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Sanctuary Moon

Second Howl

A Paranormal Anthology



A la Wolf
Melody Knight



À la Wolf

by

Melody Knight

*To Lady Tesslyn
Andrea Marie Hansen-
Hill...*

A la Wolf

*Under dirty moons
On grotty streets,
Midst city slums
On lycan feet.*

*Dredged up from deep
Beneath wolf hide,
Bloodlust strong
A driving tide.*

*Morphic mania, moon-clad sport,
In ravaging hunger, heat, and lust?
Once run amok, can love prevail,
Does affection last with loss of trust?*

by N. D. Hansen-Hill

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Prologue

The moon sat heavy in the sky, an ugly yellow, pale mustard like the matted coat of an old dog. Esther bared her teeth at it, snarling, pleased that her canines were at least a better shade of ivory than their progenitor. Damn moon! It made no sense to her, no sense at all, that a planetary body should have such a wretched effect on a woman's existence.

She was still a day away from The Burning Itch. Worse than the curse, and far more painful. Women complained about cramps and mood swings. Try combating the gum-shattering extrusion of pointy canines, and the ripping itch of extruded hair, to say nothing of the pulses in her muscles as they tightened, lengthened, shortened.

She blinked her eyes, but her lashes were already getting longer. It always happened this time of the month, and it was irritating as hell. It made her feel as though she had something in her eye, or someone standing in her periphery, which was worse. She could be a little short-tempered on days like this, snapping...literally...at anyone who intruded on her personal space. Esther had made it a point, ever since that first time when she'd bitten Gregor's chest, to stay clear of people during these times of lunar madness, at least until she could cope.

That usually didn't happen till two days after the full moon, at which point her temper and her inclinations began to settle down.

"It wouldn't do to kill anyone," a voice growled close to her ear.

Esther lunged so swiftly she was barely a blur. She landed atop him, kneeling pointedly near his groin. "There are exceptions to every rule," she assured him, through narrowed eyes. Gregor was taking advantage. He knew her lunar cycle as well as he knew his own.

He wanted her. Esther knew it. Some would have claimed it was a match made in heaven—or hell as the case may have it—but she refused to allow her disability to form alliances where her human body would not. Gregor was a scoundrel, had always been a scoundrel, and if the consequences hadn't been so dire, Esther would have felt justified in biting him that day. If anyone had deserved it, it would have been him. He'd been coming on to her once again, the fool. She'd simply reacted...and had been regretting it ever since.

"C'mon, Egg," he coaxed, peering up at her with those beautiful glistening eyes. They were the one thing about Gregor that she always found attractive, and at moon-times they took on the added adorable attribute of being almost doggy-like. As to his wolfness, well, Gregor *was* a wolf, of the male kind, at any time of the month. Esther didn't see that moonrise made any difference.

"You're disgusting," she said, and stood up, turning away so he wouldn't see her remorse. No good telling him she regretted the words, but then, she was ultra sensitive. If anyone had told her she was disgusting during moon-time, she would have been mortified with shame, thinking that all they were noticing was the protruding hair, weird muscles, and buck canines. It's not like a werewolf could put on braces, for God's sake. For some reason with her, none of the lycan stuff ever went right when it came to the orthodonture. Lord help her if she wasn't a werewolf with an overbite.

Chapter One

And now she was doomed to be a loveless werewolf with a bad jaw line. Oh, she'd read about transformations, lycanthropy, therianthropy, all to exhaustion. During the last three years, since her unfortunate encounter with a nasty man on a moonstruck night, she'd explored traditions, folklore, and the literature, some of it in its original form. What had stuck with her was the horror of it all, of being a skinwalker, which really wasn't true because she'd neither assumed varied animal forms, nor gone around making curses. The only one she cursed was Gregor, and that's because he was available. No one else would have understood her mood swings.

Of course, that made poor Gregor doubly cursed. Werewolfery, as he liked to call it, didn't bother him nearly as much as it did her. He didn't even hold it against her, which he should have. For God's sake, she'd altered his life forever.

As to the skinwalking, she was stuck with a wolf's carcass. Little different than a dog.

Give me a doggy biscuit and a pat on the head. She grimaced.

When it came to poor Gregor, hers had been a hasty, ill-thought, bad-tempered reaction. So easy for something so far-reaching. One snap, one minor

slice of the teeth, and Gregor's destiny had been fixed. She sighed, dismayed when it came out a growl, rather like a misplaced burp. Still one night to go...

With a last irritated glance and the mood, and a swipe of half-claws at Gregor, she was off. Work awaited in four hours.

She had that much time to depilate and *shave* face, if she wanted to *save* face.



Vixen strolled into the office, toned limbs taut, confident in her perfect hair, her elegance, her command of all office situations. She held her head high, her eyes seeing all, but fixed on no one, prepared to charm and challenge, a social enigma everyone wanted to know...

"Get me a coffee, will ya, Esther? Thatta girl." Tom Tyrone, her boss. If he noticed her at all, it was because she was framed by the coffee machine.

She'd been trying for three years to get them to call her Vixen. It suited her transformative status so much better than "Esther."

"Can ya pour me one, too, Poodle?" Gregor crooned the words.

Nasty maggot. Deliberately provoking her. She glared death in his direction. Only he would know how easy it would be for her to deliver it that evening. It made up her mind. Tonight, when he came hunting for her, the way he always did at moonrise, she wouldn't be around. He could track her all he wanted but she had plans. Tonight she would become a member of The Hunt. The invitation had been

issued three years before, half-heartedly tossed her way. A placating gesture to counter devastation. Only, "Esther" had been too horrified at the idea to take him up on it.

Well, times change. It was time to grow up, to have a little sport. One could only mourn one's girlhood and womanhood so long. Celibacy was her choice, and she'd made it long ago. She couldn't afford to accidentally do what she'd done to Gregor.

Never again.

And it was time for Gregor to find some else to befriend. It wasn't enough for her to know they had a common affliction. Surely, it couldn't be enough for him? It was time to cut him loose, to make his own decisions. *I don't need a keeper.* Gregor had been trying to be just that even before she'd wrecked his life.

Tonight, Vixen was stepping out. She buried her qualms beneath her well-hidden hair. Tonight, she was joining The Hunt.



Gregor watched the unspoken insult fly. There were times when his woman hated him. He wondered if she knew, other than in the most metaphorical way, how close that emotion was to love.

Her bite had come at absolutely the worst time. They'd still been at the seesaw phase, where he would come on to her and she'd push him away. Oh, he

would have won her eventually, but dammit, if he'd ever seen anyone so insecure! Esther was a beauty, but she was afraid to flaunt it. Now, ever since she'd bitten him—and given him a new *leash* on life—he'd had her guilt to contend with, too. It would have bothered him more if he wasn't having such a good time. Sometimes he wondered if the were-virus or whatever it was had gone wrong, and transformed him into a hyena, instead. All this prancing around in dog suits made him feel like laughing his fool head off.

He glanced at his watch, noted how hairy his forearm was and realized he really didn't need to know the time. His individual hairs were coming to attention. As much as Esther hated these moments, Gregor loved them.

He drove out of town and off the road, onto a dirt track that led into the hills. The path was well worn. He and Esther came here every month. It had everything: remoteness, isolation, plus it was untamed. Plenty of room for a werewolf to shapeshift, and run off a little angst.

Late again. She wasn't there. He didn't know whether she thought she might change the inevitable by willpower alone, or whether reluctance kept her away. Esther had been increasingly late in arriving. Many times she'd been more hair than woman by the time she climbed out of her car.

Gregor climbed to the top of the low hill and straightened, waiting for it to happen. There was a painful tingling in his skin, a burning, an itch that made him

want to rip it in furrows. His gums were already bleeding, his fingertips sliced where claws ate their way through the skin. He held himself erect as long as possible, a tribute to his manhood. He'd always believed that the best werewolf came of the best man. Agonizing as this transition was, he held himself with pride.

He could feel the pulse of the lunar pull luring forth his inner beast. It was as though that celestial body was in cadence with his pounding heart. Just as a ring around the moon sometimes signaled rain, the surge of pallid light signaled his transformation. Eyes squinted against the pain, Gregor lifted his jaw, and opened his mouth...to howl.



Somehow, I expected...more. Esther strolled into The Fold, timing it so she'd be safely ensconced within the nightclub before the moon rose. She'd never been here before, but she'd driven past, oh, maybe, a hundred times during the last three years. It was the place she'd go should she ever drum up the courage, or an attitude. She'd never had the guts to allow others to witness her transformation. Only Gregor.

Well, insecurity had kept her away for three years, but it was time she grew up, and did what werewolves did. In actuality, she wasn't all that sure what that was, given the contemporary climate. The reading she'd done had been more about the affliction, than any way to come to terms with it. Search as she would, she

hadn't been able to come up with any self-help books for skinwalkers—and "Lycanthropy For Dummies" wasn't on any library list she could find.

It's all a matter of coming to terms with yourself, of being confident enough to fit in...

Yeah, right. The first thing she noticed was that the stink of unwashed dog was rank about the place. Apparently, her problems with canine hygiene were echoed in the hunkered masses. Her elongating nostrils quivered with distaste.

There was a bit of the cheap and tawdry about The Fold. The last thing she wanted was to equate bloodlust with anything inelegant, but these were huddled, hunkered-down masses. They were all awaiting moonrise in various states of would-be glory. Despite aspirations to grander things, it was difficult to hide sprouting hairs. Given that the brunt of jokes against women had for years entailed female moustaches, for any female with a lick of conceit, this place was no haven.

Moustaches. Shaggy mono-brows. Haired hell.

Esther straightened, determined that Vixen would at least put in an appearance before fleeing for the hills. For a second she thought longingly of Gregor. He'd be in the hills, literally. *Waiting for me.* The easiness of their relationship, his acceptance, seemed almost idyllic in that moment.

Immature. Easy. Unchallenging. She thrust out still-human breasts. *I won't settle.* Acceptance wasn't enough. It was time to take life in her hands and wrest out the

future. With this glorious goal in mind, she traipsed with elegance across the club to the bar, tall, leggy; all breasts, long nails, and lush tush. Esther could sense all the eyes on her.

Vixen's in the house.

She was still in possession of her humanity, whereas the heavy drinkers were already succumbing to moon morph.

Esther was a little awed by her own elegance. *I'm actually going to pull this off!* She could picture her own sinuous movements. It wasn't the first time she had made an impression. It was just that most of the other impressions she'd made were bad. Those few moments of mixing in this social milieu made her sure she had made the right decision.

I am empowered.

Even Gregor would be impressed if he could see her now. Of course, it didn't seem to take much to impress him, and she deliberately attempted to put him out of her mind. There was a wolf at the bar who would be a much more fitting partner for Vixen. He was tall, lithe, and shaggy-haired. His ears were just beginning to elongate, but he hadn't drunk enough to lose control. Until the moon came up, he'd remain human enough for her to get to know.

In her enthusiasm, Vixen picked up the pace. Too bad high heels were never fashioned for doggy feet. As she tilted her head, fixing fomenting eyes on the male

of her choice, she lost track of her feet. The next moment, Vixen, AKA Esther, was lying facedown on the floor.

Chapter Two

She's not coming. He didn't know when, exactly, it hit him. Esther had run amok—or been run amok. Visions of tar, feathers and iron rails briefly assailed his vision. "Amok" was an inherent hazard. It lingered only a misplaced step, a bit of ill temper, an unexpected wolf-spotting away.

Someone saw her!

His churning thoughts threatened to overwhelm him, setting his protective impulses on rip and tear. He made himself calm, forced himself down on his haunches, striving for a dog silhouette. Something domesticated, non-threatening. That was Gregor's meditative effort during these times of transition, and he'd never told anyone, not even Esther. By forcing himself to sit placid and poised before the moon, he was asserting some control.

And anyone catching sight of him would merely assume a dog had taken itself out for an evening stroll.

His adrenalin was still making his heart race, but since he couldn't sweat in this guise, he was forced to pant instead. Slobber dripped on his front feet before he collected himself, before he accepted the truth. She wasn't coming, not because she couldn't.

She wasn't coming because she had chosen not to.

After that, he paced restlessly for a while, angry, ready to tear to shreds the next rabbit who ventured into his territory. Not that he would, mind you, but the fact that he could have, made him feel much better, easing his pride a little. They were friends, if nothing else. Hadn't she thought of him...at all?

Bitch! He felt better for that, though he doubted that even Esther would have understood his garbled sentiments, spoken as they were in a growl.

He sat down again, and lifted his nose skyward. There were far more werewolves in the neighborhood than anyone suspected, and as delicate as his olfactories became at this time of the month, he still didn't possess the smell-brain of the average dog. As the night progressed, he would find it easier to distinguish one were-friend from another, and he presumed that long and close association with Esther would implant her delicate scent upon his brain. At the moment, his nose wasn't particularly helpful.

Where could she have gone?

Suddenly, he knew. The Hunt. Last month she'd expressed curiosity, but Gregor had scoffed. He should have known that would be enough to ensure her interest. Contrary wench, wicked were-woman. That was the problem with The Hunt, though. Originating at that questionable nightclub, The Fold, this particular gathering was on the dark side, and bore undertones of the feral unleashed. That

was the attraction, of course. Anyone with were-genes pulsing through their veins had felt the lustiness of the blood hunt. The fact that no outsiders knew exactly what was hunted added to the lure.

His Esther might be getting more than she'd bargained for.

Lost in thought, his rear leg absently scratched at his stomach. It was a bad habit, brought on every month by ticks and fleas. It was also a habit Esther abhorred. Gregor sighed, stood up, and shook his shaggy self.

Were-women!

With that, he gave his muscles a final stretch, and loped off into the night.



Face down, on the floor, the stink of whiskey, dirt, and wolf hair rank in her nostrils. *Oh my God!*

"I always find this...a difficult time for coordination." The voice dribbled like a molten melody above her. A swoon-worthy counter to her own swan song.

Esther opened one eye—the one that partially stuck to the floor. It was he, the elegant he-beast from the bar, and he had an accent! Subtle, but distinct. Seemingly neither shocked nor put off by her display, he had a hand under her arm, and was lifting her to her feet.

For an instant she forgot, and went to a four-limbed pose, but managed just in time to turn it into a stretching motion, and stand instead, in all her bipedal

glory. The left side of her face felt tacky, which put her at a disadvantage, but it was far too late to hide.

Bar lighting. Maybe he won't notice...?

Au contraire. Her elegant savior leaned in, and with a panache she didn't know anyone could possess, oh so elegantly lapped at her temple, her cheek, her jaw. Esther had been prepared to die of shame, but instead, these gestures that he made seem so "au naturel" were nearly her undoing. She shivered in anticipation as those delicate lappings descended, trailing a line of tickling canine kisses along her jaw, her throat.

Holy Mother McCreedy.

Esther swallowed convulsively, then wondered whether he noticed since he was now working his way around to the back of her neck, all under the guise of cleaning her skin, of course. Vixen couldn't recall ever being so turned on and discomfited at the same time. *I mean, for crud's sake, half the bar is watching.*

Too bad the half which weren't clued her in. As bizarre and forward as this behavior seemed to her, to at least half the people in the room it was matter of fact.

He does this all the time.

That's why he's so good at it.

As sensual as his explorations of the hollows at the base of her neck appeared, no one was shocked.

I'm in over my head.

Esther smiled carefully, hiding the toothiness of it in tight drawn lips. He'd saved her from open ridicule, but this was a small world in the land of lycanthropes. The last thing she wanted was to appear scavengeable. "You do that very well," she managed, wondering how she'd manufactured the words. They sounded so very cool; not like her own at all. "But I have places to be..." She deliberately left it vague.

Cool and collected.

"Yes," he agreed breathily, in tones that would have done a husky proud. His eyes glinted a feral gold. "We must leave, before we are caught out."

The man-beast had charm. Somehow, he'd made their exit sound both dangerous and exciting. So much more acceptable than admitting you have to go before Joe Public sees a bunch of drunken wolves teetering out of the bar.

"I am Pulsar." His clawed fingers were gripping her arm now, and in that moment, Esther wished she'd already wereshifted. It would have given her a chance to flee into the night on wolf adeptness rather than ape klutziness. Pulsar was intense, something beyond her experience, and it gave her a sudden dread for the moonlit darkness beyond the door. She had no clear idea what The Hunt entailed. Decadence. Deceit. Death?

She'd come here to tempt Fate. That didn't mean it was what she really wanted.

With an arrogance she was far from possessing, Esther suppressed her shudder, and was maneuvered by Pulsar out the door.



Gregor figured he wouldn't have much trouble finding her, now that he was in the right part of town. The woman might be picturing herself as an enigma, but wolf senses, now that he was fully morphed, left little of the enigmatic about either of them. Indelicate as it sounded, at this time of the month, Gregor could have listed her last three meals. Had he been an indelicate sort, he could have ferreted out even more information about her habits, where she'd visited, her womanly cycle.

He knew it was what she hated most about her transformation. Lunar madness was supposedly a mystical event, but it left the victim with practically no mystique whatsoever. It was nearly impossible to get any control over the damned exercise, either, with all those feral feelings and animal hormones running around.

Not to mention hunger. Bloody hell, but werewolfery gave a man an appetite! It was all that sloughing of the old and in with new. The rebuilding of form was no idle matter. When held against the progression of ugly infant to handsome adult male—he lifted his wolf brow proudly—which took years, that of

human into hairy, toothsome, ferocious canine took but a flash. No wonder most werewolves were such terrors. By the time they changed skins, they were metabolically deplete. And dangerous as sin.

Gregor picked up the pace. That's one thing he and Esther had always done for each other—provided a first feeding to follow moonrise. A picnic grand enough to satisfy lycan appetites, but sedate enough to live with when restored. Strictly supermarket fare. Nothing they'd have to live down later.

Whatever maggot Esther had in her head this month, it had nothing to do with being sedate, protected...safe. She was eager to embrace her wild side, but Gregor had gone that route himself...once.

Never again.

For, if Esther were to give into impulse, she not only wouldn't want to live with memories—she wouldn't want to live at all.



Esther wasn't feeling any too brazen a few minutes later. All that swagger upon leaving the bar only ended in skulkery. They were hoarding shadows now, nobody wanting to get stuck transitioning where some non-wolf could see. No matter how much you made of it—she glanced at Pulsar—there was a certain disgust and embarrassment in such an all-over alteration, like getting caught on the toilet mid-duty.

Plus, they were in the very worse part of town. Esther hadn't particularly minded that, feeling surly as she was when she'd embarked on this little mission, but now it left her feeling vulnerable. Her upbringing had been soft and cushy. That was an entirely different scenario from the rather rowdy group she'd met in the bar. If she was out of sorts at moon time—she who had few social issues to resent—how much more so the people at her side? These people weren't living in some poverty pocket. This was the underbelly of the city, the seamy side, with its complement of criminals, gangs, mercenaries.

I'm not only in over my head. My head's on the chopper.

She didn't know where she was going, but she refused to be wooed into complacency by Pulsar's commanding style. In truth, as the moon grew higher in the sky, and the sparkling reflection hit the windows overhead, she was running as fast as the others, seeking some place of safety. There was an overwhelming sensation of threat in the air, from the shadowed surroundings, to her companions. Nobody wanted to be the one to get caught out, to slow the group.

A groaning of metal ahead announced The Changing Grounds.

Well, Pulsar announced it, too, his voice panting near her ear. Pulsar, for all his leadership prowess, was puffing and out of shape.

The bar patrons tore into the metal-sided structure, hitting the first streaks of moonlight like lines of cocaine. Whereas before they'd been avoiding exposure, now they seemed to be lusting after it. A race, to see who could transition first.

Groans, moans, growls. The stench of sweaty human was displaced by the feral scent of newborn wolf. Bright eyes captured the moon and held it, as the space resounded with howls.

The calls seemed to go on and on, resonating the metal with the strength of their wavelengths. Any creature within a half-mile radius, be warned.

Esther stepped out of the shadows, four-footed, glistening coat, eyes bright with terror. Pulsar had forgotten her in his own needs. She padded toward the door, keeping to the shadows once more, thinking to slink away undetected. Things were different this time—she was ravenous, and she didn't like it. That was something she hadn't banked on. She didn't know what she'd expected—that they would remain at The Fold, ordering up food to satisfy an appetite worthy of a wolf? To still the most beastly of bloodlusts, before venturing forth for some sport? Tag, chase, and other frivolous ventures, destined to scare, but not to doom?

No such luck.

Dread sat in her stomach, heavy, weighing her down. At the same time, Pulsar slunk her way, rubbing his length along hers. "It's time," he said, nudging her toward the gaping door.

The Hunt was on.

Chapter Three

Her ears tilted forward, chasing the sound of scurries and squeaks. The rustle of prey, fleeing in terror. Esther had always been civilized before, but this time? She wanted to snap her teeth, close them on some hapless victim, savor the chomp...

Dear Lord!

She pursed her lips, doing her best to retract her protruding canines. She could swear a person couldn't feel a tooth from the inside out, but tonight, those canines were positively twanging, itching. Itching to tear, rip, slash.

She shivered, struggling to cling to her humanity, while around her, the feral came to the fore. Savagery unleashed. Her new wolf-mates were agitated, their whines and whimpers rising around her. A clang-bang, metallic thunk as the siding dented, growls and yelps announcing an altercation at the back. Pulsar was losing control of his masses.

Was there no one who felt as she did? Who retained some trace of ethics? Of sentiment? Esther risked a glance at Pulsar. Was that a frisson of fear in the head lycan's eyes?

If it was there was instant, it was gone the next. A rise in the clamor was his signal—the spur he needed to unstopper the bottle. Like a fizzy drink in shaken mode, the lycan pack exploded out through the gap.

Hunger was a stomach-twisting ache. The metabolic demands of the moon-change needed to be met. The moment they left the old factory building the whimpering and whining stopped. There were only the sounds of the hunt, and the hunted. Panting breaths, and the whispery thud of padded feet on paving, the occasional snap and crack of teeth... And her heart pounding in her ears.

But it couldn't drown out the flight of her prey. Esther was attuned to them tonight, and they were losing definition as the minutes went on. From victims they were rapidly descending to faceless prey. Her eyes narrowed with anticipation, her nose moistened with excitement. She no longer bothered to hide her protruding teeth, but let the drool come...

There is no shame, no evil, in doing what comes naturally.

I need to be fed.

She didn't consider that even that, the "need to be fed" was a crock, robbing her of responsibility. *Is it less reprehensible to tell it like it is? I need to, lust to*—she was salivating openly now, picturing sinking her teeth into heavy, thick-skinned meaty meal—*feed*.



She'd jokingly suggested they visit the club. Gregor knew he should have realized it wasn't a joke. That was back when she was still testing him. When she didn't think he was man enough, let alone wolf enough, to challenge her.

Hell, she's still testing me.

For a moment he wavered. *Why the hell am I doing this?* If brains were the making of a man, then hunger was the making of a wolf. Without ravenous appetite to drive him, he could make sensible decisions. Man decisions.

So, why on this wolf-stained Earth am I chasing after a female who so clearly thinks she could do better? That was it, of course—the part that stung. Express his interest and it made him too easy for her to snare. Even when she wasn't in lycan mode, the lady had a trace of the wolf about her. She was seeking an alpha male.

Gregor rolled his eyes, cursing the moon. *And if I were to act all "alpha," she'd claim I was bossing her around.* He knew because he'd tried.

He brought himself back to the task at hand. This was dangerous territory. Werewolf world, and Gregor had eaten a ham before he'd come. A big, juicy, giant ham. It might be on its way to digestion, but lycan snouts were keen.

I can't smell it.

Of course, you can't, but it's probably still in your teeth. Damned difficult to floss when you were wolfish. Would ham bits in his teeth make him appear like a side of pork to a pack of wild wolf types? He wouldn't put it past them to eat each other.

It took a major act of courage for him to poke his nose in the door of The Fold. It wasn't normal behavior for wolves to visit nightclubs—at least, as far as he knew. He was no expert, but hell! Why would anyone want to, especially here? In this neighborhood, a startled citizen would be more likely to shoot him than ask questions. And since Gregor had never tested the theory of rapid healing, that particular reaction, of bullet in butt, didn't exactly appeal.

The tip of his black nostrils had barely crossed the threshold when he smelled her. *Esther!* Her scent was so strong that for an instant, he thought she must actually be there. His reaction was spontaneous, and he leaped in through the door, all caution tossed aside. He stood on all fours, prepared to wrench his she-beast from this establishment, if need be.

Up for the challenge...

Only there was no one who wanted to challenge him. He glanced around, teeth bared in an almost snarl. Actually, the snarl could have gone either way and Gregor was keeping his options open. Should the atmosphere be friendly, that

bared-tooth pose just *could* have been twisted into a smile...maybe. He tilted up his muzzle, sniffing boldly at the air, while his eyes searched for some sign of her.

There were a scattering of souls in here, all wolves, and most of them shaggy. Not of the timber wolf, thick-pelted shaggy hide, but more like the moth-eaten, poor diet, lousy hygiene, tufty kind. Even the bartender who was somehow managing to serve bottles of beer to customers was looking poorly tended.

But they were all staring at him. Gregor caught a glimpse of himself, then, in the mirror over the bar.

Crap and damn, I'm magnificent!

He'd only seen himself during transition once before. Generally, he avoided mirrors at times like this.

I'm an alpha male. No one here was about to challenge him because no one here was as tough as he was. Oh, a pack mentality—or a well-placed silver bullet, he reminded himself—might take him down, but in a one on one...

Gregor snorted with amusement, then just kept on laughing. *Unchallenged.* He nodded to the barkeeper, and tore back out the door.



Despite his amusement, he had a problem. It wasn't an insurmountable problem, except to his wolf side, of course. That part of him seemed to wax dramatic over such things as male challengers, dominance, that kind of thing.

His girl had been restless lately, but neither one of them was conversant enough with lycanthropy to understand why. Gregor had understood the moment he'd snatched that bit of her remaining scent in the bar, but it wasn't exactly the kind of thing he could discuss with Esther. She would be totally shamed, embarrassed, even distraught. Humans didn't come into heat. He doubted that she'd recognize it even in herself.

Unless someone were to point it out to her.

Gregor froze in his tracks. It might be kind at times to be cruel, but telling her the truth in this instance might be enough to alienate her forever. It would be like telling her she'd been walking around all night with food on her teeth, spit on her chin, or toilet paper stuck to her shoe. The news bearer would be blamed because there'd be no doubt he'd seen it...her. Everyone else could still pretend.

Gregor's groan resolved into a growl. There wouldn't be a male within a four-block radius who wouldn't know about her little problem, and seek to take advantage of it. It must be a pretty rare event to have moonrise coincide with human fertility. He told himself to keep cool, but the challenge was in the air, trapped in the stink of pack wolves, the drifting of hair on the moon, the saliva of

slathering beasts staining the sidewalks. They were here, they were hungry, they were on the prowl. As soon as they satiated their appetites for prey, they'd be after a different type of prey altogether. Esther.

Gregor's lip bared, and his heart pounded, the heat pulsing through his veins at the impending challenge. No one was going to touch Esther tonight.

No one.



It was a weird sound, she couldn't place, and yet some part of her did...and the recollection filled her with revulsion. It was a skitter, a rustle, a clicking, and it was happening *en masse*.

Hunger was savaging her now, and turning her savage. She spared barely a thought for her fleeing meal, wanting only to satiate what was rapidly become a ravening demand. Pulsar raced at her side, but what might have begun as proposition was now strictly competition, and he knew tricks she didn't. As they entered the alley, her eyes spotted movements in the shadows, making her hesitate. Not so Pulsar. With an almighty clang and clatter, he rammed the empty trash cans at the entrance. At the sudden noise, the alley came alive.

Cockroaches. Teaming masses of carapaced, thick-winged monsters. These were the American kind, huge and thick-bodied, the ones the city fathers had been trying to eliminate for years. They were as common down here as rats or flies.

Some of them were about to be eliminated now.

The wolf pack tore in behind Pulsar, snapping and biting. Roach squish, that yucky yellow liquidy mess, flew in spatters within the narrow confines, splattering concrete and brick. Tiny roach babies, released with a chomp of teeth, were everywhere, and it was all crackle and crunch, grunt and chomp. Chewing loudly, carapaces snapping, bits and pieces of dangly legs, antenna, broken wings everywhere.

But it was food, and hunger was eating her alive. In that moment Esther hated those roaches more than she hated anything. It was their fault for being here, their fault for overrunning the slum, their fault for multiplying so relentlessly. For hounding humanity, for contaminating her world, and most of all, for making themselves available to what was coming next.

She couldn't stay it any longer. With a move so swift it could scarcely be seen, she snatched a high flyer out of the air, and downed it with one gulp. It wiggled on the way down, but she ignored it, and went after another, and another. She was so absorbed, so caught up in that dichotomy of anger and self-disgust, that it took a heavy nudge from Pulsar to bring her back, and she snapped at him furiously, needing to vent at least some of it on him.

He didn't understand—not the way Gregor would have. He snapped back, teeth closing on her shoulder, seeking to dominate her.

Esther was in no mood to be dominated. She hated herself for her roach meal, but now the pack was moving forward, and she had no choice but to move with them.

What? Elevating yourself above them now? You, who still have roach slime on your chin?

It was true. Goo was dribbling between her overlarge canines and down her throat. Esther gagged, realized it would only mean roachmeal-revisited, and swallowed hard, instead.

Where now?

She had her answer the next moment, as a squealing rat was smashed in Pulsar's lightning jaws.

Chapter Four

They're working their way up the food chain. Gregor was tight on their tails now.

The alley was the most disgusting mess he'd ever seen, but he couldn't afford to skirt it. Not if he intended to catch up with Esther and stop her, before she did anything too rash. He actually applauded the roach meal, as much as it disgusted him. If it took the edge of their hunger, they might yet have some control.

He couldn't believe they'd hang around in town when the wildness struck them. It'd be a lot more sensible to hit the outskirts of town and take out the odd rabbit. Instead, they hung out at a club then went after coarse fare, fancifully labeling their feeding "The Hunt."

Bullshit.

The rat corpses got to him. Mammals, now. He'd been thinking "rabbits," but that didn't mean he was prepared to face spilled blood and guts. The roaches were bad enough, but they were gross anyway. People loathed cockroaches as a matter of principle.

Gregor sat back on his haunches, attempting to still the memories. He stayed that way for maybe thirty seconds, then paced restlessly. The smell of the

kill stirred his bloodlust, in a way he hadn't experienced since his first transition. It was a stirring he'd hoped would never happen again.

No time. Gregor drew a deep breath, sucking in air strained through his teeth. *Ham. Cooked meat.* Ever so much better... Whether it was true or not didn't matter, because he was going to make himself believe it.

Ham aroma might mark him as wussy wolf, but he'd rather that than be a macerating one. It would be too easy to skinwalk all the way to human slaughter.

Chasing the pack required no great effort on his part now. All he had to do was follow the trail of corpses...roach and rat...they'd left behind.



How could I have ever have believed this would be fun? Esther spared a thought for Gregor, camped alone on his hilltop, howling at the moon. How could she ever have considered his dependability, reliability, boring?

He would never serve me rats...

She was starving still, gluttony but a tooth snap away. The sight of the rats, the smell of them, stirred her hunger. Their filthy stink was rank with their urine-tainted fear response, and it should have turned her stomach, revolted her. In her brain she knew she was not this she-wolf, but she was an unstoppable force. Her body was moving ahead toward a conclusion, just like her body moved toward

hairiness every full moon. If only she could pull back enough to hate herself, to detest what she was about to do, then maybe, just maybe, she'd find the strength to leave...

But that wasn't enough, was it? A wolf, on the verge of running amok. What if she were to encounter some poor human, stupid enough, or lacking in choices enough, to venture forth under a wolf moon?

Her brain was racing, but it wasn't in control of her actions. Her conscience was a very minor partner tonight in the interplay of instinct and driving hunger. Even as she somehow forced her legs to stiffen, her forelegs to lock, firmly planting themselves in place, some inner relentlessness, a goad without remorse, was pushing her on. As much as regret might already be written in her brain, before rat hairs had so much as touched her lips, the foreknowledge wasn't going to stop her.

Horror haloed her, dark as the mooncast on her fur was bright.

God help any human abroad on the street!

She already knew she was a deadly force...and she was beginning to believe nothing could deter her. Disgust hadn't even come close.

Evil?

I already turned Gregor. The man had been so forgiving that it hadn't really fazed her the way it should have. Truth was, it hadn't bothered her for months.
Spoiled, rotten, selfish bitch.

I am Vixen. No doubts about it now—only Vixen was suddenly someone she was terrified to be. *Vixen is going to kill tonight.*

She lifted her head, chilly moonlight glazing her fur, distorting her vision. The pack was on the move, The Hunt barely underway. The rats were reacting much as the cockroaches had, their wily brains offering them little edge against the predator. They were being rounded up, their avenues of escape narrowed, their exits cut off. There was only the street ahead...

...and I'm waiting. The rats weren't going to get very far.

A drip of anticipation dribbled down her jaw line.

A movement in her periphery drew a flick of her eyes. *A window. A cigarette.* In a room one storey up, just above the churning rat migration, a human had opened a window to check on the commotion. Thundering feet, all those fleeing rodents. He had a cigarette dangling from his lips.

Target. Vixen shivered. The man was about to get a faceful of rats.

Her legs tightened to spring.

Worse. A packful of werewolves on The Hunt.



Pulsar slammed her. Vixen was so focused on the human in the apartment that she didn't hear his damned were-hide coming over the milling rats. The

cacophonic squeal, squeak, rustle and thud had drowned out everything else, a low, rumbling thunder she could feel through her paws. These rats were heavy, well-fed specimens, thriving on the refuse of a million urban dwellers.

The ramming, stiff-legged as she was, sent her toppling. They rolled into an alley, then Pulsar was atop her, his eyes shining yellow, sharp canines closing on her haunch. At first, stupid as it sounded, she didn't get it. Attack was one thing. This was something else.

When awareness hit, it was in a crass, ~~oh-my-God-I've-never-done-it-as-a-~~ dog, gag-rendering way.

Under all that hair is a man! A musty, crusty, smelly man!

It didn't help. Esther knew in that instant it'd be like trying to reason with a humping husky. Pulsar was hot to trot, and already in motion. Esther rolled over on her stomach, preparatory to crawling...

It was just what Pulsar wanted. His paws enclosed her now, his heavy weight pressing down. Esther snapped and bit, but he had her tight, and she could already feel him against her, his drool dripping on her back, the hot wetness of his penis getting ready to thrust...

Her teeth tore into his front leg, joining through the tissue, but it didn't seem to faze him. Pulsar was determined...

The next moment, Esther's buck teeth were nearly ripped out of her head. Pulsar went flying, and with her teeth locked, Esther went along for the ride. Pulsar was lying there on his side, yelping and whimpering, while a large wolf loomed over him, teeth now at his throat. Esther had a sidewalk-eyed view as she detached bound jaws, and slowly backed away.

Back to the building, butt first, hug the wall, run for your life... There was no respect among wolves. She wouldn't have come down here to this part of town as a normal female, for fear of getting raped. She'd just never thought the caution extended to she-wolves, damn it.

She didn't recall ever being so vulnerable, nor so aware of her exposed backside. She'd forgotten the man in the apartment, forgotten the rats, forgotten everything in her panic. The big wolf, looming over Pulsar?

It'd be his turn next. Esther ran.



Gregor almost felt sorry for his wolf opponent in that moment. The scent of she-wolf was strong in the air. Gregor was so tempted himself, even his hair was stiff.

It's Esther.

That didn't stop him from taking his frustration out on Pulsar. The other wolf was squirming now. Gregor knew his merit was being gauged. Pulsar was

pushing to see whether he'd carry through on the threat—how much he really meant it.

Once a bully, always a bully. Animals like Pulsar, whether wolf or human, had their own set of rules. Gregor's teeth closed on Pulsar's ear, in a savage bite, that ripped the tip. It would heal, in the way of the were-folk, but if Pulsar didn't do a patch job, to position the tissue, he would always bear a few toothy holes.

Better in his ear than his throat. Gregor had never been so tempted.

In the ruckus, Esther had managed to slip away. *Fuck it!* He couldn't run around chasing her all night. Sooner or later, he was going to be too late. Why hadn't she waited? Surely, she didn't think that he'd take the same liberties this mutt had?!

Gregor snapped at Pulsar's paw, just for good measure. His teeth sank deep into the pad. However much Wolfboy here moved tonight, he wouldn't be doing it fast.

Where's a silver bullet when you need one?

At the last, Gregor lifted his head so he was clearly silhouetted, the moon bold behind him. He stood there briefly, then with a snarl in Pulsar's direction, flicked his tail and took off after Esther.



She couldn't do it. Terrified as she was, conscience was only a turn of the corner away. Cigarette man had poked his head out his window, to check out the rats.

He'd been spotted. The pack, lured in by a rat chomp, were in varied stages of crouch mode, motionless voyeurs. Motionless connoisseurs. They were merely a cigarette flick away from acting...

The human spotted the rats and panicked. In that instant, Esther realized she was wrong. It wasn't just any gesture her pack-mates had been waiting for—it was this one. Panic. Frantic moves, as the man sought to slam closed the window. He didn't want rats surging in, but those tremors, those wriggles and restless, panic signals? Esther felt it herself, deep inside. It was the sign for prey in trouble. Of a weak link.

Time to take him out. It was a group mindset. Call it instinct, as it were.

The pack moved as one. These were disparate movements, but the signal had been read by all. In a running, leaping, snarling wave, they attacked. The window was only halfway down when the first heavy head slammed the glass, launching itself from a nearby Dumpster.

The glass spiderwebbed, but didn't break. With a whine, the head-butter slammed the concrete below.

The man inside was running. That glass-slam had been shocking, like the blast from a gun. Sudden. Loud. Shattering. The guy knew he was a target, with the light behind him. He hit the light switch, darkening the room to pursuers, and tore out his door. Esther saw him, briefly, outlined against the light in the hall.

The rats, which had been milling, were coursing away now, like a flood through a damaged dike. A wolf landing in their midst, snapping and snarling, was their cue to flee.

It's over. The wolves would take off now, after the rats. Not pretty, but better than mauled human.

Only, it wasn't over for her. One of the pack had caught her scent, his nose lifted high in the air as he sought the source. Esther would never forgive herself for what happened next.

Call it instinct...

It was certainly instinctive—the instinctive act of a coward. Distraction had been what she'd intended, but distraction didn't cut it. "He's getting away!" she snarled toughly.

Lycan eyes riveted on the spiderwebbed glass above.

Dear Lord. Throwing him to the wolves...literally.

What have I done?

By the time the first of her "brethren" had successfully negotiated the leap from Dumpster to window, shattering the weakened glass, Esther had made up her mind. She chased the leaper across the rubbish heap, launched herself through the holed frame, and attacked.

Chapter Five

Gregor didn't have any trouble locating her. Leaving Whimper Wolf behind him, he loped out toward the street, and spotted the trouble.

It wasn't trouble yet. No, that didn't happen till Esther stirred things up. Had she gone mad? When Gregor heard that, "He's getting away!" he was sure that in her wolf-change, she'd lost her mind.

The bloodlust's got her.

Bad news, and he steeled himself against the inevitable. A fight, waiting to happen. Either way, it seemed destined tonight.

He wondered whether he'd have to battle the entire pack before he could break her free. Some of these guys were *big*! He hesitated only briefly, till Esther leapt from Dumpster to window.

Oh, great!

But the pack didn't give chase, the way he'd expected. They were distracted by the churning, squealing rats, and tore off after them. These were, after all, city dwellers—seeking satisfaction with the least amount of effort. When Gregor clambered up into the rubbish, to chase Esther's leap through the window, there was only one wolf to contend with.

And Esther.

Would she fight him? If so, it'd be a first, but then, so was her flight. She'd run from him, dammit! Did she think he was out to spoil her fun, now that she'd let herself run wild?

In a word...yes.

He froze, paws hooked over the sill, halfway through the frame. Go home, Wolfman.

The first of the shrill shrieks rose, muffled, from the hallway. *Esther!*

There was no more time for thinking, only for acting. Gregor's hind legs scrambled for purchase, and he clambered the rest of the way in through the window.



She'd never fought...well, anyone...before. She'd seen enough of it on TV to think she knew how it went, and she'd once taken a judo class, but that wasn't anything like the reality. This guy was tough, wily.

And I'm scared out of my mind.

His teeth closed on her shoulder, where Pulsar had already damaged it. Damn him, damn them both. Furious, she twisted, sinking her buck teeth into her opponent's fluffy tail. It cracked, and the he-wolf's would-be growl became a high-

pitched squawk. The next instant, in the hall light's glow, in tore the big wolf who'd confronted Pulsar in the alley.



Gregor was surprised to see her fighting. Then he recognized what was happening. *Another assailant! Rapist!* If he'd had hands, the guy would have been tossed back out the window. Instead, Gregor "encouraged" him in that direction with a few bites and slams, then rammed his midsection. Wolf-rapist toppled over the sill outside with a howl of complaint, and Gregor turned back...

...only to find that Esther had vanished again. She was somewhere in the building. For a moment he feared that the bloodlust still had her, that she was off to savage the apartment guy. He tore after her along the hallway, finally cornering her on the stairwell. She was cowering, back to the wall. "Esther?"

Gregor thought the worst, and it stymied all the heated thoughts her scent was sending through him. "It's me. Gregor."

The light was bad, worse for going from lighted hallway to dirty window light, but even so, he couldn't miss the release of her pent-up breath. "Gregor?"

Confirmation needed. "Yeah," he said, willing a smile into his voice. Not easy when you were wolf-shaped, but somehow he managed. "It's me."

She crept out. He could hear the soft padding of her feet.

"It's safe," he reassured her. "They're gone."

"I thought you were the other one."

Gregor was confused. "Okaaaaay."

"Pulsar, y'know?"

"Not really." Esther had a tendency to talk in shorthand at times. It was okay on those occasions where they shared a frame of reference, but at other times, like this, it took some deciphering. "Are we talking 'wolf'?"

Impatiently. "Yes. The pack leader."

Honestly, she-wolf or woman, this female could drive a saint to indiscretion. Gregor was no saint. Irritation was stirring his libido. He clenched his teeth together, nodded, then realized she couldn't see him. "Ran into him." Hardly polite to remind her she'd been about to be raped at the time.

"Oh, no! You okay?"

She was concerned, worried even, and Gregor found it vaguely...insulting. If she really thought Pulsar was going to best him it would have been nice if she'd stuck around, maybe even got in a nip or two. Instead, she acted like she hadn't seen him there—didn't recognize him. Either possibility seemed absurd, considering how long they'd known each other. "Just fine," he growled.

"Yes." She was silent, then he heard the soft pad of feet again. Her warm breath nuzzled his nose, his lips. Esther's face drew closer to his, and very gently, she rubbed her muzzle against his. "Sorry," she whispered.

So am I. Sorry you're so close. Gregor's breath was coming faster, drawing her exhalations into his lungs with each panting breath. *It's Esther.* He didn't know whether he could hold back, not with her affection so apparent, and her scent so strong. "I *can't*—!" he warned her, in strangled tones.

"Then...don't." She rubbed her flank against his.



It was impulse. It was madness. It was heat and desire and lunacy all at once. Esther wanted him, almost desperately. *Gregor.* She could have whimpered with need, with desire. In that moment, she would have promised anything—"No commitment, only now"—just to have him. Something had happened, deep inside her. It was more than wanting. More than lust.

Maybe more like love?

Gregor was groaning now, trying to stave off the inevitable, only Esther didn't want him to hold back. She rubbed against him once again, deliberately leaving her hindquarters exposed to him, open to his thrusts.



Tantalizing. He swallowed, choked, then couldn't stop himself. She crouched before him, the scent of her need so desirable Gregor couldn't resist. He wanted to ask, "Are you sure?" but she scooted back, just a small measure, and it was his

undoing. He'd never done this before, not as a wolf, but instinct took over. With a quick thrust he was there, filling her, driving into her. Esther stiffened and arched, soft moans and whimpers deep in her throat. It wasn't pain, it was pleasure. She was thick, hot, moist, ready. He slipped in and out, driving deeper and deeper.

Pull out! Before it's too late!

But he couldn't. Swelling, she closed on him, clinging to him, holding him in while he thrust and pulsed. He spilled, felt himself going inside her, even as she contracted, again and again. Woman Wolf, she was pulsing, contracting with him. He filled her, and she howled, only this time, it went beyond pleasure.

He felt like howling himself.

Nor was it a one-off. As the Earth turned, and the moon's glow hit the stairwell, Gregor came inside her again and again. And as the moon fell, giving way to the day's sun, he was inside her when the transition came. Lovemaking had never been like that before, and he guessed it might never be again. It was one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments, when intense pain becomes near-ecstasy. As Esther became woman once again, and Gregor man, he was deep inside, mid-thrust. He came, one final time, while Esther, legs wrapped around him now, welcomed his release. She orgasmed, holding him tight in human arms, legs binding him inside her. "God, Gregor!" she gasped.

He held her, even after he slipped from her body. Clinging to her. Not wanting her to think him needy, but needing her. Was this a commitment? Foolish, to think of it as that.

I'm a fool.

But, she was struggling for words, too, and he had to admit that hurt him some. *Say something. Anything.*

"Why'd you come after me?" she finally asked. Then, shyly, "Did you..." she swallowed, "...know?"

Insult to injury. Hung, either way. "Know what?" he asked innocently. He shrugged, but it was awkward, unnatural. "I missed you, that's all." *You needy, hung up dick, you.* She'd clearly been seeking an alpha male, and he'd just shown he was anything but.

Then why last night?

Because you're a safe bet, fool. She knows you.

And has you pegged.

Somehow, he had to change this—change the way it was heading. He took a deep breath. "I ate my dog," Gregor said it baldly.

Esther's eyes widened in horror. "Flank? You said he disappeared—"

Gregor refused to look at her. "He did. The point is, not even the way I-I felt about him..." His voice sounded stuffy, trailing off. "I didn't want anything like that to happen to you. No guilt."



Esther was inexpressibly moved. Flank had been Gregor's companion, closer to him than, well, any other living thing. During the last few minutes, he'd withdrawn from her somehow. She sensed it, even though she was still lying in his arms. Now, she nuzzled closer to him, to brush his jaw line with her lips. It was rough and bristly, like a three day shadow.

She didn't care. Esther put her hands on either side of his face and twisted his head so she could meet his lips full on.

It was so obvious now why Gregor had never wanted to replace Flank in his affections. He didn't trust himself.

Here, she'd been secretly cursing him for his lack of wildness. The lack of any edginess or evil. Women liked a bad boy. She-wolves were no different. In the confusion between the strong and the wrong, the two qualities could become very confused.

Gregor pulled back, averting his head. He wasn't willing to take the comfort she was offering. "I tried to manipulate you," he admitted. "After it happened to me, I wanted to spare you..." He shrugged, the movement sending tufts of hair and wolf

dander flying. He was back in control of himself, it would seem. "Stupid, really. It's just that we're friends." He stretched nonchalantly, but somehow his arm ended up by his side instead. No longer enclosing her.

That arm made an effective barrier. Esther had the impression she'd been cut off from something important, something that mattered. *I've blown it.* Gregor had retreated. He was back to being droll, flippant, irreverent. His admission, about Flank, had driven a wedge between them.

Not to me.

No, not to her, but very definitely to Gregor. The fact he'd had to make that admission, in order to stop her from doing something absolutely insane, had cost her his respect.

Esther's big eyes filled with tears. She focused on the rising sun, so he couldn't see the way he'd affected her. Judging from what had happened so far, he'd be bound to misinterpret it.

The moon had waned, the intensity of impulse dying with it. It didn't alter Esther's feelings one bit, though. As she stared unseeing at the sun-stained horizon, her chest heavy with unshed misery, it was all she could do to stay the impulse to howl.

Chapter Six

They didn't speak much after that. Courtesy only, and the basics, like how to steal clothes from one of the apartments so as to make it out of here in one piece. Nakedness had been synonymous with attraction less than an hour before. Now? Synonymous with gullibility. Foolishness. Embarrassment.

Was I in heat? It sounded distasteful to her human brain, yet at the same time the memory of that night with Gregor made her blood hot, and her nether regions swell. *Would I do it again, even if there were "consequences"?*

In a word, yes. As long as it was with Gregor.

She knew she should be concerning herself with consequences. *Morning-after pill, here I come.*

Would it work on a werewolf? Everything seemed to heal so fast. For the first time that morning her heart raced with something other than passion. Fear. *What if I'm carrying a litter?*

Oh, God!

What about gestation in werewolves?

Maybe it wasn't heat. Maybe it was just lust. She had a feeling Gregor would know, but there was no way, despite what they'd shared, that she could ask him. Whatever indicators he used to detect it would be more than she could tolerate, pride-wise.

Esther was silent all the way home. The ease of their companionship had vanished, and she didn't know how to get it back.



Gregor was shamed. He had no regrets regarding The Deed—only about his appalling timing. It made him feel as though he'd caught Esther at a weak moment, when her guard was down...then taken advantage of her.

Some part of him couldn't forget the way she'd ignored him, even run from him. Okay, maybe he was no prize when it came to wolf looks, but that guy Pulsar was no dog's breakfast, either, and it bugged the hell out of him that she'd somehow confused him with the guy. It made no sense. How could she have run away like that? Hidden from me that way? On some level, which lingered in-between friendship and trusting affection, he was miffed. Insulted, even.

Damn it, Esther.

Of course now, there was another subject to contend with, and Gregor shied away from broaching it. *Heat, in a human?*

I could have been wrong. He grimaced as he considered the olfactory cues which had triggered his conclusions. Esther would die of shame if he were to so much as mention it. Besides, how the hell could he trust instincts he didn't understand?

In the light of day, it seemed a whole lot more likely it was his imagination, making excuses. His so-called smell-brain jumping to crazy conclusions he wanted to pursue, because he'd been in love with Esther for what seemed like forever. Their friendly relationship had always been hands off, and he'd never been willing to push it further.

Too gutless. Too afraid of losing her. He already knew there were times he annoyed her. The most he could hope for was that their connection would deepen naturally, given how many hours they spent in each other's faces.

Instead, he'd gone after her when she was vulnerable. If his damned smell-brain were to be believed, he was the worst of villains, a veritable cad.

He was feeling particularly cad-like when Esther strolled in the door of the office, dressed meekly. His girl was even more vulnerable today in her human form than she'd been as a wolf. She wasn't even attempting to don her Vixen guise. She was too busy trying to hide in plain sight.

Damn the moon if he knew how to ever put this right!



She was in the copy room when she sensed Gregor behind her. Instinct?
"Just stinct," she muttered, loud enough for him to hear.

"I do not stinct," he argued. He peered into her face. "I mighta thought so, though, from the way you acted."

Casual. Cool. Overly casual and cool. He was miffed. No doubt about it. Esther's brows drew together in a frown. What did *he* have to be miffed about? "Beg your pardon?" she asked, menacingly. She was rather proud of the latter. She didn't like being put on the defensive, the weasel.

"You."

She made her face carefully blank...and dumb. "Huh?"

"Ignoring me like that. Taking off when my back was turned."

She couldn't recall doing anything of the kind. "What are you talking about? When was that?" Outraged. It felt good to be outraged. Overblown, out of proportion, but good. She'd been having too much trouble forgetting the night with Gregor.

That's because you don't want to forget it. Indecent as hell. Decadent? Yes...or it would have been, with anyone but him.

If I can come to terms with changing into a wolf each month, I can accept casual wolf sex.

That's all it was. To him, anyway. It made her feel like weeping. Almost as if she'd gone back, somehow, to being a virgin...and Gregor was her first.

She tensed. *Keep it casual.* It didn't help that he was peering at her as though she were being abnormally dense.

"You took off, leaving me with that jerk Pulsar." He snorted rudely. "Then told me I looked like him."

Gregor. The big wolf, the one she'd been scared of, who'd dominated Pulsar with nary a baring of his snarl. Esther had never thought of him as an alpha. Never thought she could be so blind. "You." She couldn't quite hide her shock. *So...unexpected.*

"That's what I said. Repetition will get you nowhere."

"No—I mean, I didn't recognize you."

He looked at her blankly. "What?" Clipped.

She faced him full on. "That was you, in the alley."

"Who'd you think it was? Lassie?" He was scoffing now, openly ridiculing her, but not meanly. Gregor could scold, chide, ridicule, but he never belittled her. Whatever he did or said, it was always more like teasing. Affectionate teasing.

Like a brother. It was what she'd believed, all this time. But there'd been nothing remotely fraternal about his behavior the night before.

How to explain it? How to tell him she was seeing him differently?

He'll probably be horrified. What's a little casual sex between friends? What was it called?

"Friendship with benefits"?

Why didn't I see it before? Why didn't I see him before? "Last night was different."



Gregor almost choked at that one. *Different? I'll say...*

She was still talking, and he made himself listen. He'd been too damn busy hiding everything, from his dogginess to his affection for her. Time to stop. He took a deep breath. "Not to me."

She tensed. He could see it in the way her eyes widened. There was still enough of the wolf in him today to sharpen his gaze. The glistening of sweat on her brow, the racing pulse in her neck. That "didn't recognize you" smarted. But she must have realized she'd offended him on some basic level, because she was still trying to explain. "I never looked at you that way before."

As a wolf? He knew he should be glad. He'd much rather she see him as a man. Gregor forced a laugh. "Maybe that's a good thing."



She knew what it meant now, that expression—about being out on a limb. She felt as though she were balancing, and the wrong words would send her crashing down. How to say it, so it wouldn't offend him in man-mode, hurt his pride in wolf mode? "I liked being in your arms." She avoided looking at him. "Waking up there."

He edged in closer.

Is this a mistake? No. Not with Gregor.

Esther forced herself to meet his eyes. "Man or wolf." There. It was out. Rejection just a head twist, or a tail swish, away.

Not with Gregor. He grinned slowly, like a wolf savoring a particularly tasty morsel, then drew her swiftly into his arms. "Pure lunacy," he murmured, against her hair. "Did I ever tell you you're moon mad?"

All her tension fell away. *Safe.* "Lunatic, yes." Nuzzle. "Whatcha say we hit the hill tonight?"

Epilogue

Later, they sat on the hilltop, staring companionably at the lunar surface of the man in the moon. "I ask you," Gregor was saying, "what's so great about bipedal? Are you trying to tell me that ascendancy from chimps beats that of wolves?"

That there were a few errors in his genealogy didn't matter—Esther got the point. What was the point of elevating one social group over another, on such a flimsy basis? Put the way Gregor had, it actually appeared a bit...stupid. So did the idea of worrying about a child, or children. *If it's with Gregor, I can deal.*

Esther glanced over at him, catching the glint of mocking laughter in his eyes. Yes, any child of theirs would be a little devil, no matter what the provocation. She nuzzled against him, amazingly content. "I have a yen to kill something," she told him, sure that he'd understand. Violent emotions ran deep. It wasn't evil to think evil—merely to act on it.

He did...understand, that is. "I think we'll start with Pulsar," he said. "Tear a few strips off his tatty hide."

"Moth-eaten rug," she agreed. "I hear he's an accountant in his day job."

With a growl which sounded remarkable like a chuckle, the two of them tilted back their heads, and cut loose with near howls at the moon.

The End

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N. D. Hansen-Hill has been writing novels for nearly a dozen years, specializing in science fiction, fantasy, and horror. All her stories are suspenseful, and all bear traces of the paranormal. A little over a year ago, the author—writing as Melody Knight—added romance to her genre list, and now has a number of published sf and fantasy romance titles. Her recent work has concentrated on single titles, rather than series. With a busy schedule that includes work as a professional artist and designer, ND stays in touch with science via university, studying a range of topics, from anthropology to virology.

Red Rose Publishing (as Melody Knight)

GlassWorks
Of Dragons
Emerald City
A Kiss for Luck
Ala Wolf

Fictionwise (as N. D. Hansen-Hill)

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Fire
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Grave Images
Graven Image
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Light Play
Light Plays
Lightning Play
Static
Vision
Elf
Trolls

Cerridwen Press (as N. D. Hansen-Hill)

Gilded Folly
The Hollowing (2008 release)
Gray Beginnings (2008 release)
BloodWorks (2008 release)

Drollerie Press

Relic (2008 release)
BoneSong (2008 release)