his arms. Mason all but wrestled with him before giving up in exasperation and lying back with a hiss, the backs of his hands flat on the mattress.

Lan's kisses pressed down in a barrage, growing to nips that were strange for him, but seemed merely playful. Then Lan bit down hard on Mason's shoulder, a possessive, pinning gesture. His teeth dug in sharply, pressing painfully into flesh. Mason clutched the sheets to resist striking back. He knew Lan wouldn't mean to hurt him, but there was an animal in his soul, and sometimes it came out, although never before like this. He tried to gently pry Lan away, then finally descended to shaking him roughly to try to bring him to his senses. Lan growled and pulled away with a jerk. His ardor seemed to cool as quickly as it had flared.

"Mason, I'm sorry," Lan blurted. "I am just..." His voice broke uncertainly.

"You've just not been a wolf in a long time."

Lan was surprised, of course. He never expected Mason to put stuff together, to figure it out. They just looked at each other in the grainy darkness, sprawled together across the disordered bed. Of course, it wouldn't be as dark to Lan's eyes.

"You need to be in your other form," Mason said patiently. "I know that. I can take you out to the greenbelt while it's still dark. But not before I have a shower."

Chapter Three

As he leaned back in the driver's seat, Mason's mind was fogged with fatigue and confusion. Lan had gone into the woods, furtively, leaving his clothes tucked in the passenger-side footwell, neatly folded into a plastic bag he kept in the glove box for just that purpose -- a very fastidious werewolf.

He hadn't changed his shape until he was out of sight. Lan didn't like to "do it" in front of Mason unless he had to -- probably because of the reaction he'd gotten that first time. Mason folded his arms against the cold. He still couldn't quite shake off the horror of seeing the man he loved transform into a wild animal. It didn't just change what he thought he knew about Lan; it changed what he thought he knew about the world -- about reality. And he'd had no warning. Lan hadn't even tried to tell him, just took him outside and showed him.

Acceptance had been slow to come, and they never really had talked it out afterwards. In many ways, they'd never recovered the closeness they used to have, although he knew they both wanted to. At first he'd simply had trouble understanding that Lan was still Lan, just as he'd always known him, albeit with a lot of extra baggage. There were the politics of the were; the council trying to bring the different herds, packs, and scattered individuals

together; and most of the wolves determined to maintain their *laissez faire* and murderous ways. But he'd had time now to get used to all that. It wasn't really the issue anymore -- although he needed to find a way to bring up the were in Greyfriars last night and try to find out what that was all about. Damned if he could think of a way to do it that didn't leave him looking more than a little paranoid.

Mason snorted in disgust at his own dithering. There would only be a few more hours before dawn, maybe a little longer before anyone was out and about in this part of the park. He fiddled with the seat control. If he could just lie back a bit, he might grab an hour or two of sleep. It was not just his thoughts that bothered him. His feet ached and his shoulder stung. He was still damp from the shower, and though the car heater was starting to kick in and the air was stuffy, he was cold right through.

He could still feel them, the two round, ridged indentations burning like brands on his skin and aching like one hell of a bruise was setting in. The bite had been oozing blood. He had tried slapping a couple of sheets of toilet paper on it as if it were some oversized shaving cut. One of them was still stuck in place. He reached back now and pulled it out from under his shirt. Balling it up and trying not to see the rust-colored drying bloodstains, he cracked open the door briefly to toss it out. Half dozing, he drifted, a nagging feeling at the back of his mind. He couldn't quite drop off, knowing Lan was out there somewhere, alone.

Lan had grown up in human care, institutions and foster homes. Even his animal form set him apart from his kind when he found them, not fully wolf, but instead half coyote, some kind of hybrid. Only over the last few years had he mixed with weres, other loners and outcasts, and finally the Hameltown deer. The wolves were too vicious; he never fitted in with them. But Mason knew Lan still had some of those instincts himself. These shape-shifters whose other self was a predator, they needed to hunt and to be with the pack -- to be with their own kind. And that was something Mason knew he could never be.

The sound of a motorcycle broke through the early morning hush. He presumed it would just pass by, but instead he heard the engine hiccup down through the gears as it slowed. Probably some tourist looking for directions.

The headlight of the bike swept over the interior of the car and pulled up by the passenger side.

A man kicked the stand and leant the bike over. It was some half-plastic monster, Mason noted, Kawasaki with an apple green faring. Based on that, the man's slightly dated clothing -- jeans, a white button-up shirt, and a leather racing-style jacket -- wasn't too surprising. His hair was long and tightly curled, like a perm, although it could have been natural. So the good news was that he probably wasn't a robber. The bad news was that he was probably a cop. All he'd need to be a perfect cliché were a moustache and a notebook.

The man walked slowly around the car, a real old-style intimidation move. Mason sat facing forward, not letting it get to him until the cop opened the passenger door of Mason's old Renault and sat down presumptuously, closing the door after himself.

"And what can I do for you, officer?" Mason said.

Mason leaned forward and flipped open the glove compartment to pull out a crumpled box of cigarettes. One of the advantages of having a disgusting habit was that it could be used to cover up any nervousness. Hopefully, whoever this was wouldn't pay too much attention to the grocery bag full of clothes in the footwell. The cop's toes were brushing the edge of the plastic, but Mason tried not to look. He pulled his Zippo from the inside pocket of his jacket and went through the motions of lighting up.

"People are always so smug about spotting a police officer," the man said. "Really it says more about them than anything else, that they can tell. But I don't recall seeing much in the way of a record on you, Mr Patterson."

"Most people think I'd be just the type," Mason said, snapping the lighter shut and tucking it away as he decided just how far to let this guy push him. But it put him on the

defensive, knowing that the cop knew who he was, and he didn't like it. Could the cop have been watching them from somewhere when Lan got out? Mason glanced out the foggy window, knowing Lan might return at any time, and Mason sure as hell didn't want anyone starting to get suspicious about what a college professor was doing naked in the woods in the predawn hours.

The man sighed and pulled out his ID. "I've been working with the Were Council," he said. "So there's no need to butt heads here."

"You're the one following folks around in the middle of the night." Mason puffed out a cloud of smoke and watched it hang and dissipate. He hadn't heard anything about the council working with any kind of police, but then, he hadn't really involved himself. The whole gang were led by an old gent called Acton, a weredeer, dean of the psychology department at the university where Lan worked. Acton and his old lady were okay, but most of the rest of them clammed up whenever there was someone in the room who wasn't one of them.

The cop wound down the window on his side. "If you're going to be like that, that's fine. Here's what I'm here to say. I just wanted to make sure you knew. To a wolf, everything that isn't pack is prey, and this pack has been getting bolder, working with a company called Krypt. You can ask your boy Lan about Krypt -- they know all about wolves. The Hameltown wolves have started openly counting humans as prey. Soon they're going to start acting on it, and I know they've targeted you before. I know the council are watching Krypt. I know Krypt is recruiting wolves. And the wolves have got you in their sights. It's not the whole story, but it's all that I know right now. Maybe the council knows more, but they aren't telling slobs like me -- or, I bet, you -- about it. I figure you have the right to know what I know, because anything less might get you killed. For the rest, you need to talk to your furry buddies."

Mason sucked deep on the cigarette and held it, feeling the nicotine hit his system in a sharp burst. He couldn't assume this man was really in the council's trust. He didn't dare say

anything. But he thought about the guy in the club that night. And he thought about the last time he'd gone against wolves, when he and Lan had first moved to Hameltown, before Mason knew anything about weres. The memories swarmed up.

He'd been standing in the backyard with a weed-whacker, trying to get a start on taming the neglected garden. A pack of what he'd assumed were large dogs had come around the side of the house. They'd been on him in a second, knocking him down as they tore at him. He'd hardly been able to do a thing to defend himself and had survived only because they didn't bother to finish him off. It had shaken him to be so helpless. Those feelings -- fear and disgust -- had been part of his reaction later when Lan had showed that an animal like that was in him, too. Emotions, fears, primal and cowering inside him, curdled in his gut every time he was around a were. Even Lan.

"I'm Ross, by the way," the man said in a change of tack, offering a hand awkwardly across, which Mason ignored. "Well, be like that. But they *didn't* tell you what was going on with Krypt and the wolves, did they? Try as they might, they haven't really learned to let outsiders in on their problems -- the ones they face or the ones they cause. And now the deer and other weres are getting organized, they're protecting themselves better from the wolves, and the wolves are turning to humans. More than they had already, that is. Do you think that bothers your friends on the council? Do you think they'll lift a finger for ordinary folks like me and you?"

The cop was starting to get worked up, and the question was clearly rhetorical. "I went to the police when I had my trouble," Mason snapped, keeping things deliberately vague. "*They* didn't do me much good." He stopped just short of adding "either."

"I read the report. You didn't know then, did you? You said some things someone covering up for the weres wouldn't say. Like when you said the dogs that attacked you 'looked like wolves.' Someone who knows tries to stay away from that sort of thing. If they come into hospital at all, the pit bull tends to get the blame a --"

“Yeah, well, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mason said, cutting him off. He wound down the window on his side and tossed his cigarette out, though he was no more than a third through it. It was an invitation to leave.

“All right, then.” Ross pulled a card from his wallet and placed it in the still-open glove box. “But once you’ve checked me out, keep in mind what I said. I came down here because there’s a couple of girls gone missing already. Not weres themselves, as far as I can tell, but last seen with some men I know damn well are wolves. The Hameltown pack have been challenged and humiliated by this new alliance between the shifter species. Were-prey are getting all cozy with each other, even the cats and the coyotes. God knows what Krypt is doing with the wolves, but I doubt it’s anger management training. They’re out there right now, looking for easy targets.”

He sounded pretty frustrated, but a couple of missing girls and a conspiracy of silence will probably do that to a cop. He got out of the car and back on his bike. Mason watched him go. He had to admit he felt a sneaking tendency to assume this Ross was on the up and up. If women were getting hurt, that was more important than anything else. He struggled with an impulse to get out of the car and go after Ross, to find out what he could do to nail the wolves that were responsible. Lan had mentioned Krypt. They’d kidnapped a were up in Orclundt a while back; some cryptozoology nut working for them had been trying to out the weres. So how the hell did it all fit together?

And through it all, the last two words Ross had said stuck in Mason’s mind. There he sat, well over six feet tall, wide-shouldered, army-trained, knew how to handle himself -- and an *easy target*. That was the world he’d got mixed up in. He took a deep breath and peered out the window, hoping Lan might have decided to come back early. He might not look like too much of a hard target, either, to a pack of angry wolves.

Chapter Four

Mason turned the business card over in his hand. It did little more than identify Ross Bailey as a detective, with three words underneath in italics: *Special Task Force*. A cell phone number was written on the back with a Sharpie that had bled through the thin grade of card. He put it in his pocket next to the lighter and reminded himself that he was meant to be giving up smoking -- and giving up taking men's phone numbers, to boot. He smiled ruefully and tossed his Zippo in the cup holder, but kept the card in his pocket.

Dawn wasn't so much breaking as oozing out of the mist when two figures finally emerged through the shrubbery. Lan followed behind another, lankier animal. The last few months had been something of a crash course in zoology, so Mason knew the stranger was a full-blooded coyote. The coyote continued along the path toward a rest stop farther up the road. Lan slowed, still looking in the direction of his retreating companion, before finally turning towards Mason.

Mason reached over and pushed open the passenger door, and by the time he looked up, Lan was in human form, dashing for the car. Behind him, the coyote retreated into the tree line. Morphing into a scrawny, red-haired man waist deep in ferns, he turned back as he

walked away. Those dark eyes were smug and hostile at the same time. The bastard from the bar.

Mason tried to cover his confusion and the shiver he always felt at seeing an animal become a man, let alone *that* man. "Leave it any later, and someone is going to spot you naked on the side of the road," he said. It didn't come out in quite the jocular tone he had been going for.

"Professors are supposed to be kooky," Lan replied. "I'll just tell them I'm a nocturnal naturist jogger." Lan reached for his clothes. He looked up and apparently clocked that Mason wasn't in a joking mood.

"So who was that?" Mason asked quietly. "That you were with, I mean."

"What do you mean, *with*?" Lan was quiet, tense.

"I didn't mean... I just wondered who it was."

"Just a coyote."

"Ah," Mason said, as if that made sense or counted as any kind of explanation -- as if that didn't make him wildly suspicious. He knew Lan wouldn't...hadn't... "What's he doing out here?" Mason asked, not sure that he wanted to know. It wasn't as if Lan could even have known he was going out there this morning, so he couldn't have made some kind of plan to meet up with whoever the hell that guy was.

"You've been smoking in here." Lan's voice was muffled by the sweatshirt he was pulling over his head. He clearly didn't want to talk about the coyote. "And..." But he didn't complete whatever he intended to say next.

That brought Mason's thoughts back to the cop, Ross. But how was he supposed to jam that into the conversation without sending it into a real tailspin? Mason leaned forward and started the car. He was even getting used to these frayed edges in their conversations. What was the other option, really? He wanted to push, to rant and rave and ask exactly who this guy was, like some big jealous bastard. And to move from there to the council sitting by and

letting Krypt and the town wolves have something to do with women going missing. He didn't know what to say without saying it all, and it certainly wasn't a conversation to have in the car.

They drove back to the house in silence. Mason kept his eyes on the road as Lan struggled back into his clothes. Out of the corner of his eye, Mason could see Lan's gaze dart over to him a dozen times.

"It's only because I don't want you to get sick," Lan finally said, hesitantly.

"What?"

"I don't want to nag about the cigarettes. I just don't want you to get sick. I don't...can't watch you doing that, and not say something." His words were strained, trying to hold back emotion. Lan was, no doubt about it, a "sensitive New Age man," but he wasn't given to melodrama. "My foster dad, you know..." Lan added.

"The one who gave you up."

"They... You, of all people, should understand the shock it was to them when I was just a teen and the genes kicked in. They saw me change right in front of them, and back then, even I didn't know what it was. They *had* to go along with the psychiatrist and say it was just my delusion, that it hadn't really happened. And after that, I was down as psychotic -- it was me or the younger kids that had to go. They did their best."

Me, of all people. Mason's face flushed. Yes, he should understand. He'd run away from it himself, run all the way back to his parents' house so that Lan had to track him down and all but beg him to come back. And Lan hadn't done a thing wrong; he was just as God made him. Presumably. And there was a big pile of thinking there that Mason hadn't even started to get into and Lan, atheist that he was, hadn't even thought of.

"My foster dad, he used to smoke a pipe," Lan said. "It always made me feel at home, the smell of it. Once it was clear that tobacco was dangerous, he would go out back into the garden and wouldn't let us kids be around him when he was smoking. But the smell of the

pipe tobacco was on him and..." Lan broke off, then added, "I was an undergraduate, second year, when I found out he had emphysema. They wouldn't let me see him at the hospital because I wasn't listed as immediate family, and legally I wasn't family anyway. I could have asked my ex-foster mom, but it just seemed like she had enough to deal with without me dragging up all that stuff about me, just then. So I didn't see him before..."

Mason shook his head. "I'll stop. I will."

"Don't just say it because I'm --"

"I'm not. I will." Of course, he had said that before, but he hadn't *known*. He really hadn't known it was more than PC nagging on the health issue of the day. But he should have guessed. Lan wasn't one to take a stand unless he had a reason.

Mason pulled into the driveway. "You should try and grab a few hours' sleep before getting to work," he said. They both got out of the car and went to the front door. Mason fumbled for the keys.

"Hardly worth it now," Lan said. "You go ahead. I'll get off to uni."

The wine bottle was still sitting on the hall table. Mason picked it up and went through to the kitchen. "Shiraz," he said. That was Lan's favorite. Mason was never much for wine. Lan made an effort at a smile, but it wasn't very convincing. He started to make coffee. His slender fingers made the routine task a dance. Mason couldn't help but stop and watch.

He still hadn't mentioned Ross or anything the cop had said. He knew it was a mistake. Now they seemed okay, relaxed with each other again, and he didn't want to spoil it. But he should say something to stop it from growing into a secret. And besides, he felt it all fitted together somehow, the wolves, Krypt, the red-haired coyote...and Lan. But he didn't know how to say anything about what Ross had told him without it seeming like some kind of accusation. If there was a threat from the wolves, Lan would tell him, surely?

"I made decaf," Lan said. "So you can have some and then catch up on your sleep once I'm off. Here, give me your jacket."

“No, it’s all right.”

“What are you talking about? The heating is on. Give it here.”

Lan tugged, and Mason let him lift off the heavy jacket. He prayed the toilet paper had done its job well enough, but Lan froze. “Mason, let me see.”

“It’s nothing, really.” Mason tried to turn away.

“Let me see.” Lan tossed the jacket onto the kitchen table.

There wasn’t much point in resisting. Lan would see eventually. Lan pulled the shirt up, and Mason pulled it off the rest of the way.

“Lan, really...” Mason peered over. The bruising was starting to come up, large scarlet clouds around the crescents of fresh scabs. He heard Lan hiss, tugging at the tissue still sticking to his skin at the back, but not pulling it free. “Come into the bathroom,” Lan said tersely.

“Lan, I know you didn’t...”

But Lan wasn’t listening. He turned on the hot tap in the sink. When it warmed up, he put in the plug and turned off the tap so a few cups of water were left, then tipped in some detergent.

“Lan...” It was hard to know just what to say.

Lan was frowning, not looking him in the face. He looked tense and pale. “I didn’t know I had done...this,” he said. He took the edge of a towel and soaked it, then dampened the tissue and pulled it off. Reflected in the bathroom mirror, the bite at the back looked a lot worse, deep and inflamed. In several places, it started to bleed again, the blood seeping quickly into the water and flaring out in a bloom of red, looking even worse.

Mason grabbed the towel and draped it over his shoulder, casually covering the wound. “Stop it,” he said firmly. “It’s just a cut. It’s not... You weren’t yourself. I know that.”

Lan backed away to the wall. “I *was* myself,” he said sickly. “My other self. Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I did.” Mason stepped in, wrapping his arms around Lan. “Besides, I knew you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“That’s a stupid thing to say. I clearly would,” Lan said with uncharacteristic bitterness.

Lan tried halfheartedly to break away, but Mason wasn’t prepared to release him, to let him walk away thinking these things about himself. “You just need to get out more, let your other self off the leash. Go meet up with your friends and do whatever it is you need to do.”

Mason felt something release inside him. He had known when he went back to Lan that he was getting a lover who wasn’t entirely human. They would have to work at this relationship, and that was just what he was going to do. And he was going to start by letting go of this coyote thing. Either he trusted Lan or he didn’t. Even if Lan sometimes needed...well, whatever he did need.

Lan relaxed and leaned into him. “I don’t need anything but you.”

Mason kissed the top of his head and sighed. *But clearly you do.*

Chapter Five

They kissed at the front door as Lan was about to leave for work. Mason leaned over, pressing him back against the door frame. Lan clung to him, his mouth open and inviting, his body lean and yielding. Mason felt a flare of possessive desire, wanting nothing more than to drag Lan back inside and fuck him 'til he cried out for mercy. It was easy to think that could be the answer, at least for a while.

But Mason pulled back. "If you're planning to get to work, we'd better stop there. Besides, we don't want to give the neighbors too much of a show."

"We here, we're queer, and I think they're pretty much over it," Lan said with a laugh.

"Well, I should bloody well hope so." Mason still gave Lan a push. "Think you could get off early? I could make us a proper dinner to go with that wine."

Lan sort of grimaced. "I'll try, but it's exam time, you know. Perhaps you could get off work or start a bit later?"

"Some of the exams are over already. The bars will be full of students in a mood to celebrate by getting pissed off their gourds, and the locals will get away from them by going to Greyfriars. It'll be busy."

They stood there awkwardly for a while. Finally Lan said, “We should, you know, talk about *this*.”

Well, wasn’t that exactly what he’d been trying to say? But Mason just prompted, “This?” There were a few different issues competing for the title of “this,” after all. Perhaps that was a problem all in itself. Maybe he meant the whole lot of it.

“We just never seem to have time anymore,” Lan said wistfully.

“We’ll both be off Saturday...” Mason began. But, of course, Saturday was when the council met up on Acton’s ten-acre block. He didn’t normally go to those powwows. They made a lot of noise about accepting him, but those who weren’t homophobes were anthropophobes. There was always something of a vibe, and after a while he’d just stopped going. It was easier all round.

“Saturday night, perhaps?” Lan said.

“Yeah...sure.”

Lan gave him an apologetic look, and he didn’t know the half of what was on Mason’s mind. But there was nothing for it. A man’s gotta work.

* * * * *

Mason lay in bed, wearing just his jeans and socks. He laced his hands behind his head and looked down at his feet. His white sweat socks were stained with the dye from his new Johnny Reb boots. He’d felt like a throwback buying those boots. Like he was still that farm kid trying to be tough, who spent all his savings on a cut-price symbol of independence.

He’d sneered at the cop on his Japanese bike, but here he was, motorcycle jacket still tucked away in the closet, Johnny Reb boots still on his feet. He hadn’t owned a bike in years and didn’t even want one anymore. He just couldn’t let go of the trappings. He didn’t know what else to be. He didn’t know what else he *could* be.

Their jobs, his and Lan's, were the most obvious problem, literally night and day. They really were going to have a talk, but first he had to figure out what he thought about it himself. Lan was a university professor -- of course he couldn't change his job. His job was important, and his wages paid the mortgage and covered most of the bills. Lan was on the Were Council, the first ever systematic governing body for shifters. That was even more important, not just some hobby. It just wouldn't make sense to suggest he give up either commitment.

And Mason was just a bouncer. Outside of odd jobs like fruit picking and a short stint in the army some time back, it was the only kind of work he'd ever done or knew how to do. He'd moved towns. He'd wrapped his head around this whole werewolf thing. His work was the only part of him that he still had left. Mason sighed. What else could he do, be some kind of househusband and buy a poodle or a bunch of cats to keep him company during the day?

There was no way he was going to be able to sleep now. As he stood, frustrated, a flash of movement outside caught his eye. By the time he turned to the window, the movement was gone. The drapes were pulled back, but all he could see was a strip of lawn and the neighbor's fence. Then, leaning forward, he saw another too-quick flicker going around the side of the house -- a swath of dark fur.

At first, he foolishly wondered if it was Lan deciding to take some time off after all, but he would never be so bold as to wander around the suburbs in wolf form, or so furtive as to slink around the house rather than just come right in. Another shaggy form slunk past against the side of the house, right under the window and not looking up. A wolf. A large one.

Mason swung back, pressing himself against the wall. He heard the scuff of paws on the outside windowsill. Frozen, he waited. He couldn't see the wolf from where he stood, nor did he think it could see him. But then he looked up. The bedroom door was open, and across the hall was the bathroom, with its mirrored drug cabinet door still open. A dark wolf

was reflected in the mirror, looking right at him. Its mouth lolled open, laughing at him as he cowered and hid from it.

Mason jerked away from the wall, backing away from the window. The wolf watched intently. What could he do? He needed a weapon. A grayish figure slipped by in the background; another sat to the side. So there were at least three.

There was an old fireplace set in the living room. Lan had been talking about getting the chimney cleaned out so they could have an open fire. Mason had bought the poker set from a secondhand shop almost as a joke. Slipping through to the living room, he grabbed up the poker, made from a twisted piece of wrought iron. The pack that had attacked him when they first moved to Hameltown had been five, maybe six, animals. He had to assume there were about as many now. It wasn't just the visceral memory of torn flesh and fear; it was common sense. He was going to need some help here.

He couldn't call Lan -- even if he could get back, he wasn't really a fighter. Not that he wouldn't fight, but his half-coyote form was about half the weight of the big black wolf. And the cops wouldn't understand. They were only six or seven blocks from a station, but if the wolves didn't bolt when authorities turned up, the cops could get hurt. They would underestimate the intelligence of the wolves. *What a mess. At least Lan isn't here.*

There was a sniffing sound around the front door. Mason backtracked to the kitchen and reached into his jacket pocket. He kept his eyes moving, looking for any incursion, as he put the card down by the phone and put the receiver on the table to tap out the number. He kept the poker out in front of him, his back to the wall, and picked up the receiver.

"Big bad wolf at the door?" said the voice at the other end of the line without any preamble.

"How the fuck do you kn--" Well, there was only really one way.

"I thought you were in real danger, so of course I'm staking the place out. Other than that, you're in the book, and I have caller ID."

"Fine. So were you thinking of helping out here?" Annoyance, relief, and fear warred in Mason, but at least someone was there.

"I'm on my way in now. Feel free to lend a hand."

Mason dropped the receiver onto the table and made his way cautiously to the front door. There was a frosted window just to one side, but it was impossible to really see anything through it. Bracing one foot against the door, wishing to hell he'd thought to put his new boots back on first, he slowly turned the lock. His hand felt weak, his whole arm kind of numb and trembling. Not many things scared him -- in fact, probably only one -- but this was it.

Last time he'd gone up against wolves, he'd been laid out in hospital for three days; it took months to even halfway recover. But last time he'd gone up against wolves, he hadn't even got one good blow in before they'd had him down on the ground, tearing and tugging his body in all directions. He wasn't going to be so easy this time. He was ready for them. Sure, he was afraid -- he was *terrified* -- but that wasn't going to happen to him again. Weighing the poker in his hand, he tightened his grip and swung open the door.

There were four wolves spaced out across the front lawn. It was around ten o'clock, and most everyone was at work, or at least none of the neighbors were making themselves known. The wolves were divided into pairs, two looking his way, two looking at the man crossing the street towards them. He had what looked like a short white staff in one hand and a simple claw hammer in the other. A fifth wolf, the black one, appeared from the side of the house. *Dammit, how many of the bastards are there?*

There was a moment of hesitation, and then, as if by some kind of unspoken agreement, the wolves sprang into action. Three of them went for Ross and two for Mason. Mason braced his legs. He felt a surge of terror jolt through his body, but he kept a lid on it. The world seemed to slow. The poker didn't have the kind of weight needed to swing it like a bat. Instead he waited until the black wolf lunged at him, and then he drove the point of it straight at the beast's chest. The tip of it skidded, ripping the skin, and then punched wetly

into the wolf's flesh. The impact jarred down Mason's arm, forcing him back into the narrow doorway, but the wolf fell heavily back and rolled away.

Two loud yelps cut the air, but Mason didn't dare to look up to see how Ross was doing. The second wolf was coming at him low, going for his legs, trying to get him down on the ground. Mason gritted his teeth and let it come in, driving down onto its shoulders with the bloody point of the poker even as it seized his ankle. He planted his leg and slammed down with all his strength, determined to pin the damn thing to the ground like a giant butterfly if he had to. The wolf growled, clamping down on his leg again, trying to get a better grip through his jeans, but his thrust was pushing it down onto the ground. Finally its courage broke, and it scrabbled backwards.

Mason staggered as it got out from under his impromptu weapon. The two wolves facing him slunk low, but as Mason approached, they looked over their shoulders and saw the rest of the pack in full flight down the street.

Ross stood, looking conspicuously untouched. The cop just laughed and strolled over to the front door, not even looking at the fleeing pack as the stragglers joined the retreat.

"What, not going to invite me in for a cup of coffee?" Ross said.

Mason tried to match his tone. "If decaf'll do you."

Chapter Six

Mason noted that, despite his bravado, Ross made double sure the door was locked once they were inside. Mason limped down the hallway and into the kitchen at the back of the house. He sat down at the kitchen table and raised his right foot up across his knee. The sock was soaked with blood around the top band, but he could tell there wasn't all that much damage done underneath. The jeans had blocked the brunt of the bite further up his leg. On the whole, he was relieved.

Ross followed slowly, unabashedly having a good look around. "Charming place," he said. Then he tossed the white object he was carrying down on the table and placed the hammer more carefully next to it. The white thing was a relatively short, thick rod with an orange handle on one end and a metal fork at the other.

"Cattle prod," Ross said, seeing him looking. "With a few modifications."

Mason raised an eyebrow. There were some nights on the job when he'd wished he had something like that. He only wished he could have seen the wolves get a taste of the hot end of it.

He finished rolling up his jeans and pulled off his sock. There was a scattering of punctures, red and oozing a little blood, but -- assuming werewolves didn't get rabies --

nothing serious. He knew enough from talking to Lan to realize that, unlike in the movies, it wasn't a condition you could catch. You had to be born a werewolf.

"Some of those look deep," Ross said. He'd helped himself to coffee from the machine on the kitchen counter next to the sink.

"It's not too bad."

"I didn't mean *that* bite. I'm looking at that hickey of yours."

Mason sat up quickly. He still had no shirt on, and in the excitement, he'd quite forgotten the other, blatantly human-shaped bite on his shoulder, the one surrounded by more bruised flesh than any normal human bite could ever cause. He stood and limped rapidly into the bedroom, then pulled out the first shirt he could find, a rumpled black muscle shirt with a tattoo-like winged skull motif on the front.

He looked up to see Ross standing in the doorway with a strange expression on his face.

"What?" Mason said sharply.

Ross shrugged. "You're not going to appreciate the comparison, but it's a bit like when some girl comes into the station with makeup on her face and those big sunglasses over the top to hide a black eye."

"You're right, I don't appreciate it. And it's not like that."

"Yeah, well, that's what they say, too."

Mason pushed past him and went back into the kitchen. "I appreciate the help and all, but if that's what you want to talk about, you can get the hell out of my house and take your toys with you."

Ross didn't really react. He certainly didn't seem much impressed. He just followed Mason back again. "You got blood on the carpet. You'll want to do something about that before it dries," Ross said. He looked over at Mason, who thumped back down into a chair by the kitchen table. "Okay, so did you mention me to your guy, Lan? Get the okay from the council that I'm one of the good guys? No?"

He seemed, or at least was feigning to be, surprised at that. Mason was just pissed that he was so easy to read.

“Well, I’d hoped you do just that. But then, maybe you don’t have much to say to them. I’m willing to bet they don’t want you to know what’s going on.” Ross leaned in the doorway, seeming to gather his thoughts. “They’ve been looking into this place, Krypt,” he said. “Krypt is working on something that’s causing a lot of tension between the council and the few normal humans that know about them.”

Mason felt a fool sitting there with one sock on, being lectured on something he should damn well know about, but didn’t. Assuming it was true at all. He should be calling Lan. The pissed-off wolves might just go after him next, or old man Acton, or...

Ross leaned forward, placing both hands flat on the table like he was trying to get Mason’s full attention. “The guy behind Krypt got started because his daughter vanished, killed by a pack up Queen Country way. But he thinks he’s really come up with something now, a way to hunt down all the shifters, maybe get rid of the lot of them. I don’t know exactly what it is, but he’s making deals with the Hameltown pack, deals that they think will leave them the only ones left. Everyone’s spooked, and no one knows what will happen next when this guy perfects his were-detecting device.”

Mason looked up as Ross’s voice trailed off. Ross was staring at him, serious, intent.

“Isn’t the real point those girls you mentioned?” Mason said. “If someone’s missing or hurt or even dead, surely that’s a whole lot more important than lurking around outside our place.”

“Well, forgive me for saving your ass, but since the coyote leader called back my only staff, a coyote woman by the name of Reba, it’s just been me. Charles’s idea of dealing with a problem is to get all his kith and kin the hell out of Dodge and leave the rest of us hanging. And yes, we’ve got two women missing, and it sure seems like members of the local wolf pack fit the descriptions of the men who took them. But there’s not a trace of the suspect

wolves in any of their usual places. I think the council could find out a whole lot more if any of them gave a damn. But on my own...there's just a limit to what I can damn well do."

And from the way he bit off his words, the cop was torn up inside about it.

"Do you think they're dead?" Mason asked.

Ross looked at him long and hard, like he was trying to work out whether Mason really cared and whether he mattered enough to discuss it with. Ross scraped out a kitchen chair and sat.

"Best I can work it out, they were moved out right away, probably still alive at the time. The real power base for wolves is the Queen Country pack. They have a farm with about a hundred acres of dense bush in the middle of it. They homeschool the kids all legal, and the satellite packs check in up there and keep them informed. Both nights, the girls -- I can't tell you too much about them 'cause of confidentiality -- but both nights, a van left the main house they keep here, and didn't come back for a day or two."

"How do you know that?"

"Mason, it's just me. I have to improvise. I came into town as soon as I heard one of the big bads from the main compound had come down to Hameltown, and I planted a digital video camera in the hedge opposite. The fence is too high to see much more than what goes in and out, but I really didn't like the look of that big white van that left the place real late, like I said, both nights."

There was a look in his eyes, a look Mason knew a little too well. It was the look of a man who didn't have the power he needed to do the things he wanted to do, to protect the people he wanted to protect. Suddenly he felt a bond between the two of them.

"So what do you want from me?" Mason asked.

"All I want from you is that you don't end up kibble," Ross said dismissively. "That would be one less thing for me to worry about."

Mason stood up, taking the coffee mug from Ross's hand to let him know it was time to go. He really didn't know what to say to the man, but being dismissed as nothing more than a potential victim cut loose most of the sympathy he was feeling for the man.

"Like I said, I appreciate the assist," Mason said, a slow-growing anger in his voice. "And I guess I even owe you one. But I don't know what kind of crap you're talking. I don't know anything about it. I don't want hear any more about it. And if I see you hanging around this house or see you anywhere near Lan, we're going to have words."

Ross snatched up his hammer and cattle prod and went easily enough. "Just do me a favor and keep my card," he said. "These are dangerous people, Mason. Some of them mean well, and some of them don't, but they are *all* dangerous. I just wanted you to know, you aren't on your own. If you do need my help, you can call."

Like he was meant to feel a connection with the guy just because he wasn't were. Which was just what he'd almost done. Mason slammed the door in his face and limped angrily back into the kitchen. Angry, in part, because he knew he'd needed the help.

"Yeah," Mason said as a weak parting shot, made even more pointless by the fact that the man was long gone. "Sounds like maybe you're going to be the one needing the help."

There were indeed blood spots all over the beige carpet. He grabbed the business card from the table and threw it into the bin. But he looked down at it for several long seconds before he turned away and left it there. He did wonder just how much Lan had neglected to tell him about what the council was up to. Without Ross's help, he might be nothing but a chewed-up carcass right now, and maybe Lan should have warned him. But then, it wasn't Lan's job to protect him, and he sure as hell wasn't going to be inconveniencing Ross any further on that front. He had to find a way to do it for himself.

Chapter Seven

It was a pretty domesticated sort of day from there, if you didn't count another session of dabbing disinfectant on his injuries, and the buzzing in his head as he tried to work out which of his nascent suspicions might just be true. He should have told Lan about Ross right away. If he had, he'd probably know the whole truth now, or know there was nothing to it. A mysterious company and an avenging father, this Krypt thing Ross had been going on about... Well, clearly something had got the wolves riled up again.

They were out of carpet cleaner, and that seemed an easier thing to deal with. Mason walked to the nearest supermarket, just over the bridge on the edge of downtown. He felt the back of his neck prickling all the while, but damned if he was going to hide away at home. He did take a backpack with the poker in it.

While he was there, he picked up chicken breasts, cheese, apricots, some white asparagus, and other fixings. While he kind of resented being thrust into any sort of homemaker role, he did like to cook. Stuffed chickens breasts, steamed vegetables, and some nice...well, for him a can of lager. He added a six-pack to the basket.

As he walked back, his wariness was waning. His mind started to play over what Ross had been saying. It came down to one thing. If Ross really was a cop the council was working

with, then maybe some of what he said was true. If not, it was a matter of who was messing with his head and why. In a way, he preferred the second deal. Because if the coyotes really were going underground, why the hell had a coyote been running in the woods with his boyfriend?

He cooked dinner by about four and set it under the warmer. If Lan arrived any time before six, it would still be edible. Then he sat down and started scrubbing the damned carpet. He was just thinking that he should have done these two jobs in reverse order, when he jumped at a sound.

It was the sound of a key in the door, but also of voices. He stood up hastily to find Lan coming through the door with the kind of smile that he normally reserved for Mason, or so he'd thought. He wasn't looking at Mason. There was another man coming in with him. The damned redhead.

"Um, Mason, this is Charles," Lan said, casting him a covert, apologetic look. Then he added, "What's up with the floor?"

Mason tossed the cloth in his hand into the bathroom sink. "I cut my foot," Mason said. "No biggie. Do bring him into the kitchen. What does he drink?" Charles, who Ross had mentioned took back his only assistant. Charles, who'd been out in the woods with Lan. Charles: *I should think we are going to have some trouble.*

"Are you all right?" Lan said, dropping a box full of exam scripts onto the hall table. The end of exams would mean the beginning of marking. Days of nothing but Lan at the kitchen table with a big green marker in his hand. No red pens anymore -- they'd been declared to be psychologically damaging or something. Lan went far enough ahead of his guest to mutter, "Sorry. Charles is the head coyote, the alpha. He insisted on checking out I was set up okay before he and the rest head out of town. I'll get rid of him after dinner, and we can talk."

"Yeah, fine," Mason said, not taking his eyes off Charles, who was sauntering behind.

"I hope you don't mind. I brought Charles back with me," Lan said for all to hear. "He's kind of a friend. Or family. Something like that."

Charles was watching everything with a smirk that someone needed to wipe of his face with a fist. Mason made himself smile back with as much sincerity as he could fake. "Anything that gets you home early is fine with me," he said. If they had to make it look good for the coyote chief, well, he could do that. Mason reached out a hand, "So you're the ineffable Charles."

"I take it Lan has been talking about me," Charles said in a gravelly voice, not taking the offered hand.

"No. Lan hasn't talked about you at all," Mason replied, withdrawing his hand. "That's what makes you ineffable."

Lan's smile started to look a little fixed at that point. Charles just slapped Lan on the back and proceeded into the kitchen. "That's what happens when you invite an alpha into a house that already has an alpha," he said. "What's for dinner? It smells good."

Mason was about to suggest slow-roasted coyote when he caught Lan's desperate look. Lan hated tension and conflict -- too much growing up in homes where a wrong step would see you sent back into state care. Mason shoved his pride down hard into his stomach and decided to choke Charles on the honey of human kindness if he had to, but not to rise to the bait.

"Chicken," he said. "I'm sure there's enough for three."

"See, I told you," Lan said. "Mason always cooks enough for an army."

"I am sure he's a great little cook," Charles said. "Emphasis on the great. Given that you insist on settling for a human, at least you picked a big one with a few useful skills."

Mason turned his back on them, pulled the food out from under the warmer, and got an extra plate from the cupboard. He kept his mouth clenched shut. He wondered just how

much Lan cared about Charles's opinion. Were had instincts about pack order, but Lan was too smart to be a slave to them.

"Charles, be nice," Lan said, obviously still nervous.

"This *is* nice." Charles scraped back a chair. "For me."

Mason normally made his own portion pretty generous, so most of that went to Charles. Lan poured the wine, three glasses. You'd think he'd have noticed by now that, given the choice, Mason always got himself a beer. But Mason wasn't going to start some petty argument about it now.

They managed some light banter about general events, sports, politics -- human politics, that is -- for a while. Charles managed to compliment the meal in a way that implied real men don't cook. Lan didn't seem to notice the subtext. Wine always tasted bitter to Mason, but never more so than now. He looked over at Lan, whose delicately handsome features were picked out by the dimming light of early evening. When had he become so hard to read?

"So, it's nice to see you settled down," Charles said to Lan, leaning over to touch his arm again in a gesture that was just a little too lingering. The scrawny bastard couldn't seem to keep his hands off Lan, and the way he didn't wasn't exactly "like family." Lan seemed pretty uncomfortable with it, but wasn't telling him to stop, and he seemed to be avoiding eye contact with Mason. Mason bristled, but he refused to start acting like Lan was his property.

"Yeah, I seem to recall you saying coyotes don't settle down," Lan said lightly.

"Well," Charles conceded. "You're only half coyote, after all. Maybe Mr Mom here will be enough for you."

"Charles, cut it the hell out," Lan said, fully serious this time. "I show you due deference because I'm told it's the coyote way, but if you really insist on making this a

choice, it will not be a difficult one.” He was plainly drawn up tight and nervous at standing up to the alpha, even if coyote was only part of his nature.

“Oh,” Charles said. “It’s up to you to lay down the rules, is it? I thought for a moment it was the beefcake here, but it seems he isn’t up to it. While you’re at it, maybe you should ask what he’s been doing cutting his ankles on wolves when you’re out.”

That comment deflected Lan, leaving him gape-mouthed for a moment. Finally he turned to Mason. “Mason, what?”

“I’m not talking about it in front of him,” Mason said tersely as he stood to clear the dishes.

“So you thought you would just *not mention* being attacked by wolves, after what happened last time?”

Like he’d have bloody forgotten last time, when it had landed him unconscious from blood loss and left for dead. Mason tossed the plates into the sink, hearing at least one shatter. He felt anger welling up inside him. “And when were you planning on telling me that charming Charles here wants you to go underground with him and the other coyotes!” It was a wild, hotheaded guess, but Lan’s shocked expression and even Charles’s raised eyebrow told him it had hit home.

“Mason, how did you...” Lan began.

“I don’t know, Lan. How could I?” Mason said sarcastically. “You sure as hell weren’t going to tell me, and the rest of your lot don’t exactly drop by for a cup of a tea and a natter.”

“I think perhaps I should go,” Charles said. He didn’t look all that cut up as he strolled out. In fact, his demeanor was more *fait accompli* than embarrassed.

Mason’s head felt like a pressure cooker, and he damn well didn’t want to go off at Lan. He needed to get control of himself so they could have that talk they’d been planning. Even more need for that now.

“I think perhaps I should, too.” Mason reached for his jacket and headed for the front door. He was honestly just thinking a couple of walks around the block, stop in to the corner store for an apology box of donuts. But right now he was a bomb with a lit fuse, and he needed just a little space to stamp it out.

Lan made a grab for his arm, but Mason just shook him off. He got to the pavement and saw Charles had gone one way towards the main bypass. Despite a hotheaded urge to go after the little creep, Mason went the other way, towards the river.

Chapter Eight

There was a path down along the river, wide and flat for families to walk and bike on during the day. At night it didn't look quite the same. Normally he wouldn't be too bothered by the street kids and occasional opportunistic muggers that might be down in the dark under the trees, but goddamn, it was stupid to be walking around out here in the dark with a pack of angry wolves after him. Mason shoved his hands deep into his pockets and wished he had the poker with him. At least with his boots on, he had the option of kicking the living shit out of anything in his path. In fact, he almost hoped to have the opportunity.

All the same, when he got to the bridge, he headed for the stairs. He could cross over into downtown and get in early for work, maybe sort out the storeroom, flatten and throw out the boxes that had been building up out back. And there was always something to do at the bar -- restocking, cleaning some loads of dishes or towels...

Sitting on the stairs was a man smoking a cheap cigarette. It was Charles.

"Oh, I really wouldn't do this if I were you," Mason said.

Charles leaned his elbows across his knees, cigarette dangling lax in one hand, and looked down at Mason without a trace of concern. "There's a bad time coming," he said. His

manner seemed different somehow, more downbeat “If you want Lan to be safe, you’ll let him go with us. His people. We can protect him.”

“I can protect him just fine.”

“Yeah?” Charles flicked his cigarette off into the bushes. “If you think that, you’re even stupider than you look.”

With most men, that might have been provocation enough, but Mason’s family had raised him to know that there was never a good reason to start a fight. Being pacifists, they also didn’t approve of his willingness to finish one, but there was only so far Mason was prepared to go. Still, he was willing to give peace a chance, if only to keep one item off the ever-growing agenda of his impending talk with Lan. Mason shook his head and turned away from the stairs, continuing on down the tree-shrouded path.

He heard only one light footstep coming up behind him and spun, fist raised and ready to finish the fight but good.

Charles stepped inside the blow and delivered a tight punch into Mason’s gut, knocking his breath out and shunting him back three feet at the same time. Mason would never have believed such a little guy could pack such a wallop, even a were. But years of wrangling drunken crowds meant Mason knew not to show pain or surprise. He planted his feet and didn’t try for another punch. He let Charles come at him and tried to get a good hold on him. Wrestling gave an advantage to weight and reach, and he was sure he could get the little creep.

They tumbled to the ground by the side of the path in the wet grass and mud of the ditch. Mason got a hold of Charles’s throat and arm, and damned if the little weasel apparently didn’t need to breathe. Hooking a leg over, Mason managed to come out on top, but Charles got him by each wrist and slowly but surely pulled both hands off.

Mason managed to drive down his elbow into the man’s face, but it threw him off balance, and the next thing he knew, Charles flipped him over and pressed both hands to the

ground. There was no way it should have been possible with his disadvantage in weight. Mason writhed and pushed, but Charles locked his legs around Mason's torso, then got a lock around one arm and an elbow around his neck.

Mason flailed with his free arm, but he couldn't reach anything but leaf mold and mud. His vision began to blur as he fought, bucking, but couldn't get Charles off.

"You can't protect him," Charles whispered, holding him tight. "*You* couldn't even take *Lan* in a fair fight, and he's about the weakest of us, physically. The wolves are fucking idiots, but that lot at Krypt will finally kick some sense into them. They're turning them into lapdogs, adding Krypt's smarts to the dogs' teeth. So they'll be back at your house with guns or something that'll take a little longer to kill you, will let them have their fun first. Now, I don't give a fuck about you, *human*, but Lan's one of mine. I've watched over him. I've fucked him. It's my job to look after him. And if you stand in my way, you *are* going to go down."

"I think you made your point, Charles," someone said out of the darkness.

Mason was struggling to hold on to consciousness and only belatedly put a name to the voice. Ross. Bastard was still lurking around.

"Why don't you let him go now?" Ross added. "Or I'll put nine thousand volts right up your ass."

Charles duly let go. Mason panted, trying to shake off the fog and get enough strength into his arms to push his face up out of the mud. He heard Charles make some comment, light and joking.

"Hardly," Ross replied. "Now fuck off before I decide to arrest you, just to ruin your night."

Charles was still laughing as he left. Mason pushed up onto his hands and knees, then stubbornly onto his feet, but still doubled over. Part of him wanted to go charging after Charles, but there was a good chance that would just get him even more humiliated. He put a

lid on it and filed away the idea that he was going to have to follow Ross's example and start carrying some kind of weapon. He didn't like the thought, but he liked the slime he was spitting out even less.

He straightened, ignoring every ache and pain in his body. "You should have done it."

Ross tapped the end of the prod against leg. "The current would have grounded through you."

"It would have been worth it."

"Yeah, well. We need to talk about what you're going to do, you know. Whenever you're ready to admit there's a problem."

Mason sighed. "I guess I owe you another one now, and I won't deny it," he said. "But I'm going to think this through myself, and I am going to talk to Lan. And then maybe we'll give you a call. That's kind of the way I have to do it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a job to get to. And, not to be ungracious, I seem to recall telling you to stop hanging around our house."

"You just don't know who your friends are," Ross said with a sniff.

"I just don't even know that I've *got* any at all," Mason muttered as he limped away.

Chapter Nine

He arrived at the club muddy, in torn clothing.

“Hey, man,” Laura, the bartender, called out. “You got in a fight, eh? Hey, Barry, Mr Karma got in a fight.”

“Yeah?” The manager came out of the back room. “Bloody hell.”

It was still only about five p.m., so they pretty much had the place to themselves.

Laura got a look at his face and got serious. “You all right, Mace?”

That was their nickname for him. He was never quite sure if it was a serious reference to his bulk, or an ironic one about his easygoing nature.

Mason took a deep breath in and out. “Yeah,” he said. “I’d really like to not talk about it right now, if that’s okay with you.” They gave each other a look, but it seemed like Mace had enough cred with them to earn a pass so he could go out back to clean up in peace.

The evening progressed with reassuring predictability. Mason went through his usual tasks, setting up the tables and doing the rounds. Later on, the lights went down and the DJ set up. It was a busy night, but fairly subdued, and because there was no band or cover, he didn’t have to work the door. There was the usual carding and shifting out of the egregiously

underage and simply booting the overly drunk and belligerent. He chatted with the regulars and kept a wary eye on everything.

He paused to help clean up some empties, stacking them in towers, one of pint glasses and one of half-pints. All the while, the back of his mind was chewing away on the events of the last few days. Not really getting stuck so that he was distracted or got all worked up, but it was filtering through. He was mostly pissed about Charles, and even with Ross, but that wasn't really his big problem.

Item number one: he'd just walked out on Lan. Again. Sure, he'd only meant it to be for a few minutes, but then going the other way, deciding to head in to work... Well, he had to realize Lan's point of view could only be that Mason had left and hadn't come back all night.

So maybe this time he hadn't gone so far and it wouldn't be for so long. But it was well past time he learned to be steady, to hold his ground and figure things out without storming out the door.

So, what did he really know? At some point in time, according to Charles, Charles and Lan had fucked. *Why am I focusing on that?* Even if it had happened, at some time, it shouldn't be at the top of his list of things to worry about. *Yeah, right.*

He got the table cleared, and Barry wiped it down. There were a bunch of girls giggling near the door, wearing far too much makeup and far too few clothes. But more than that, it was their furtive looks that gave them away; he started to make his way over to them through the crowd.

Between Ross and Charles, the basic message he was getting seemed to be that some company called Krypt was involved in organizing some of the wolves, whose sporadic opposition to the new Were Council had so far not risen to the level of a real threat. Not since the little showdown when they'd first moved to Hameltown and hooked up with Acton and his herd.

But if the wolves were working up to something, Lan had two main options: circle the wagons and hunker down with the deer and any of the rest of the council who threw in with them, or get the hell out of dodge with Charles. Either way, it was really Lan's call. One thing Charles and Ross seemed to agree on was that Mason wasn't one of *them*. He wasn't were. They weren't likely to be interested in hearing from him, any more than they seemed to be interested in talking to him about all the shit that was going down.

This thought percolated up through his consciousness just as he got to the door. Damn. He couldn't see the girls he'd been looking for now. The place was packed, and his mind wasn't exactly one hundred percent on the job. It was possible they'd seen him coming and had gone straight back out again. One bouncer wasn't really enough to keep even a place this small locked down, just keep a lid on the rowdies and underagers. He paused in the doorway, taking a deep, welcome breath of cool air.

So Mason wasn't were, but he *was* with Lan -- or he was trying to be. Could he be? Was that the question? Could he ever really be what Lan needed him to be? He certainly wanted to try. If only he could stop acting like a complete fucking idiot.

As he headed back inside, Mason felt vaguely in his pocket for his cigarettes and then stopped himself. Damn. He was already off balance and really didn't feel like going through quitting the ciggies as well. He'd tried a time or two before, and it always made him tired and irritable. He'd never stuck to it. But after what Lan had told him, he had to do it now.

There was no question in his heart that he would stick with Lan if he could, but it would be nice to know just how many members of the greater were nation he was hooking up with at the same time, and which ones. Lan called them the kith -- people like him, regardless of what kind of animal they became. Other than Professor Acton and his wife, who were a decent old couple, Mason would be just as happy without the lot of them. But having grown up in foster care and boys' homes, Lan grabbed tight to any notion of family, whether they deserved his loyalty or not. So what would he want to do? Go into hiding with Charles and the coyotes, or...whatever the hell Acton and the council were up to these days?

In short, it was well past time he and Lan had that talk.

Stupid, really. The answers to extremely complicated problems could be very simple. Not that it would actually solve the problem, but it wasn't his job to solve the problem, only to find out what his part in the whole sorry mess was, the part that involved Lan.

Chapter Ten

“What’s with the mood?” Barry said as they got ready to lock up.

“What? I was doing my job. I was being pleasant.”

The last thing Mason needed was to be in trouble at work. He had already pretty much changed his whole life around to move to Hameltown with Lan. The only thing, the only other constant to his life, was the type of work he did, and this was a small town. If Barry dropped him, the other club owners would tend to assume there was a good reason and would hesitate to give him a position.

“You were frowning,” Barry said.

“Frowning?”

Barry finished locking the large front double doors at the top and the bottom. “Just a little,” he added, touching a finger between his eyebrows. “But with someone six-foot-something tall and almost as wide -- at the top, rather than the bottom like me” -- he hitched up his pants around his ample belly -- “even a little frown can have quite an effect. I think the crowd was better behaved then usual, eh? Except for the girls, but they always like a bad boy, especially the jailbait.”

Barry laughed as he headed out back. Mason was relieved he didn't seem to be in trouble, at least. He tapped in the code to set the alarm. The two of them met again just outside the door into the alley, where Barry used his master key to lock up.

"I must have frowned before, on other days," Mason said.

"Nope," Barry said. "Can't say you have. You must be the goddamned friendliest bouncer I have ever hired, and you're also distinguished by having an IQ higher than a cabbage. Watch yourself, Mace. A decade or two of cultivating your bank account and neglecting your body, and you could be in my shoes."

He headed off to the staff parking area with a carefree whistle. So the boss wasn't upset with him. Quite the reverse. Mason let out a relieved breath, then remembered that he hadn't brought the car. At the same moment, a shiny black limo pulled up at the end of the alley. The door swung open.

Mason stood with his hands in his jeans pockets and looked at the vehicle. Common sense suggested that he should turn the other way and get the hell out of there. But on the whole, Mason wasn't feeling entirely sensible. He turned and walked slowly towards the limo. The inside was dark, impossible to see even as he drew close.

Mason stared at the mute invitation of the open door while he breathed in and out slowly several times. Then he got in.

The back of the limo was a wide-bodied area with deep, leather-covered seating around three sides. A man sat back in the far side of the forward-facing seat, his arm leaning beside the window. He was perhaps in his fifties, with a deeply lined face; close-cropped, pewter-colored hair; and oval, rimless glasses. He had the face of a grandfather, but the eyes of a bird of prey, sharp and watchful.

"Mr Mason Patterson," the man said. "My name is Foley Samson. I would suggest that we talk. Or, more to the point, that I talk and you listen."

Overall, Mason was pretty damned skeptical about anything this bloke might have to say. In the last little while, he'd had less than illuminating talks with Ross and Charles, and he'd just decided that the only person he really needed to talk to was Lan. But Samson's suggestion became somewhat more forceful when the driver came around and closed the limo door. Mason was curious enough to go along with it. He sat on the backward-facing seat in the opposite corner from Samson.

"And just what do we have to talk about?"

"I hold a controlling interest in a company by the name of Krypt --"

"So is this the part where you make some vague threats that I'm meant to understand the point of, and you then drive me to some remote spot outside of town and let me out without coming to a complete stop first?"

"No, Mason. I actually have no argument with you. You're human, at least. I have been working on a very large problem, very large." Samson looked out the window as they cruised down the main street. "It proved strategically wise to make some deals with certain groups -- friendlies, you might call them. I needed to be able to take observations and samples from known shape-shifters. I'll deal even with that kind, if I have to, to --" He broke off his thought and then started again. "The wolves, you understand, all of them are impulsive and difficult to control. Some of the local...freaks have something of a grudge against you, and I must apologize for the inconvenience they've caused. It was not my intent that they should target *you*."

Which rather begged the question of who they were meant to target. "An apology isn't nearly as useful as a cattle prod," Mason muttered.

Samson laughed sharply, more like a bark. "Hybrid humans are rather hard to control by any other method, I agree." But then the false smile fell from his face. "They are innately violent, but for a rare minority whose human genotype is more dominant. The rest have

formed an underclass devoted to their clan and their illicit trades and blood sports. We really will be better off without them.”

The implication slid into Mason’s mind, that Samson’s goal was to eliminate the were -- *all* the were. The limo was cruising across the bridge and coming around onto Gray Street, moving towards the cottage. Having started off worried about being in the limo, now he realized the ride would soon come to an end. He had a few minutes, at most, to work out what kind of threat this weird old coot was to Lan. Was that last statement an idle wish or an imminent threat?

“So this is actually the ‘we know where you live, drop you off at home’ threat,” Mason said hoping to provoke something a little more revealing.

“This is no threat.” Samson took a deep breath. “My company has been working hard on understanding the mutation. The were subspecies was somehow created, we think, by an early virus that transferred genetic material between species some time in our recent evolutionary past -- which is to say, at least fifty thousand years ago, maybe a little earlier. We know how to detect them now. We have some understanding as to why most are impulsive and violent. We can even manipulate it to some extent --”

“They’re just people,” Mason snapped. “Good people, as far as I have met.”

Samson nodded. “A few of them are, I’ll concede, a very few. The herbivores, it may not affect them. And they’re doing their best for their own people, but precious little for ours. Ask the policeman, Ross Bailey. As long as these people live secretly, they will be a dangerous criminal element, all but immune to any kind of justice, and innocent people will die. He tried to change that, as are you, in a small way. But in the end, he’s come to realize that the problem is too great for a few do-gooders to tackle. Not just the humans, but this council, which will not be around very much longer. I, by way of apology, have come to offer you a way out. They have made their choice; I have made my choice. The few such as you, the collaborator, need to make yours. Time is running short.”

The limo glided to a halt outside the cottage. It seemed fairly unlikely that this man had brought him home for some deep, sinister reason. Whether he was wrong or right, he was apparently sincere.

Samson continued, leaning forward. "Most weres these days are wolves. They were always more vigorous, more aggressive. There are, of course, a few other predators, a very small scattering of others, but the wolves have hunted most of them to extinction. Almost all that remain are wolves, and almost all of them, I assure you, are murderers. Their own behavior has brought them to this brink. They cannot go on, and we cannot allow them to turn away from their nearly extinct prey to targeting normal humans like my daughter. She was kidnapped and killed for sport by a pack of werewolves. There will be others, many others, if they are not stopped. And Detective Bailey can tell you, the few in authority who know have no intention of doing anything about it. Your precious Were Council stands by and does nothing. I did not want this duty. I derive no joy from it. But, by their inaction, they have given it to me."

There was sincerity in his eyes, glistening sentiment that contrasted with the stern set of his face and dark authority of everything around him, from his suit to the limo. There was a stifled madness, too, but more the madness of grief and conviction than malice. The madness of the righteous man.

Mason wanted to say that this was just a stereotype, that the way the werewolves behaved didn't define the limits of all the shifters. But there was no doubt that Samson was a true and committed believer in the line he was spinning, and a man who'd lost his daughter was unlikely to be interested in platitudes.

"How much better than them are you?" Mason said. "You think you know so much. But those 'friendlies' of yours have taken two more girls. Did you not know that, or did you just not care?"

Part of his rash retort came from his disquiet. The council was trying to draw together the peaceful weres, but they were proving to be fewer than anyone had expected. Yet there

were packs of werewolves all through the country, and every one of them was involved in crime and killing. When it came to wolves, only a few rogues were peaceful types. Who was doing anything about the rest of them?

Samson leaned forward, his brows drawn down in a deep frown, his expression frozen. Had he truly not known? Finally he leaned back again without a word. The driver opened the door and stood by it with a small sidearm held loosely by his side. Mason took that to be an invitation to leave. He got out of the limo and watched as the driver went back to the front of the vehicle with precise, orderly steps. He was a tall, thin man who never once looked in Mason's direction. The two of them were well up there on the freaky scale. It was a little hard to know if Samson could possibly have the ability to follow through on his grandiose threats.

The limo pulled away, its engine hardly making a sound. Mason stood a long time on the pavement, watching the empty street.

He really, really wanted a cigarette.

Chapter Eleven

So there he was, walking up to the front door of the cottage again. The small front lawn needed mowing, he noted distantly. He kept a new manual rotary mower for the purpose. It was good exercise, and it reminded him of his father, who used to get out a manual mower every weekend and clatter up and down across the grass. Lan had approved, too -- better for the environment, he said.

It was easier to think about that than some madman's plans to wipe out the werewolves. Even worse was the fact that Mason wasn't entirely sure that would be the wrong thing to do. But it sounded like what Samson had in mind was something fairly indiscriminant and likely to take out most of the other were. And, hell, Lan said there were some full-blooded wolves that were okay too. Some yuppie wolves he'd met up in Orclundt.

Mason opened the door, not trying to be quiet. He had half expected that Lan would have turned up at the bar sometime during the night, but had been happier that he didn't. Lan shouldn't feel the need to go running after him every time he stormed off in a huff. Better that Mason had to come back on his own to apologize and explain. Then he wondered if Lan had just gone to sleep and not cared about his reaction.

As he came inside, the house was dark. Mason kicked off his boots in the hallway, but left his jacket on. It was surprisingly cold inside, and the nightlight wasn't plugged in. Mason tensed up the moment he saw evidence of a break in their normal routine. The wolves wouldn't bother Lan, surely? Lan wouldn't have left the house. Where would he go? There was no light in the house but some vague reflected starlight and streetlamp light coming in through the windows. The curtains weren't drawn, and the air was cold and fresh.

Proceeding down the small hallway, he looked first into the living room -- empty. Then to the nexus of the bedroom and bathroom -- also empty, as far as he could see. Then on into the kitchen. The back door was open to the dark, empty yard and a blank expanse of the back fence. In the middle of the kitchen table was a square of toilet paper, its crumpled, soiled shape smoothed down flat. Mason stared at it, bemused.

He looked up to the dark void of the open door, then back to the table. Belatedly, he realized this must be the toilet paper he'd discarded from the car early that morning. The most logical way for it to have got there was courtesy of friendly neighborhood policeman Ross Bailey, the man who thought all shifters were dangerous people. Fuck. This was all getting too damned complicated.

A few more cautious steps took him to the back door. Just outside was a very small concrete porch, three feet off the ground and no bigger than the seating area of the two-person sofa. Lan liked to call it their white-trash loveseat. Looking to the side, Mason saw the lean shape of Lan's animal form lying with his forepaws dangling off the front of the stoop. The wash of relief was so strong that he physically sagged, leaning against the doorjamb. Lan looked up, the faint light glinting off his eyes.

"Damn, Lan, you had me worried. Things are getting pretty fucked up in this town, so I would appreciate it if you barked or something when I came in so I know you're all right."

He sat down next to Lan, with his back against the outside wall of the house. They had a lot of catching up to do, and it really would be better if Lan was in human form, but in a way this was easier. Mason put his arm over Lan, feeling the sleek but coarse fur over his

shoulder. He resisted the urge to pat Lan like some domesticated dog, but his fingers seemed to move slightly of their own accord, just tracing the grain of the hair down Lan's shoulder.

After a moment, Lan sighed and leaned into him, his heavy canine head lying across Mason's knees. They sat together for a while, looking out at the dark, lumpy contours of the backyard, listening to the distant hiss of the downtown traffic and the occasional vehicle navigating the nearer suburban streets. Mason's mind wandered over the time they had spent together, the bond that he could almost feel between them right now in the silence. Lan was the only person he felt he could be with and be only and entirely himself. That hadn't changed. That had never changed. It was just that his sense of who he actually was had started to slip away.

Finally Lan got to his feet, stepped carefully over Mason's legs, and went inside. Mason followed him. He went into the bedroom and got Lan's old, frayed terrycloth robe, and by the time he came back, Lan was in human form. He slipped the old robe onto Lan and shut the back door. Then he set up the old coffee perk, putting in the paper and coffee -- decaf again, neither of them could afford to lose any more sleep. That damned piece of stained tissue was still in the middle of the table. Mason grabbed it and tossed it into the bin. He noticed, with a glance, that although the kitchen scraps were in there, Ross's business card was not.

Lan sat at the kitchen table, loosely tied robe gaping to show the pale slope of his clavicle and the expanse of his chest. Without even thinking, Mason slipped his hand under the folded lapel of the robe and stooped to kiss Lan. His hand slid over suede-smooth skin, and his thumb brushed over Lan's nipple. Possessive lust welled up, a pang in his groin that coursed through the rest of his body and mind.

Lan reached up under Mason's old leather jacket and around his shoulders. Mason scooped him up effortlessly from the chair, and Lan clung to him, his fingers digging in as he was pushed back against the kitchen wall. Not a word. Not a word to break the spell.

Already getting hard, Mason pressed against him, hands roving and pushing the robe open and smoothing down to Lan's taut ass, pulling him close. Lan reached down, fumbling with Mason's jeans, freeing the button and zipper. His hand slid over the thin cloth of Mason's cotton boxers; Mason's cock pushed partly out. He groaned, feeling his cock and balls cupped carefully and gently massaged.

Lan pushed down both jeans and boxers just far enough to free Mason's cock, which sprang up hard, the clothes binding around his legs. Lan slid down, leaving Mason leaning with one hand flat on the wall as his cock was seized. Lan's mouth slid tight over the head. Mason's cock was thick, and Lan's beautiful mouth was small and struggled to encompass him. He resisted the urge to push forward, fingers pressed white against wall.

Lan took Mason's cock into his slender throat, stroking slow and as deep as he could. It was exquisite, perfect, and all it did was make Mason harder and stoke up the fire inside. Finally he could bear it no longer. He scooped Lan up and struggled out of his jeans and boxers as he all but dragged him towards the bedroom.

Lan bent over the bed, leaning on his elbows, offering his ass. Hurriedly, Mason threw off his jacket and T-shirt. He grabbed the lube from on top of the set of drawer and smeared it liberally on his aching cock.

Kneeling, he spread Lan's cheeks, pale and clean. He licked Lan's balls, where they peeked out between the duvet and his perfect body, then up along the seam of flesh, stopping just short of his ass. Lan writhed at every touch, spread and welcoming. Mason knew what that meant.

Leaning forward, pushing up slightly on the balls of his feet, he had the perfect position. Brushing Lan's ass with one thumb, he curled his fingers to position himself. He pushed in carefully with the ball of his thumb and followed with the blunt, slick head of his cock, feeling the flesh open and strain around him. He went on, slow, tight, all the way to the base, and Lan groaned, flexing his back and pushing against him, burying him deep. Lan's pale flesh was almost luminous, even in the faint light coming through the window. Mason

ran one hand slowly down Lan's ass cheek, then hooked it around the front of his thigh, pulling them tight together.

Then he could hold himself back no more.

Pulling back, he braced his hand on the bed and saw Lan clutching the covers. He started to work Lan's body hard and deep, fast but smooth, and every thrust was a wave of emotion from intrusion to possession. He pulled almost all the way out and then pushed in hard, the legs of the bed dragging across the carpet. Lan's arms trembled, outstretched on the bed, and his breath came in ragged gasps. He wasn't much for talking during sex, but Mason could just hear him hiss, "Yes, yes, yes."

They were together in the dark, joined. Raw and physical, a connection that cared nothing for words or roles or the quiet, sleeping world beyond their small house. Their bodies brushed and slid together. Mason leaned forward and bit down on Lan's narrow shoulder, not enough to leave a mark.

Lan shuddered under him, thrusting against the mattress and jerking as he came.

* * * * *

They slept under the covers, Lan curled tight in his arms. Sleep too long delayed slipped in before any other thoughts could intrude. But Mason's troubles plagued his sleep, so he bobbed into awareness periodically in the darkness. The feel of Lan's body against his was a trump card to any doubts or concerns, any words he had to speak. Hell, Mason knew he was hardly the most articulate of guys to begin with.

It was coming up to dawn when he stirred again and felt that Lan was awake too.

"I'm thinking that Detective Bailey was over here last night," Mason said. "After I threw my little tantrum and stormed out."

Lan was still a moment. All Mason could see was the back of his head.

"I found the card," Lan said. "I knew about Ross, through the council and from Charles. A first attempt to try and curb the werewolves' behavior. For years, they've been all but committing genocide against the other shifters, any they can catch and hunt. But we got a whole lot better at looking after our own, stopping the wolves from getting them." Lan sighed and rolled onto his back. "Ross's only assistant was a woman called Reba, a coyote, and she dropped him without a word of warning. I think that was the last straw for Ross. He's seen a lot of what the wolves do. He hasn't been able to do much about it and has all but ruined his career trying."

"Someone's got to protect people from those wolves," Mason said. He wondered where they were right now, as he was lying comfortable in his bed. "Ross says there are women missing. Who's going to look for them? Between those who don't know, those who don't care, and those who just aren't going to do anything about it..." A thought occurred to him. "You think maybe Ross has got something to do with Foley Samson?" Mason asked.

"Foley Samson?"

"The guy behind Krypt."

"No." Lan seemed pretty sure about that. "He's just seen how it tends to go when a human get mixed up with a wolf. Apparently domestic violence is rather the norm in the rare cases when this happens. My kind -- the wolves, anyway -- are dangerous people."

"Did he say something to you? I told Ross to stay they hell away from this house."

Lan looked over to him in the grainy predawn darkness. "I hurt you," he said. The guilt over it was deep in his eyes, eating away at him.

"And I walked out on you. Again," Mason said. "We all have flaws in our natures."

"Yeah, and mine's literally a large predatory animal."

Mason lay still for a while, looking over at Lan. The planes of his face were so familiar and so dear. "Mine's apparently just a dumbass. I'd take a wolf over that any day of the week. What can we do but work on it, work it out? I'm always gonna be dumb, but I think I can be

less of an ass. And you're always gonna a be a wolf, but I can only figure that if you don't cage the wolf up or starve it of what it needs, it's not going to have any reason to bite anyone."

Lan didn't answer immediately. That was his way. He thought about things, and he thought about them as long as he needed to. Finally he rolled all the way over, fitting against Mason's side.

"I don't think you're dumb, Mason. In fact, I think you see things more clearly than me, most of the time. I get tied up in worrying and wondering and thinking. And not doing anything. You know, the last meeting of the council, we spent it arguing about how to decide whether we have a quorum and whether Charles can represent the coyotes when they never elected him by a formal democratic process. I feel like we're standing in the middle of a highway, inspecting the pebbles in the asphalt, and somewhere in the dark, a great big eighteen-wheeler is heading our way."

Mason put his arm around Lan, feeling him shudder. Sometimes it seemed like Lan felt things too much and, yes, maybe thought about things too much, and he got all frozen up inside. But it still needed to be said.

"Samson approached me after I got off work last night," Mason said. "I don't know how much the council are keeping track of this guy, but he is clearly planning something catastrophic, very soon, against the wolves. I don't think he much cares who else gets in the way. In his world, weres are something other than human, and I think he blames each one equally for whatever happened to his daughter. He has to blame someone, after all."

And that was the resolute expression he had seen on Samson's face. He was on a mission for revenge in the clothing of justice. And he wasn't going to great lengths to save anyone on the way.

"You sound like you sympathize with him."

Mason looked up at the ceiling. "He's crazy; it's in his eyes. But he lost his little girl, taken by some monster he couldn't protect her from. Monsters create monsters to fight them. They pull us down into that dark place. Samson's gone, Ross is on the way, more girls are missing, and Charles is running from it. I guess I can understand that, too."

"You know I would never go with him, with Charles."

Mason looked down. "And you know that if you did, I'd go with you."

Lan leaned up on one arm. "I do know that. And I know that's why I'll never get trapped in the darkness, no matter where my wolf might take me."

"And I'll never leave you," Mason said. *Never again.*

Chapter Twelve

It was Saturday morning, the first Saturday of the month, and so the Were Council was meeting at Acton's place. But this time, Mason was going too. They needed to know what Samson had said, and besides, it was time he got involved. He was with Lan, and Lan was with them, so he was damn well going to be with them whether the weres wanted him there or not.

As they drove out into the countryside, he and Lan talked, gradually recovering the closeness they had once known.

"Last week, Acton got word that Ross had been more hostile recently," Lan said. "Since being detached by the commissioner to look into the events that led him to uncover the were criminals, he hasn't been able to bring many prosecutions, some penny-ante marijuana stuff. The commissioner is only half convinced by what Ross is telling him about us. Meanwhile, suspicion has grown about some of the wolves' human associates dropping from sight, and now these last two cases where he determined it was definitely wolf abductions. This time he has proof, something that cries out for action. Ross is stuck between a police force that is never going to believe what he knows and a problem that he can never tackle alone. It's hard on him, I know. But it seems like his attitude is hardening against all weres, especially after

his assistant dropped out of sight. I think he half suspects something happened to her, too. As if Charles would ever hurt anyone, let alone one of his own.”

Lan looked at Mason. Then he frowned. Reaching forward, he traced his finger down the side of Mason’s neck. “Where did you get this bruise?”

“Charles,” Mason replied tersely.

“Oh.”

It was beginning to look a little like a matter of perspective. Ross had been investigating the weres for some time; he had good reason for his attitude. But then, he had been seeing only the worst of them. The council, Acton, Lan...they were just people. People were just people. Anything else was prejudice.

Mason sighed. He was just going to say it. “He said you and he...” *Well, maybe not quite “just say it.”*

“Oh,” Lan said again, with obvious embarrassment. “It was when...just after I showed you what I was. I told him afterwards I was going back to you. Charles doesn’t really believe in coyotes being monogamous; it’s not usually their way. But I thought he respected my choice.”

“*Your* choice, maybe. But I think he has a bit of a problem with me.” He could feel Lan still looking at him. “He took me down pretty hard,” Mason admitted.

“Yeah, well, screw him.”

A quick glance over showed Lan looking out the windscreen, jaw tight and eyes blazing. He was pissed and hadn’t even noticed his own unfortunate phrasing. Mason felt himself relax. “Well, you can’t choose your family,” he said.

“Charles is just a relative, probably a distant one. *You* are family, and I damn well chose you.”

Mason laughed. God, but he loved Lan. It was hard to believe he’d started to lose his grip on that. “I will admit that, as annoying in-laws go, he takes the cake,” Mason said, but it

truly didn't bother him anymore. "But I wouldn't wish on anyone the kind of thing Samson and his Krypt buddies seem to be working on."

Lan shook his head. "We've been so preoccupied with trying to get in touch with the different scattered were communities and getting representatives to buy into some effort at governance. This business with Krypt... Their headquarters in Orclundt are being watched by volunteers, but we found out about a research facility in this area, a few miles out of town. And we couldn't agree what to do about it. We didn't end up doing anything."

"But you knew Krypt was trouble. They were up to something in Orclundt last year, you said?"

"Mason, we're outcasts, prey species. Just what is it you're expecting us to do? The boldest weres involved with the council are coyotes, and they still aren't going to take anyone on."

"Well, someone's got to," Mason said.

And there was silence in the car after that.

* * * * *

Mason parked the car on a gravel lot out front of Professor Acton's house. There were about twenty other cars and trucks already parked. That was fewer than normal, so he knew it must just be a usual weekly meeting, not the monthly business meeting or the quarterly when reps came in from all over. For the quarterly meeting, they had cars parked out in the paddock and all down the street, and Lan would be walking on eggshells, dealing with visitors who looked at predator were like they were the bogeyman come to life, and with good reason.

Mason naturally dropped behind Lan as they walked up to the front door. It was like at the university -- this was Lan's territory, and Mason felt he was meant to stand back. Mrs Acton met them at the door, looking like any other well-off older woman from this

semirural area, tidy but not fussy. She was always particularly pleased to see Mason and all but dragged him out back to have a look at their new koi pond.

Mason gave Lan a look to say he should get the prof up to speed before things really got started. There were people all through the house chatting and getting tea or coffee before the meeting was brought to order. Mason didn't feel like he was imagining the looks they gave him, the ones that said, *What is that human doing here?* Charles was leaning in a window, chatting to a muscular woman with harsh, black-dyed hair. The coyote gave him a smirk. As usual.

It was a brisk morning, and Mrs Acton took him out into the empty backyard. They walked together over the lawn, which was already being cut longer for the coming winter.

"I've been meaning to have a word with you, Mason," she said. "My husband tells me you and Lan have been having some trouble."

Mason's mind had been fixed on Krypt, the coyotes, and the wolves, so he was surprised to be suddenly pulled into a conversation that was clearly personal in nature. He liked Mrs Acton. She was a caring and quietly intelligent woman who had cared for him while he was recovering from the attack by the local wolf pack back before he even knew their true nature. The two of them had spent a lot of time out in this garden. But the idea that Lan was complaining to the professor, who was having his wife sort it out... No matter how well they meant it...

Mrs Acton stood on the edge of the newly installed pond surrounded by slate pavers and stocked with plants. "No fish yet, unfortunately," she said. "Oh, don't give me that look. You men. Problems don't go away if you don't do anything about them."

He didn't want to hear this from her. It wasn't that it was wrong. It wasn't even that it wasn't her business, although it wasn't. But if your friends are in trouble, are you meant to just stand by? It was just an emotional response, and he gritted his teeth over it.

"We haven't been seeing as much of you lately," Mrs Acton added.

"I haven't exactly felt welcome," Mason said. "I understand most of the were groups keep a very careful secrecy. Those that haven't have had some bad experiences. It just seems that there's a delicate state of affairs, learning to have some kind of government above their own family or herd. Making a...nation or whatever. It felt like every time there was a new group sending someone to see about the council, they would see a human here. It seemed better for everyone not to be bringing that up all the time, about humans knowing, about were being with humans. And God knows, the whole queer angle wasn't helping any."

"Maybe it *needs* to be hard for them," Mrs Acton said. "They've got to work through these things. They have to realize the world is changing. They have to face it."

"And maybe it doesn't have to be *me* every time getting the looks and the names and being responsible for the trouble and hearing that hate from them. I've had enough of that, you know. Maybe I shouldn't care, but it's like I've inherited the biggest pile of crazy in-laws that anyone could imagine. And there's a point at which I have to agree with Detective Bailey. Lan is my family, and you and your husband have stood up for me. But wolves had another go at me yesterday, you kn --"

He saw the shock and concern in her face. She, more than anyone, knew how torn up he'd been from the previous attack.

"It's okay. I'm okay," he added hurriedly. "But the one who warned me, the one who turned up and protected me, was a stranger, a human. I have to..." Mason shook his head, feeling pointless emotion pressing up in his chest. "I'll back Lan," he said. "Right or wrong, right down the line. I'll do whatever he asks me to, and whatever I have to, to protect him. And you and your husband, I trust, absolutely. But the wolves..."

"The wolf packs are not the council," Mrs Acton said. "You know we formed to protect ourselves from folk like them. If there is a nation, it will not include any who remain loyal to the old pack order."

“And what about Charles? He’s right inside there. He all but choked the life out of me last night, and it was Ross that stopped that, too.”

Mrs Acton looked troubled. Mason thought it over. Perhaps that was the heart of the problem -- the council were trying to protect themselves from the wolves, but there were still wolves, and they were still killing people. It had to be someone’s business to put a stop to that. He hated to admit it, but perhaps Samson and Ross each had something of a point about that. The current state of affairs could not be let to go on.

“You seem rather favorably impressed by this policeman. Ross?” Mrs Acton’s brow was creased with concern. The nice thing about her was that he knew she wasn’t thinking of political implications. She was thinking about Lan.

“No. He’s a bit of a jerk, really. But he helped me out of a couple of tight spots. And it may be for all the wrong reasons, but it’s nice to have someone ask ‘how are you doing’ from time to time. God, listen to me. Whining.” Mason reached again for the cigarettes that weren’t there. “I gave up smoking,” he explained. “It’s doing my head in.”

“When you say, ‘all the wrong reasons’...?”

“The detective seems to think that normal people involved with weres are likely to end up in trouble, that weres are dangerous people.”

“Dangerous people,” Mrs Acton said, looking down at her lilac-colored shoes on the edge of the pond. “I rather like that. We should go back inside because even if we only count what I have to say to Charles, I think this meeting is going to be a doozy.”

Mason laughed. “There’s one thing I want to ask you while we’re alone.”

Mrs Acton’s face was getting grim. “Because you can’t trust the rest of us?”

“Do you want me to lie?”

“No, I want you to ask your question.”

“You had your degree in chemistry, Lan told me, before you married Professor Acton. So I was thinking you might be able to tell me what Samson might be planning to do, what he might actually be capable of.”

“It’s not because of my degree fifty years ago that you ask. It’s because you think I’ll tell you the truth when none of the others will. That, more than anything, tells me how far wrong we’ve gone. A man like you...” She trailed off before saying what a man like him was, exactly. He would have been curious to know what she thought. “We’ve had people watching the research station, on and off. We didn’t see much but a few men go in and out, the town wolves go in and out. We pulled some paperwork from the Dumpster and put together part of the story.”

She looked out over the fields, her gaze distant over the waving grass.

“It’s some kind of drug,” she said. “A dissociative. I’ve always been a skeptic about split personality in anyone but a shifter, but push down the dominant personality in a were, and what comes out isn’t just the animal. It’s the animal minus all the parts it shares with the animal that is man. The academic types sat down around that formula a long time, and our best guess is that they think of it as a were-detecting drug because it forces the change, reveals the inner beast. But what it really would be is murder. Because it’s the kind of change they’d never come back from. They’d be *just* the beast. A beast of rage or a beast of running, depending on their nature.”

It seemed like she was seeing something out on the pasture. Something from deep inside herself. Something running.

They walked back together, Mason with his elderly defender. He smiled. It was reassuring to know someone would take his side. Just like his mother. But the satisfaction leaked away. Not only was it ridiculous, but he and Mom had been on pretty fragile ground after he put his parents through hell to enlist in the army and, after all that, only lasted in it a few years. There was more than one relationship in his life that could use a little work.

Chapter Thirteen

With some late arrivals, the Acton's living room was packed and the atmosphere was tense. A lot of them cast Mason hostile looks, but Mrs Acton just grabbed him by the arm and steered him to the centre of the room.

A small, fierce-looking woman was speaking. "The wolves went into the research facility last night. They haven't been seen since."

"So what are you saying?" Charles drawled. "It's a sleepover, or he finished them off. Frankly, I couldn't care less either way."

"And when he lets loose his drug?" Mason said coldly. "Maybe in the water or the air? There won't be much to joke about then."

"The joke is you being here in our business," Charles said.

"Now wait --" Mrs Acton began, and the room erupted into a confusion of voices.

Mason held up his hands. "Samson told me --"

"And just what have you been talking to Samson about, *human*?" That was Charles again. The anger in his eyes was not his usual shuttered sarcasm, but something stronger kindling.

Mason had his mouth open to reply and both fists balled up, but Professor Acton had a wooden gavel that he slammed down on a side table until the room quieted down. “We have some business to get through, folks,” he said. “We have to officially fill the empty posts in the council, with some people’s terms coming to an end.”

Mason couldn’t hide his grimace. All the council had been much good for so far was this -- bureaucracy.

“No offense, Prof,” Charles said, “but with trouble coming, I don’t know that it matters who’s taking notes and who’s bringing the sandwiches.”

“No offense,” Lan echoed quietly, “but until the last few days, we haven’t seen hide nor hair of you since the new year. So if you have something better to do, don’t let us stop you.” It seemed he really had made that choice.

Charles turned to Lan. Orneriness was clearly an unavoidable part of Charles’s character, but now Mason felt a frisson of pure danger -- like when they had first met at Greyfriars. Instinctively, Mason stepped out into the space between Charles and Lan.

“Trouble has already come to this town,” Mason said forcefully, turning to sweep his gaze over the whole motley gathering of twoscore weres. “In the last few weeks, two young women have been grabbed up by werewolves in this town, and God knows what happened to them.”

And fuck Charles anyway. Mason felt his anger and frustration not as a loss of control now, but as strength to stand up even to a man he knew could take him. It wasn’t about fighting to win; it was about fighting because somebody had to. Somebody had to care about the people who were getting hurt in the middle of all this. Glancing briefly to Lan, feeling his support like a candle in a dark room, Mason pressed on.

“Most of you are looking at me now like you don’t know what I’m doing here. Like you don’t know where I get off talking to you, because I’m not one of you. When you all look at me, all you see is a human, and that’s what I am. I’m going to do the one thing I can. I’m

going to speak for the humans. For two women you aren't going to protect because they're not yours. Two women who can't even begin to know how to protect themselves, because they don't know werewolves are real. Two women one lone policemen can't do anything for. I don't even know their names. Do you? The only ones who were helping him were the coyotes." He looked at Charles. "And maybe they just couldn't do it on their own and decided to stop trying, huh?"

The coyote woman looked down at the ground, obviously uncomfortable. That would be Reba, then? Charles looked over to her, and his expression changed. There was a note of doubt cutting through his enmity.

"We just cannot go looking for trouble with these wolves," said a woman. Mason didn't know her, but she felt like a deer. He was getting better at reading these weres. "If we stand up to them now, they can still come together, all the packs, and destroy us. We wouldn't have a chance."

The group was starting to mutter, and he felt his grip on their attention slipping away. "You are meant to do *something*," Mason said. "Or find people who will, and give them the knowledge and the support they need. Because if all you do is change who the werewolves are killing, if that's all you care about, it's all part of the same thing. They kill people because if they're not wolves, they're fair game. You let people die because if they're not weres, they're not your responsibility. The wolves are out there after humans. Samson is out there after all the weres. And someone needs to be dealing with them all, or trying to. Someone has to fight the wolves, whether they can win or not. Because they are monsters that must be fought; they are a force of evil that must be opposed by anyone who wants to be a force for good."

He let out a breath.

One of the stags, Richard, started, "How dare you tell --"

“He’s looking out for his people,” Charles cut in. “That’s just what an alpha is meant to do.”

“The question remains,” Professor Acton said, almost apologetically, “what are we going to do about it?”

“Like I’ve been telling you,” Charles said, “you fight, or you run. I’m a coyote, and as everyone knows” -- that smirk again -- “we go both ways. And I gotta say, I looked around, and I figure my people are better off out of it. I never lied about that. You lot can’t take the wolves. I don’t know as you can take on Krypt, either. And the humans who know about the wolves...in this town, that’s one man, maybe two. In the whole country, it’d be less than ten. They haven’t got a fucking hope.”

A cell phone rang. Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out an old pay-as-you-go phone. With everyone there looking, he answered it with a curt, “Yeah?” Then to Mason, “Well, speaking of lambs to the slaughter. It’s our friendly one-man antiwerewolf task force, and he wants to talk to you.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Mason!” Ross shouted across the hissing line. “Samson pulled some shit with the pack last night, some serious Frankenstein-type shit, and now they’re out...heading across farmland in a beeline for town, and there’s too fucking many of them for me to...keeping up with them as best I can. When I left the lab, it was billowing smoke out every -- Shit.”

There was a thump and a skid, then a crunching sound.

“Ross!” Mason yelled into the receiver. “Ross, what the hell is going on?”

He had the attention of the rest of the room at that and flapped his hand, trying to get them to shut up. Finally he could hear Ross again.

“...cking Kawasaki is not made for crossing cow paddocks. Look, in about ten minutes, they’re going to be crossing or coming onto Martin Road, somewhere between the roundabout and the dairy. I’ve got nothing but me and a revolver. I’m hoping to hell you can do better, or there’s going to be enraged pack of about eight or nine wolves hitting the outer suburbs in half an hour. Maybe less, the speed they’re going.”

“Fuck.”

"I'm going to be just north of that roundabout, waiting to find out if this is going to be a showdown or my very own suicide-by-werewolf. Because whatever Krypt did to these puppies, I don't think they're going to be easy to stop." Ross cut off the call with a clatter.

Mason pulled the phone away from his ear and glanced at his watch. "Lan," he said. "Samson, or someone at Krypt, has messed up the local pack and either set them loose or lost control of them. I need the car, and if anyone here has a gun, I'll need it. Oh, and anyone who wants to come along. It sounds like the lab might be on fire, so they might have broken out of there after some kind of experiment gone wrong."

"You know I'm with you." Lan stood up and went to him.

The others made no immediate move, apart from Mrs Acton, who strode to a closet and pulled out a shotgun and a box of twelve-gauge shells. "If that lab is damaged, I need to get over there," she said. "We can't let those pharmaceuticals get out, and we don't necessarily want them recovered by God-knows-who. But you're welcome to this, if it'll help."

Mason grabbed the shotgun. Professor Acton stood up and grabbed his car keys. He didn't look at all thrilled about his wife's plan, but he wasn't going to argue about it, either. "I'll drive you to the lab," he said to his wife. "The rest of you will simply have to do as you think best."

Mason was pushed aside as the Actons left, and a good number of the deer went right with them.

"Enlightened self-interest strikes again," Charles said wryly, looking over the scattering of nervous shifters that remained. "Well, fuck it, I guess we're with you. But I gotta warn you, I don't hold with guns. Never fired one in my life. I think Reba's thinned out the rabbit population a little in her time. I'm thinking you'll be wanting to come along." That last bit to the coyote woman.

"Damn right."

Chapter Fifteen

They were six, all told. Mason and Lan, Charles and Reba, one young stag by the name of Carl, and Ross, who was waiting for them by the side of the road.

Charles took one look at Ross as they scrambled out of the old Renault. “Well, shit,” he said.

Mason knew what he meant. Ross looked scared as he stood up from the side of his motorbike. It was smoking and missing most of the plastic molding from one side. Ross had an old revolver clenched tight in one hand.

“I got a quick look at the bastards as they left the lab,” Ross said. “They’re well gone. No more than ten of them, but crazy even for wolves, and they started heading straight for town. I doubt we have much time, and I don’t suggest taking any approach other than trying to kill them as quick and sure as possible.”

So this was it. Mason had the shotgun. Reba had pulled a smaller-gauge rifle from under the seat in her truck. Charles was armed with little more than a heavy cast-iron shovel, and Lan had an old cricket bat. Damn, but that was Mason’s main worry. He had to stop the wolves before they even got to Lan. The stag, Carl, looked pretty uneasy. He stepped into the deep grass on the verge of the road.

The rest of them walked out across the road in their best O.K. Corral style. Carl joined them in the form of a tall stag, pretty impressive up close. His polished rack reached up over a foot and bore three tapered points on each antler. He took his place in the centre of the line with Ross.

They looked down the asphalt, a straight two-lane road like a runway for death.

"I hope to hell they didn't cut across a farm somewhere," Ross muttered, loading six rounds. "They looked pretty set on going down this road, and it's a direct path into town, where most of the people will be."

Mason had already loaded the shotgun and now held it loosely at his waist as he looked down the road with a hand raised to shade his eyes. Through the heat and dew haze, he saw faint, bobbing smudges. The small shapes weaved together and apart as they became clearer. First he could make out six, then seven. Finally he was pretty sure it was eight. Eight maddened werewolves in their prime. With three guns between them, he didn't like their odds at all.

"Ross."

"I see them," he replied.

Then Mason heard the hum of an engine behind them. A battered old Toyota was turning off the roundabout. Ross ran forward, waving his hands to turn it aside. Of course, one of those hands was still holding the revolver. The driver, an older man with aviator shades settled over a large, lumpy nose, took one look at them, deer and all, and stomped on the accelerator. His car veered to the side of the road, debris and dirt spinning up from the wheels as he swerved around them and back onto the road.

The driver started to speed down the road away from them and towards the wolves. Ross shouted after him, "Turn around! You can't go that way."

"He'll be all right, surely?" Lan said. "They can't stop a car."

Mason took a few steps down the road. He wasn't so sure, but there was no way he was going to catch up with a speeding car.

The wolves could be clearly seen now, approaching with uncanny speed straight down the road. They all watched as the wolves fanned out. The car, still weaving slightly as it corrected from the swerve, was driving right down the centre line. The car and the wolves came together about one hundred yards away.

Mason raised the shotgun. It was hard to see exactly what happened next. There was a crash. For a moment, he even hoped the driver would take out a wolf or two and just keep on driving. But the car lurched to the side of the road, where it plowed into an old wire stock fence and stopped with a sickening crunch.

Mason took a couple more steps out in front, wanting to go help. But he saw four of the wolves still on the road and still running right at them. He judged their speed and decided in an instant that his best hope was to fire at the edge of his range and try to reload and get in two more shots before they arrived.

He braced his feet, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. The first shot spat up blacktop just in front of the lead wolf. It didn't even flinch. Mason felt a cold calm as he corrected and fired again. This shot took the lead animal in the chest, and it cartwheeled to the ground. He broke and tipped back the shotgun, and the shells slid out. The other three wolves were still coming as he reached into his pocket for shells. They were within about fifty feet; this was going to be close. Saliva ran from their mouths, and their lips were pulled up in ferocious snarls.

He heard the sharp retort of Ross's revolver, firing measured, aiming each time. He kept a count. *One, two.* By the time Mason raised his gun again, there were two of them still coming, almost right on them. He squeezed the trigger, but was jostled aside as the stag jumped forward, rack lowered. Mason cursed as the shot went wild.

He stepped to the side, trying to get in front of Lan and also aiming for the wolf that was leaping for the stag. His shot seemed to glance off its head, slowing but not stopping it as the stag butted forward into its body. He heard Ross fire again. *Three*. The stag staggered back under the force of the wolf's attack.

The remaining wolf swerved and launched right at Mason. *Four, five*. He grasped the stock of the shotgun, hoping to swing it as a club. He knew this wasn't going to work. In that last blur, he saw the glint of the wolf's reddened eyes and a flash of yellowed teeth. Then the heavy black head of an old Victorian shovel flashed between them, hitting the beast full in the face. It still kept coming forward, landing hard on his chest, so he, the wolf, and the shovel ended up down on the ground together.

Mason wrapped his hands around the wolf's throat, feeling the thick skin slide over its muscular neck. Its hot breath over his face stank of rancid flesh. He thrust back with straight arms, squeezing down as hard as he could. In a fumble of limbs, he saw someone else's arm around the wolf's neck from above. Very gradually, the wolf started to weaken. Then there was a blast, and the beast jerked and fell. *Six*.

Mason pushed off the heavy body. His shirtfront was soaked with blood. The stag had a wolf pinned down on the ground. About ten feet behind him, another wolf, its muzzle smeared with gore and blood, was racing towards him. There were three more behind it. The rest of the pack.

The shotgun was broken open on the ground, and shells had spilled out of his torn pocket across the ground. There was no time.

"I've got this one," Ross said, reloading as he stepped forward, then folding the revolver closed. But as he hurriedly pulled the trigger, the gun jammed.

Mason grabbed for two shells and scooped up the shotgun as he rolled to his feet. He knew there still wasn't enough time, but there was no way they would take the wolves hand to claw. Charles dropped the shovel and jumped forward, transforming as he did. Reba

braced and fired. The bullet hit the wolf square in the chest, but the caliber was too small to stop it.

Charles was on it, his coyote form much lighter than the wolf, lacking the broad, strong jaw. But he got a hold on its throat and hung on. The wolf thrashed wildly, flinging him around. Lan stepped forward with the bat and swung at it.

Part of Mason wanted to step in there, before Lan drew the enraged beast's attention to himself. But the two other wolves were almost on them all as he snapped the shotgun closed. So Mason took two running steps forward and fired. He hit a wolf, but even his larger shot didn't stop it. All the same, he lifted the barrel and aimed for the second animal even as the first was almost on him. Better to weaken them both -- even one healthy werewolf could take out the whole team now that they were out of ammo and time.

He fired, saw the shot take the wolf in the foreleg with a splash of blood, and was pummeled backwards again. His head flew back in a whiplash movement, exposing his throat. *So this is it.*

He hit the blacktop. Teeth snapped, grazing his neck. But something stopped the beast. Reba was by his side, the slender barrel of her rifle thrust between the wolf's jaws. Up close, he could see the pure, senseless rage in the animal's eyes. Whoever this animal once had been, that person was long gone. Instead of pulling back, it seemed to try to chew right through the barrel. Mason grabbed the gun too, and they were both pushing back. The wolf, with its feet on the ground each side of his body, was actually pushing them both across the ground, lunging to get at his throat. Ross came up behind it, the heavy shovel raised in both hands. He brought it down hard on the wolf's lower back, and there was a crack of bone.

The wolves fought hard. The wounded snapped and snarled at them until the very end, but eventually they had the wolves immobilized. Ross got his weapon freed up and finished them off systematically. Charles was still in coyote form, lying on his side in the grass, with Reba crouched by his side. Carl, in stag form, stood in the roadway with his head hanging low and one antler broken off raggedly. Lan leaned against the Renault, bloodied and

holding one arm against his chest. Mason felt a chill. He hadn't seen Lan get injured. His mind had been on keeping the whole group alive. It was an uncomfortable thought. But he couldn't just look after Lan; he'd had to think of getting the whole group of them through alive.

Lan just nodded up the road to the crashed car. Mason walked away from the group. The road remained empty, the sky blue. It was a beautiful day, and a small white butterfly fluttered erratically across the road. The car was still, engine ticking faintly as it cooled. Coming around the side, he saw the entire front windscreen had been shattered. The driver lolled to one side. He was unmistakably dead, and there was nothing to be done for him. Ross caught up with him.

"His misfortune probably saved the lot of us," Ross said. "It staggered how the pack got to us. We were lucky to get out of this with only one person dead."

"Whether we liked them or not," Mason said, "there are nine people dead here. And it didn't have to be this way."

"So what could have been done? God knows, I tried." Ross sounded defensive.

"All I'm saying is, neither Krypt nor the council had the right way to deal with the wolves. It's got to be the law, and if you need help, I'm here, for what it's worth."

Ross looked over at him, then at the shredded body, and nodded. He walked back to the rest, pulling a cell phone from his pocket. "Everyone needs to get the hell out of here before the muggle police arrive," he called out.

* * * * *

It had been harder than expected even to get away. Carl and Charles were both injured badly and couldn't change back to their human forms. Carl ended up having to limp a few miles to some cover near a back road, where they got a horsebox to come pick him up and a trustworthy vet to come look after him. Ross's bike wouldn't start, and he had to leave it. He

seemed sure enough that he could talk to his superior and avoid too many difficult questions about that.

The rest of them got into the Renault and, for the lack of a better plan, ended up back at the Actons'. Mason had a few more bruises and bites to add to his tally. Lan had thrown out his shoulder but, thank God, nothing worse than that. It looked like stoic Reba might have a broken arm, but she refused a lift to the hospital, saying she had one of her own people she would go to. Charles didn't look too good. The vet was worried about internal bleeding, torsion, spinal injuries. But he said there wasn't too much to do but give him relief from the pain, and peace and quiet to heal.

People started to meet up in the living room, coming in and out with reports. Mrs Acton, disheveled and smelling of smoke, reported finding Samson's body in the lab, lacerated and partially burned. Her face was pale as plaster.

"When the fire department arrived, I managed to convince them I worked there. I'd put on a lab coat to cover my clothes when I went in, so I guess I looked the part. I took out computer towers and paperwork, stuffed every vial and beaker I could find in a cooler, and checked the place out before they stopped us going in. The cooler is sealed up in the supercold freezer at the university, the secure one in the nuclear unit. There weren't any other weres in there. Between us, I think we found ten people dead, torn up by the wolves. There may have been others that got away." She took a deep breath.

Mason sat down across from her. Other weres were circled around. "Ross says they're calling it an escape of illegally kept exotic pets -- wolf-dogs or some such," Mason told them. "Some of the patrol officers suspect some kind of gang animal-fighting activity. He reckons a few of the smart ones suspect a little more than that."

Reba came through with her rifle under one arm and a bag slung over the same shoulder. "I've got some coyote business to sort out now that Charles is out of action for a while. We depend a lot on him, you know," she added defensively. "So you better pull him through."

“Coyotes,” muttered one of the deer, as if that explained everything.

Mason followed her out. “I’ll keep an eye on him. And Mrs Acton is okay.”

She tossed her bag in the back of her pickup. “So long as that vet’s not some kind of idiot, he’ll make out,” she said. “Charles is tough. Tell him to hurry up about it. I’m not going to fill in for him forever, and half the dogs won’t do as I tell them anyway.” She sighed. “Coyotes make trouble,” she said. “I know that as much as anyone. But Charles is damn good at keeping a lid on it and stopping any of our kind going the way of the wolves. He doesn’t get half the credit he should.”

She climbed into the driver’s seat and wound down the window. “Don’t be fooled by Ross, either,” she added as she put the truck in gear. “Humans aren’t so different. Leave ’em alone long enough, and they go rogue crazy just like the wolves. Ross looks okay, but you could trust Charles to back you nine times out of ten, and Ross maybe half. Don’t get me wrong -- I think the guy’s all right, but deep down, he’s got more in common with Samson than he’ll admit. So you watch out, for you and for Charles.”

She pulled out of the driveway and onto the road. Mason wondered if she’d told him all that just because he was there, or if she thought he was the one who most needed to know. It didn’t take long to find out the answer to that.

Chapter Sixteen

“Ross says Hameltown is a central location, the largest metropolitan area near where the main werewolf compound is located,” Mason explained. “It made sense to move the task force, such as it is, down here.”

“Well, either way, at least it’s a day job,” Lan said.

They lay together in bed, the duvet tucked around them. Mason had to admit he kind of felt bad about giving up his job at Greyfriars. Barry hadn’t seemed all that surprised. “We never do hang on to the good ones,” he’d said. But joining the task force gave Mason a chance to really make a difference, or at least to try. He had to give it a go. Two people might not be all that much better than one, but at least it was a step in the right direction.

“I’m glad Ross made the offer,” Lan said. “I mean, I’m worried, too. I want you to be damned careful. But you seem more...yourself, if you know what I mean.”

He did know. *I have a direction now, something I’m really going to try to do with my life. Looking after people, or trying to. What more can anyone do?*

“And you remember, I’d never leave you.” Mason had a little bit of trouble coming out with the “L” word, but he hoped that got the point across. “So...you, me, both awake, not

working, and a whole weekend ahead of us. Will wonders never cease?" He had a few ideas about what they could do to start off with.

Lan rolled towards him, seeming to have already shrugged off the bumps and strains he had suffered in the fighting. Mason simply ignored his own aches. They didn't really seem important anymore. He reached around, his hand sliding up under Lan's shoulder, slowly. He didn't push or wrestle, just guided. After a moment, Lan leaned back, lying in his arms and stretching up, exposing the pale expanse of his neck.

There was still the strength in him. Mason could feel it, the strength of the wolf within Lan's deceptively slender body. But not the nature of an alpha. Which was just as well. For a moment, Mason thought what it would be like if everyone he knew was like Charles or even Ross.

"What are you smiling about?" Lan asked.

"Oh, you really don't want to know." Or, at least, Mason sure wasn't going to tell him. No matter what the reason, he wasn't going to say he was thinking about other men right then.

Mason kissed Lan's throat and then his lips. There was nothing in Lan he needed to struggle against, to overpower. Mason moved slowly, deftly, feeling his lover respond, moving under his hands. Lan moving just as he wanted, not because he was mastered, but because it was what he chose, because he was at peace and able to choose to follow.

Lan arched against him, thighs pressing up against his hips. With a hasty grab, Mason snagged the lube from beside the bed. Much as he knew they had all the time they needed, he also wanted Lan. He wanted him now.

Feeling his own cock harden further in his hand, Mason pressed in. He pushed through, that incredible sensation of another man's body ceding, tight and hot around him. Pushing up on his arms, he leaned over Lan, feeling the cool air slip between their bodies. Lan raised his own arms up, bracing against the headboard. They slid apart and together,

smooth and sweet. Slow as he could bear, the sensation building inexorably in him, Mason looked down at Lan's face, struck by a glancing beam of morning light.

Lan moaned. Mason's last vestiges of reserve melted away. It was better even than it had been when they first met. It was beyond that, beyond the hesitancy, the fear, the conscious control of himself. Lan moved with him, pressing to meet his every thrust. Mason felt sweat springing up on his skin, the warmth of passion, and the drumlike beating of his own heart. Somehow, he knew Lan's heart beat with that same rhythm, just as hard.

It was as if, together, they managed to hold on to time and stay within that moment. The feeling built inside him slowly, but didn't peak. He had time, time to look down at Lan, to see his face. To think, *This is mine*.

Lan reached up and smoothed his hand down Mason's cheek, then rested it on his shoulder. Mason reached down, the lube still on his hand helping his fingers slip easily over Lan's hard cock.

"I can't..." Lan clutched his arm. He was so close to coming, his cheeks flushed and lips parted.

That sight pushed Mason to the edge. He felt that familiar clutch in his gut, but slower, longer than he had ever felt before. Lan came in his hand as they collapsed together.

* * * * *

They lay together in the lazy aftermath into the midmorning, hands on each other gently, like connecting threads were spun between them with every touch. Mason dozed, but lightly. Lan shifted against him, and Mason drifted into awareness again, a very pleasant awareness.

"I think..." Lan said softly, in a way that presaged a rather intimate thought.

There was a knock at the front door, loud, confident, and imperious.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Mason said. He hesitated, but then rolled out of bed and grabbed a robe on his way to the front door. He had the robe mostly on when he got to the door and found Ross there.

“I got a report that those two girls are still alive up at the compound,” Ross said perfunctorily. “I thought we’d go see about getting them out of there.”

“But I...” Mason began.

Lan was behind him. “Ask the man in for a cup of coffee,” he said. “I’ll pack you a case.”

 THE END 

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