

Cole grew up hearing horror stories about The Gorge and the monsters within that would tear you apart. After surviving a dare to check it out, Cole discovers that the creatures are werewolves! Finding himself cursed, he quickly adapts to his new furry alter ego with the help of resident loner Reyna. When Cole's double life threatens everything he knows he'll have to choose what truly matters.

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"C'mon man!" Cole laughed, as he pushed against one of his best friends. "You scared?"

"No," his buddy, Tyler pushed him back. "I'm just not stupid. I like my head shaved!"

He rubbed his hand over where small thin blonde hairs were peeking. Cole thought the look was ridiculous, like an early 2000s Rock wannabe. Unfortunately while Tyler had the height we lacked the mass of the wrestler.

"What's stupid is that the guy charged us double for this," another guy, Andy gulped a beer.

Where Tyler had height, Andy didn't. He was reluctant to the idea of drinking but that may have been because he'd provided the cash. He crossed his arms, nursing the alcohol while the last teen rolled his eyes, clearly taking the night in stride.

"Yeah, it's total crap. We should have gotten the good stuff," Mason agreed, holding his own drink.

The four teens chuckled as they wandered aimlessly. The night was chilly but Cole didn't mind it being in the company of his closest friends. They'd been hanging out at his place until Mason had the brilliant idea to use the fake IDs they'd made for beer. They hadn't tested them but Mason was confident they would pass. Cole had been only half surprised at the stoner at the liquor store who hardly glanced at it before handing them a case.

"Hey guys, what are you doing here?" A new guy approached them.

"Tyson? That you?" Cole asked, stumbling forward.

"Yeah, me, Gage and Vance," Tyson nodded to the other guys with him.

Cole stopped as the trio approached. Tyson was your typical handsome superstar, built like a god with spiky black hair and dark blue eyes and a tan. His lackeys Gage and Vance, were good looking too but clearly fell second to him. They snickered at the boys and Cole shook his head. Anytime he saw them, he had this urge to just walk away. They were royalty around town and they knew it. They didn't have to sneak out or have fake IDs, they had whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. All the guys went to the same school since the prep school had closed over the summer and Tyson and his boys had made it clear how much they hated the new school. Cole frowned, wondering what the hell they could possibly be doing here out on the edge of town away from their ivory castles.

"We're just shooting the shit. Thinking about going to Becca's place." Tyler said dreamily, the beer finally affecting him.

"Her parents are outta town and she's throwing a rager." Mason explained.

"Well hell let's go!" Tyson cheered.

"Someone's too scared to make a move. Thought some liquid courage would help him out," Cole snickered, gesturing to Tyler.

Tyler had been crushing on Becca for months, ever since she'd come back from color guard camp. Despite numerous chances to ask her out, he'd balked at every chance. Mason had enough though and decided tonight would be the night he'd make his move. The guys laughed at Tyler's expense as they walked along the treeline.

"You know man we can give you a ride," Vance jeered. "Long as you promise to puke outside my Jeep."

"Puh lease, I doubt they're even buzzed," Gage grabbed one of the beers. "You didn't even get the good shit. Where'd you go?"

"None of your business!" Andy snapped.

"Oh touchy," Vance stepped away as Cole walked forward.

"Get lost Vance."

He pushed his way past the trio who chuckled at Cole and his friends and Cole glanced at the woods to his right. Normally he'd just ignore the snobs but he wondered how quickly he could shove them down the ditch and into the woods.

Their town bordered a small treacherous forest that seemingly went on forever, but its endlessness wasn't the only danger. Within it was an impossibly deep gorge, that dropped off suddenly into darkness. Countless people had perished over the side, never to be seen again. Stories went that there were dangerous monsters at the bottom, ones that feasted on the flesh and bone of any who dared to disturb them.

Cole had grown up hearing horror stories, they all had, even the rich kids, so he knew nobody would be stupid enough to go hiking alone within the woods. Of course tonight with a brightly lit moon and the buzz of alcohol running through their systems, boys will of course, be boys.

"Hey Cole, I dare you to go to the bottom of the gorge!" Tyson challenged suddenly.

"No way, we got a party to go to," Cole shook his head, turning to face Tyson.

"Bullshit," Mason pointed to Tyler who stumbled, again, over air. "He ain't going anywhere. Dude's a mess."

"Why don't you go?" Cole shot back.

"Cause I ain't a moron," Tyson smirked.

"You expect me to find Bigfoot? Oh wait she's at your dad's!"

The boys said collective ooh at the burn and Tyson swiped another beer.

"C'mon man we paid \$100 for that," Andy groaned.

"\$100? Bro you got ripped off!" Vance roared at Mason's frown. "Taste as bad as it looks, shit."

The other three guys took the last of the beers, mocking them as they half drank half spilled the beer. Cole rolled his eyes at them, annoyed that the harmless trip was going south by them.

"What's the point of getting drunk if you got no stories to tell after eh?" Tyson asked, stepping up to Cole. "You only live once right?"

Cole met Tyson's eye contact, not breaking it as Andy spoke up, not nearly as loud as the others but definitely more clear.

"Don't listen to him Cole. You don't have to prove anything."

"That mean we're finally going to the party?" Mason asked.

"I don't think asking out Becca when I feel like this, is a good idea anymore," Tyler confessed.

"I'll go." Cole said.

"To the party?" Andy asked, his voice wavering with fear.

"To the gorge," Cole smiled, "Tyson's right. We gotta have a story. And this may be shit beer but I'm buzzed."

Tyson and his buddies laughed as everyone walked to the tree line. It was dark within, no clear path but the gorge was a straight shot from the highway. It couldn't be far. Cole took a deep breath, regretting his choices more and more with every second.

"How will we know you actually went down?" Gage asked. "We need proof."

"Text us," Vance suggested.

"Nah, no service that far deep," Tyson shook his head. "But a picture would be good enough."

"Deal." Cole shook Tyson's hand and looked back to the woods.

They did seem a lot more threatening than the dozens of times he'd watch them during the day. But the warm fire of alcohol sent shivers through him and he felt ready. After all the stories were just stories right?

"Want me to go with you?" Mason asked.

"Nah. I can handle it. Just text Britney, let her know I'll be late."

"If you make it back in one piece," Tyson crossed his arms smugly.

"I'll be fine," Cole rolled his eyes and walked into the woods.

After a few minutes of stumbling through the thick trees and wild bushes, Cole realized he couldn't see the road anymore and shook. The wind wasn't exactly freezing but it was sharp and he only wore an open flannel shirt and loose jeans.

"What the hell am I doing?" he muttered to himself, walking forward.

He walked cautiously through the woods, stopping at every sound. He never should have accepted the bet from Tyson. The dude was stupid and beyond full of himself. Everyone thought blending the schools would foster a better community between the tiny towns, that they'd all get along. Cole and his friends knew better, just like Tyson. The dickheads had been pushing them for months now and Cole was sick of just walking away. Oh well, not like he had a choice now. He knew that if he went back, they'd never let him live it down.

The woods, the woods couldn't be that scary, Cole thought to himself as he stepped over a log. The Gorge was just a fairy tale anyway, a tourist schtick made up to bring money to their small town. Monsters that feasted on human flesh? A terror that made professional hunters crap themselves? It was all nonsense, Cole had lived here all his life and he'd never seen such a thing. Course he heard animals, that happened living on a mountain, to hear about a mountain lion kill or a deer being hit was old news.

Stepping over more rocks, Cole noticed that he somehow went off the tiny path he was making for himself and was now truly deep in the woods with no identifying landmarks. Shaking his head, he ducked under a tree and into a narrow clearing no bigger than a tiny bathroom.

A deep growl came from his right and Cole turned in circles.

"Whatever you are," he shouted. "I'm not afraid of you!"

The growl repeated itself and despite his bravado, sweat coated Cole's head.

"Screw this, I'm going back," Cole muttered, as he headed back in the direction he came from. Before he took another step, a chorus of angry growls and snarls erupted and something flew out of the darkness.

Throwing his arms up to defend himself, Cole slipped backwards, rolling down the narrow clearing.

Screaming, he tumbled deeper into the forest. He slammed into a small boulder and groaned, heaving himself on top of it.

"I'm going to kill Tyson," he muttered, "how the hell am I supposed to get out of here?"

Another round of growls went off and Cole sprinted.

He didn't believe in monsters but he knew mountain lions and bears could definitely rip him to shreds so he ran. He struggled, turning in circles as he pushed back trees and skipped around bushes. There were no trails and he knew he was deep in the woods, far from any of the campsites or the highway.

He just had to find a campsite, or a ranger station, hell maybe he would find the highway, Cole thought to himself. Sure he was drunk, but he'd rather face the rangers or cops for drinking underage rather than get killed out here.

Looking behind him, sensing he was being watched, he failed to see the rocks beneath him and fell, tumbling again down an incline. Cole grasped for anything but nothing could hold him as his body slammed against rocks and more.

Slamming hard against a stable surface at last, Cole rubbed his head, feeling blood on his temple.

"Great, where the hell- oh shit."

He dropped his hand, staring upwards and realized why he couldn't grab anything.

The sheer vertical wall of stone and rock rising above him told him exactly where he was. Cole turned his head to see a shallow creek ran just a few feet away and more trees on the other side curled up in strange angles. As he stood up, brushing dirt out of his brown hair, he gaped at the height of the rock wall and back to the creek.

"I made it," he sighed. "I actually made it to the bottom."

He shook his head in disbelief and went through his pockets, finding them empty.

"Dammit."

How the hell was he supposed to take a pic of the bottom of the Gorge if he lost his phone? Shaking his head again, he stood up, looking at the cliff side. Getting to the bottom was easy enough, but getting back out seemed to be another problem. It wasn't like he was a rock climber.

As his head throbbed from the hit, Cole began walking alongside the cliff. There had to be some way out, a trail or an easier spot to climb at least.

Stopping to wipe the blood off his forehead, that would definitely need an explanation, Cole's arm hair went up.

Something wasn't quite right, he realized. Not a single animal had wandered out, not a single tree rustled down here. He was in the bottom of the Gorge, there should be piles of bodies and monsters ripping his limbs off according to the stories.

Even the creek was too quiet, still as glass as the moon shone over it.

Shaking, from the fall, the cold or something else, Cole slowly turned around.

A deep guttural growl seemed to echo in the Gorge than, different from any animal he'd ever heard living here, more sinister than any animal he'd ever heard that night.

There wasn't even a way for him to tell where it came from, the sound seemed to continue, surrounding him. Ignoring the blood that slipped down his cheek, Cole bolted.

He didn't make it two feet before he was brought down.

He screamed, pulling himself forward as something pinned him down. Whatever it was, it was impossibly large, dark and viscous. Cole felt sharp, heavy claws tear through his jeans as it yanked him back. Closing his eyes, he cried out.

"Help! Help me! Someone!"

The animal, whatever it was, threw him on his side and Cole turned away, shielding his face from the flash of teeth.

Before he could fight, a blinding hot pain tore through his shoulder. Cole screamed, his voice reaching octaves he never thought possible as teeth crushed his shoulder. As the blood sprayed over him, he felt his arm go numb, the nerves and muscles probably being ripped apart and he welcomed the darkness falling over his eyes.

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"Dude, dude you okay?"

"Hey man, what happened?"

"Bro get up!"

Cole blinked against the bright sky and crisp morning air as his friends crowded him.

"Cole, you alright?" Mason asked, giving Cole a hand.

"What?" Cole asked, taking it and winced.

The four of them were sitting on the side of the highway, he realized. Looking down at himself, he saw he wore nothing but his boxers and shredded jeans.

"Your shoulder," Tyler made a painful face as he and Mason helped Cole up.

Cole winced as he stood up, his head spinning as he tried to remember what had happened. All he could remember were flashes, some sort of animal and teeth. He blinked, shaking his head. The heat and stink of the breath over him was overwhelmingly but not nearly as much as the shine of long yellowed fangs arcing over him.

"Bro what happened?" Andy asked.

"I don't know," Cole said slowly. "I went in the woods, got lost, fell in the Gorge-"

"Yeah we can tell." Tyler gestured to him. "You're lucky you didn't die!"

"What was down there?" Mason asked. "Whatever it was, it fucked you up."

"Yeah," Cole said, taking note of not only the aches and pains of his body but the dried blood on his forehead and most importantly his arm.

His arm that was intact aside from a deep nasty looking animal bite.

"I don't know what's in the bottom of the Gorge, but it got you good!" Mason said as he poked at the bite.

"Ah, don't touch it!" Cole cried, pulling away from his friends.

The marks completely circled his shoulder, it was so deep, flaps of skin waved in the gentle morning breeze and it burned at the slightest movement. Cole's head pounded as he tried to think of what attacked him but nothing was clear.

"Well Tyson wants his proof there it is," Andy shook his head. "Almost got you killed."

"Where is he anyway?" Cole asked.

"He left, got scared," Tyler rolled his eyes. "Pussy."

"Yeah well after what happened I don't blame him," Cole winced as he walked with his buddies.

"Thing could have killed me. You guys come looking for me?"

"No, well yes but we didn't find you in the Gorge. We just found you. We figured you'd come running out of the woods but when you didn't we started running the highway for you," Mason explained.

"We saw you here on the ground like two minutes ago," Andy added. "You must have ran like hell and passed out."

"Yeah," Cole pursed his lips.

He didn't remember anything after the attack, he swore he was a goner. And if the guys didn't find him, then how the hell did he end up on the highway? He knew he'd made it to the bottom, he knew the rock walls were too sheer to climb. Hell he doubted he could even climb with how much his body hurt just walking. He leaned on Andy's shoulder, thankful that he was shorter than the rest and he didn't mind the extra weight.

"Whatever man, doesn't matter. Point is, you made it to the bottom of the Gorge, faced whatever hellspawn is down there and made it out. Alive!" Tyler crowed. "You know who can say that? No one. Monday, you're gonna have all the chicks."

"Tyler's right bro. You even got a battle scar," Mason nodded.

"I'll check with my parents' logs," Andy said. "They gotta have an idea of what's down there."

Andy's parents ran the Rangers in the woods, a group dedicated to preserving the woods and helping campers and hikers lost in them.

"Guess so," Cole nodded as he walked with his friends along the road.

He looked behind at the woods, sensing something but shook his head. Whatever was down there he was sure it wasn't an ordinary bear. But the monsters that ate human flesh? Couldn't be that either. He was alive, and he certainly wasn't going to question it. He'd head home, wrap up the bite and be fine.

After all, he had to show Tyson proof he survived.

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Monday morning. Cole rolled his eyes at the crowd funneling themselves into their tiny high school. The difference between the privates from the prep school and the publics like him was night and day. Fancy cars, girls draped in designer clothes, stylized bags and binders. For Cole, a plain book bag and his ancient truck was enough.

Of course today though, he looked eagerly for a blue Jeep that held Tyson and his buddies.

"You alright," Mason bumped into Cole.

"Ah, yeah watch the shoulder," Cole groaned.

"How's it holding up?" he asked.

"Well it's still attached," Cole said gratefully.

At home, Cole had taken a long shower, savoring the heat on his skin as blood and mud slipped down the drain. After cleaning it, Cole had spent hours trying to match the bite marks to the local Rangers website. He wanted to tell people what he fought off but nothing online matched. It was too narrow for a bear, too many teeth for a mountain lion and too large for a wolf.

In the end he decided he'd play into the mystery of the monster at the bottom of the Gorge.

"Hey check it out, she's back." Tyler said, joining them with Andy.

"Who?" Mason asked.

"Reyna," Tyler pointed to a girl walking up the steps to the school.

"Right, fosters must have found her and forced her back," Andy said. "Why they bother is so stupid. Everyone knows she's gone once she's 18."

"Two years," Cole reminded. "They have to make her behave till then."

He watched her as the girl, a thin brunette in nothing striking paused on the steps and looked up. Cole furrowed his brow, something seemed off the way her dark eyes glared at the building before her.

Just then, she turned her head sharply, locking eyes with Cole.

Cole took a step back, amazed at the intensity of the stare. Across the crowds, despite his friends talking in the background, he felt his skin crawl.

"Bro," Mason bumped him again and Cole shook his eyes, breaking contact with Reyna.

"Sorry what?"

"Tyson, twelve o clock."

Cole shook his head, clearing the thought of Reyna from his mind as Tyson and his crew walked up.

"Got your proof," Cole grinned, pulling his collar down to reveal the bandage.

"What is that supposed to be?" Tyson asked.

"A bite," Cole explained, pulling the bandage back gingerly. "Sucker had to be at least ten feet tall, almost tore my arm off."

The bite was raw, not bleeding, but the deep punctures deep into Cole's shoulder were obvious. Seeing Tyson's horrified face, he grinned, savoring the ability to embellish his trip.

"Holy shit," Gage took a step back at the brutal bite.

"Well what is it?" Vance asked, "Is it Bigfoot?"

"I don't know," Cole pressed the bandage closed, "but it wasn't a bear that's for sure."

Tyson stepped back, his eyes darting all over as he tried to come up with something. Cole tilted his head back, soaking in the joy of seeing the preppy's confusion. After a brief but tense moment, Tyson shook his shoulder back and gave a half smile.

"I got to give it to you," Tyson held his hand out, "didn't think you'd go for it."

"Thanks," Cole glanced at the hand and shook his head. "But I don't need you telling me what I do and don't do."

He walked away, feeling lighter than anything as his own friends cheered behind his back.

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Word spread fast and by lunch, everyone was buzzing about Cole's adventure with the beast in the Gorge. Despite it all, Cole didn't feel the same. Instead of feeling excited at the new height of his popularity his stomach was doing somersaults and was distracted by Reyna. She had caught his eye twice after this morning and for some reason it felt like she was watching him. Why the school loner was suddenly interested in him was a mystery, or was it that he was interested in her?

"What are you doing?" Britney asked, sliding next to him.

"What? Oh-hey!" he turned his attention away from Reyna to be met with glistening lips from Britney.

He savored the quick kiss with her for too short of time as she broke away.

Britney and him had been dating for over a year now. She was beyond gorgeous, a tall and seductive looking blonde who dazzled the field every Friday as captain of the color guard. She placed a manicured hand on his shoulder, her blue eyes searching his.

"I heard what happened Saturday," her eyes traveled to his shoulder. "Are you okay? They say you fought off like a dozen bears or mountain lions or—"

"I'm okay," he wrapped his hand over hers, pulling it away from his shoulder. "Just some wild animal at the bottom of the gorge. No big deal. See? Got a whole arm."

To prove he was fine, he swung his arm around, grimacing as the pain flared but flashing a quick smile to Britney.

"Next time those jerks dare you to go tramping around the woods..." she trailed off then huffed, "I don't care how much beer you've had."

"Please, he only had like one can," Andy laughed, joining them.

"Yeah and all that beer went to waste when someone didn't even go to the party!" Mason gave a pointed look towards Tyler who shrugged.

"It's fine," he said, biting into an apple. "I'll ask Becca out at the rally on Friday."

"Isn't that what you said two weeks ago, and then you said at the party on Saturday?" Andy laughed, "At this rate you'll ask her out after Prom."

"You know what?" Tyler reached across the table to punch Andy but he danced out of the way. Cole shook his head as his friends chased each other over the cafeteria.

"You really need to help the poor kid out," Britney said. "On the upside I do have you for the afternoon right?"

As she leaned in for another kiss, Mason coughed.

"Actually football..."

"Come on man really?" Cole groaned and Britney sighed with annoyance.

"You know Coach wanted us to run drills during our free period."

"After?" Cole raised an eyebrow.

"Color Guard," she said. "I won't be free till 5."

"Sounds good to me. Long as I'm home for dinner." Cole said, kissing her.

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Drills, Cole hated drills. He jogged out of the locker room, pressing on his bandage as Coach, a thick muscled man with a bald head and dark glasses barked orders.

"Whoa whoa hey what are you doing?" he demanded, stopping Cole as the others started drills on the field.

"Drills coach," he said.

"Not with that," he shook his head, pointing to the thick bandage. "You're on hold till that heals, from what I hear you almost lost your arm."

"Coach I'm a runner not a thrower. I can still play," Cole countered.

He couldn't not play football. The season was only a few weeks in, but they had a solid lineup this year and could take regionals. He turned around, seeing Tyson walk up, in his own gear of all things!

"What's going on?" Cole demanded.



"I just need a sub for a game or two," Coach said, "I know you're fast but I got to have someone who can run your position for the other guys. With the schools mixing I grabbed Tyson."

"Can he even play?" Cole argued. "He was never on the team!"

"He was a first rate track star, you know that. With a little work, he can sub you while your shoulder heals," Coach said, "The decision's final. Take the extra time, study, you know you have to keep up your GPA to be on the team."

"Hey coach, where do you want me?" Tyson asked, flashing a smile.

"Take it up with Tyler, shadow him." Coach ordered.

He turned to Cole who stared in amazement as Tyson jogged to the line. Coach took off his glasses and put a hand on Cole's shoulder, his tone became soft as Cole glared at him.

"Look kid, you know this ain't permanent. But the rules are clear, no injuries on the field."

Cole said nothing as he slammed his helmet on the bench and walked away. With Britney deciding to go to town on her free period with Becca and the guys on the field there wasn't anyone he could hang with. There was certainly no way he was going to study.

He stopped as he was about to enter the locker room, seeing Reyna again.

Cole tilted his head as she turned away, vanishing around the corner. He knew everyone who watched the players during drills and Reyna wasn't one of them. With nothing else to do, he followed his gut, walking around the corner.

"What did you see in the woods?" she asked, leaning against the wall.

"What?" he asked.

"You saw something," her eyes were locked on his shoulder and he rubbed it.

"Yeah, the monster at the bottom of the Gorge got me."

He was used to everyone asking him about the attack but he never picked Reyna as one to ask about it. Hell what did she even do? She wasn't a jock, not a nerd or into gaming. She just floated through class, not really making an impact on the social hierarchy. Cole shook his head as she glared at him as if he was an idiot.

"You survived a trip," she said slowly, "to the bottom of the Gorge where full grown men, trained climbers and professional hunters couldn't."

"Yeah," Cole furrowed his eyebrows, where was she going with this?

"Don't you see how that's a bit odd?" she drawled.

"You don't believe me?"

"Something had to leave you alive and breathing on the side of the highway," she said, twirling her hands in front of her.

"The highway?" he said, he hadn't told anyone where he woke up.

The only ones who knew were the guys. A sharp whistle went off and he turned around, looking for the source. Seeing nothing he turned back to Reyna.

Only to find her gone.

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**You're sure she said highway?** - Mason texted Cole.

Even after searching the entire school, Cole hadn't found Reyna. While he and Britney had gotten together after her practice, he was too distracted by what Reyna had said and Britney

had stormed off. With nothing else to do and the guys tired from drills, Cole decided to head home. With Reyna's cryptic talk, he couldn't get it out of his head and asked Mason about it.

**I don't know what to tell you. No one else was out there.**

**It's weird but I feel like she was watching me all day.** -Cole replied.

**I mean she's right. No one else has made it to the bottom, let alone out, alive.** -Mason's reply was quick and before Cole could respond, there was another text.

**Andy did say her fosters dragged her back home Sunday. Maybe she saw you on the road.**

**Yeah I guess. It was the crack of dawn when you found me.**

Ignoring any future replies, Cole tossed his phone on his bed.

Something about Reyna and the Gorge didn't add up, he couldn't explain it. She had never even looked at him let alone talked to him before today. Why did she care about him in the Gorge all the sudden? Everyone else seemed to buy into the horror stories they'd all heard growing up. So why wasn't she? Shaking his head, he sat at his desk, flipping open his laptop. Maybe there was an animal on the Rangers site that he missed.

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Burning, why did he feel like his body was on fire? Cole woke up, drenched in sweat as he bit down his tongue to stop screaming. Something was on fire, he threw his blankets away from him, realizing the pain was in his shoulder. In a panic, he ripped the bandage off, throwing it on the ground and he rubbed it.

Becoming more and more awake every minute, he realized his skin was smooth, not rough and coming apart like before. Stumbling out of bed, he made it to the bathroom, feeling the burning subside. Just as he turned the light on, his eyes widened.

The bite mark in his shoulder was practically gone! The only evidence of it was a series of red dots surrounding his shoulder. He twisted his shoulder, examining it from different angles but all he saw were red scars, one for each of the teeth marks. He ran a finger over each one, realizing they were as real as anything else.

It was impossible, the bite was three days old, last night it was still open and raw. Now it looked weeks old.

Taking in a deep breath, he continued to stare at his shoulder than its reflection in the mirror.

A door slammed shut and he jumped, backing out of the bathroom.

"You're up early," his dad noted, walking through the hallway with coffee.

"What?" Cole asked, still out of it.

"It's only 5am, sun's barely up," his dad said as he walked past Cole.

Cole stepped back into his own room, feeling the sun already drying his sweaty back. He grabbed his phone, making sure that the guys could meet with him before school.

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"It's completely gone!" Tyler gaped at the clean healthy looking shoulder.

"Yeah, no idea what happened," Cole said.

"Does it hurt?" Mason asked, poking it.

"I mean it aches but nothing worse than a sprain."

"How the hell did it heal?" Andy asked, "That just makes no sense!"

"No idea," Cole repeated. "I spent all last night on the Ranger site and even on the state site. Nothing, absolutely nothing matches."

"Anything close?" Andy asked.

"I thought it might be a cougar but too big, too many teeth."

"Bear?" Tyler suggested. "I mean that's the rumor going around."

"No way," Cole shook his head and pulled his shirt over to hide it. "But it's seriously freaky."

"You know what else is freaky?" Mason jerked his head down the hall.

Cole followed his gaze and even though dozens of students separated them, he could tell Reyna was watching him, just him.

"Heard her fosters picked her up at the gas station at the top of the mountain," Andy said.

"Would definitely make sense if she saw you on the road coming back to town."

Cole tuned his friends out as they debated theories, locking his eyes on hers. With each passing moment, he felt a stronger pull towards her. The whole situation was just too bizarre, too coincidental for her not to know something.

"Babe!" Britney broke his concentration, planting a kiss on his lips. "You okay? Seem a little off. Do you need coffee?"

"No, no," Cole pushed her side, but quickly realized Reyna was gone.

What the hell was going on?

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Despite his friends' best efforts and Britney's very attractive blue halter top, Cole skipped lunch. Things were not adding up and he was having a major headache. Every noise seemed amplified, his sandwich tasted like cardboard and Britney's perfume was overpowering every other smell in the room. Knowing his parents weren't home, he decided to skip the rest of the day.

He pushed the doors open, intending to walk home so he wouldn't arouse suspicion when he spied Reyna, once again leaned up against the flagpole.

"You've been quite the moron haven't you?" she said quietly.

Cole stepped back as he was still about 50 feet away and could hear her perfectly. Seeing no one else was around he ran to her, afraid she would disappear again.

"Excuse you?" He asked.

"Going down to the Gorge? That's just plain moronic," she said flipintly.

"I'm fine," he shrugged. "Like I told everyone else, its all a story."

She snorted, getting off from the pole and stepping in close to Cole.

"If its all a story, then what attacked you? And more importantly, how did you get out to the highway?"

Cole said nothing, surprised at the sudden sinister tone Reyna spoke in. When he didn't answer, she smirked.

"There's a story and then there's the truth. I suggest you be careful."

"What do you know?" Cole asked in a rushed whisper. "Did you find me? Were you there?"

Reyna narrowed her eyes and glanced over his shoulder. Cole adjusted his bag to hide it. Rolling her eyes, she turned away.

"You don't want to tell me that's fine. But you should be careful. You got hurt."

"What do you know about the woods?" he asked, stepping to stand in front of her.

"Don't challenge me," she said, her eyes flashing with a strange light. "You won't like it."

Cole's heart hammered at the sudden steel of her voice, even with the few short words between them, he felt as if he should apologize, almost as if she was in charge. He took a deep breath, fighting the urge to shrink away from her cold stare.

"I'm not stupid. You know something about what happened out there. You were out there."

"And what gave you that brilliant idea?" She raised an eyebrow.

"The fact you were driving down the highway at the same time the guys found me. Duh," Cole rolled his eyes. "Who else would be out that early and that close? Why be that close?"

"Because I was being dragged back to town by my warden. Obviously," Reyna shook her head, chuckling. "But let's say for devil's sake I was out there. Why would I leave you on the side of the road? How would I have even rescued you from the Gorge?"

Cole bit his lip, unsure of what to say. She did have a point. Its not like the Gorge was easy to get out of and all he remembered was being torn apart by that thing.

"Look, I was being dragged back to town by my fosters. Not being Ranger Rick rescuing your ass."

"So why the warning? Why you acting all cryptic?"

"Oh good Lord," Reyna's giggle was dark. "You don't get it do you? The more you talk up this trip to the Gorge, the more idiots will go down there. Just because you got lucky doesn't mean everyone else will."

"You know what's in the Gorge don't you?" Cole asked excitedly.

"Trust me," Reyna's eyes grew dark as she snarled. "You don't want a repeat of what happened in the Gorge to happen to your friends. There's a lot that you don't know. And frankly you really don't want to know."

"What's out there?" Cole asked again. "Tell me. You can trust me!"

Reyna snorted, walking away.

"All I'll say is this," she paused, glancing over her shoulder at him. "Stay home tonight. Don't go out. Don't go into the woods. There's a reason why they're dangerous."

Cole watched her saunter away and idly rubbed his shoulder. The shoulder that had mysteriously healed this morning as if nothing had happened. Pulling his collar back, he looked at it, noting his skin was clean and undamaged. Looking up again, he sighed in frustration at Reyna's mysterious vanishing act.

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"Dude we are going out!" Tyler announced, knocking open the door.

"Uh huh," Cole waved absentmindedly towards his friends as they took over his room.

He was on his laptop, once again searching. He had tabs open to the Ranger site, the state wildlife site, a dozen different articles about the Gorge. He was even reading about random myths and legends now like how tonight was a full moon.

"Come on man, you missed your chance to kick Tyson's teeth in for taking your spot!" Mason crowed. "You could have told Coach you were fine."

"Sure," Cole nodded, clicking on another article.

The last missing person in the Gorge was over nine years ago, the body never recovered. It wasn't a local or any sort of climber. A drifter passing through, people theorized. Just another hunter maybe, claimed by the horrors of the Gorge.

"Bro what is with you?" Mason asked, pulling Cole away from the desk.

"It doesn't make any sense!" Cole threw his arms up to face his friends. "None of it. The Gorge, over 200 victims in the last hundred and fifty years. The few that made it out? Dead. All of them washed up down by the ocean hardly recognized, they're so torn up. Then there's me, not a hiker, a climber or any sort of wildlife expert walking around, drunk mind you and I get out with nothing more than a bite. A bite that heals three days later. And Reyna, the resident loner, freak, whatever tells me not to talk about it and acts all secretive about what happened."

"You are way over thinking this," Tyler waved his hand. "Reyna's just talking out her ass to be all mysterious because you survived the impossible. She's probably jealous."

"Yeah, I guess she goes hiking out there all the time," Andy said. "She tries running away and hiding in the woods."

"What?" Cole asked.

"Yeah Becca's brother, he's the one that saw her out there Saturday night. Guess he's the one who called her fosters. According to him, she's out there all the time."

"Not your parents?" Mason asked. "I thought they'd be the ones to call."

"Same but as far as I can hear wherever she goes, my parents never see her in the woods. Only out by the look out point," Andy explained

"See, she just doesn't want anyone out there calling her out," Mason rolled his eyes. "It's nothing."

Despite what he felt, that did fill in some holes. Cole sighed, standing up and stretching.

"Alright guys where we going?"

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First Fries was popular, especially for Tuesday night. Cole and the guys ate, drank and talked. Britney swung by with Becca and the other girls that followed her. The night was good, Cole even managed to forget about his bite and Reyna when Britney pulled him into her car for a makeout session.

It wouldn't last long though.

"What was that?" Cole asked, sitting up.

"What was what?" Britney asked, annoyed at her boyfriend's lack of attention.

"You hear that?" he asked, wiping away the fog on the car window.

"I didn't hear anything," she grumbled.

Before he could ignore it, Cole heard and then saw several dirt bikes roll up to the diner.

"Tyson," he groaned, recognizing the pretty boy and his friends.

"Hey, you got a girlfriend here you know," she pouted, turning his face away. "Don't tell me you're into dick now."

"No, no definitely not," he said with a smile.

"Then please, let us continue?" she raised an eyebrow, pulling down her top further to reveal the lack of a bra.

Cole leaned down, savoring her strawberry lips but jerked back up again as he heard arguing.

"I need to," he jerked a thumb towards the diner with a shrug.

"I swear," she moaned, sitting upright. "If it wasn't for your loyalty to your boys."

"Then you'd never know how loyal I was to you," he smiled, giving her a quick peck on the cheek and dashing out the door.

His instincts and surprisingly sharp hearing was right. Tyson and his buddies were taking over the diner, causing an argument with Mason and the guys.

"Hey man, knock it off!" Cole yelled coming in behind Vance and Gage.

"What do you want?" Tyson sneered, holding a plate of food.

"What are you even doing here?" Cole asked.

"Here for some food obviously," he rolled his eyes. "Even if it is garbage."

"If it's so bad then go back to your castle and get some caviar." Tyler snapped.

The crowd cheered as Tyson struggled for a comeback.

"Hey Cole what happened to your big scary bite?" Vance pointed out.

Cole looked down, realizing that the sweat and heat in the car with Britney made the bandage come undone. He'd considered telling Britney what happened but decided it would be best to talk about it later.

"Oh looks like someone didn't go down to the Gorge," Tyson jeered, walking up to Cole.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Cole growled as he tried to cover up his shoulder.

"No? So what happened? You run out of makeup for your fake scar?" Gage laughed.

Suddenly Tyson jerked forward, grabbing and ripping the bandage off to reveal naked healthy skin.

Whispers ran up in the diner as Cole pulled his shoulder back.

"It wasn't fake and you know it," Mason argued, coming to stand between the two.

"Yeah? So what happened? Miracle cream?" Vance asked, taking Tyson's right hand position.

"This isn't your scene so get out," Mason argued.

"Maybe it is my scene," Tyson snapped back. "I mean a burger's a burger but if the right lady's serving it..."

"Get out Tyson," Cole said, he took a deep breath, trying to hold back the sudden rage in his stomach.

"Make me," Tyson hissed.

Tyler and Andy stepped up just as Gage stepped next to Vance. The air was getting hot and it wasn't from the burgers.

"Cole," he heard Britney's voice and he turned just enough, not to see Tyson's punch coming.

It happened in seconds. Tyson's fist grazed Cole's face and completely crashed into Mason's nose. Before he even registered it, punches were flying. Cole ended up tackling Tyson, slamming him into the counter. He saw nothing but red as he pounded Tyson's face.

It was only being yanked up by his collar by one of the chefs that he blinked, coming back to reality.

"You're out of here!" he shouted, shoving Cole and the guys out of the diner. "You'll be lucky if I don't call your parents!"

Cole screamed, throwing his arms up as he stalked away. The adrenaline of the fight was too much for him to go back to his truck and Britney's car was somewhere in the lot. To be honest, Cole was still seeing red and he screamed again, kicking a rock.

The small rock flew like a missile, shattering a car window somewhere. The boys looked at each other and bolted as the car alarm went off. Cole wrapped his hands around his ears, wincing at the sheer intensity and pitch of the alarm. Eventually they slowed, about a block and a half away from the diner and they leaned up against a light pole, catching their breath.

"Yo man you okay?" Mason asked, putting a hand on Cole's shoulder.

"I'm fine," Cole grumbled, shaking him off.

"Dude you were insane," Andy shook his head as they walked onto Main Street.

"Tyson's going to be black and blue tomorrow for sure," Tyler chuckled. "You got it out of your system?"

"Yeah I'm fine," Cole repeated, but he was anything but.

Something about the air was sparking, he felt like he was hot, hotter than any other time before. It was like there was a fire and it was burning him from the inside out. He stalked the street, ignoring his friends talk about the fight. He could taste the night on his tongue, the freshness of it, hear a heater start two houses away. He could smell the deodorant Mason had put on three hours earlier and feel the slightest pebble under his shoes. It felt like electricity was in his veins and his brain had too much caffeine. Unnatural, but he ignored it.

He paused under a tree, sensing something was off but what? Sure he wasn't friends with Tyson but a full on sludge fest was completely out of nowhere. Shaking his head, he walked forward, coming out from the shadows of a thick tree and looked up.

Up and straight into the face of the full moon.

Cole screamed as a sudden pain overtook him. He fell into a fetal position, tears suddenly pouring. The electricity within his veins suddenly turned into a raging inferno and his brain exploded. He could smell individual scents like pine versus cement and see the individual hairs on Tyler's shaved head. The world exploded into a series of colors, scents and sounds. He could count how many fibers of grass tickled his face and taste how much ketchup was on his burger from over two hours ago.

For all the pros though, the cons outweighed them that night.

Cole arched his back and felt his body shift and change. To be honest, whatever happened came in such a sudden intense burst he hardly paid attention. The pain was agonizing and despite his prayer for it to end, it only extended what he felt.

His clothes ripped apart, falling around him. His body elongated and he watched horrified as his knees bent backwards and a hairless tail sprung through the remains of his shorts. His fingers shrunk and bunched into a thick paw, the thumb moving backwards and his nail curved, shifting white to yellow. Cole collapsed on all fours, roaring in pain. His neck thickened and so did his body, shifting from human to some sort of animal.

His screams deepened and turned into snarls and growls of pain as his nose bulged out painfully, blackening, widening. His teeth split and grew slowly, bleeding rapidly from his gums. Blinking rapidly, his vision changed, becoming distorted than normal again but sharper somehow. He felt his ears change positions, rising up on his head as his hair grew out and waved across his body in one long painful wave after another. His back arched up and his tail stiffened as he growled, the shift completing itself.

As the pain faded from a burning rage into an icy slap, his senses became attuned and looked up at the white moon, howling.  
Something cracked to his right and he turned, a sense of hunger overcoming him as he leaped forward at the figure snarling.

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Chirping. Why did Cole hear chirping? He blinked, sneezing as he inhaled. Lifting his head he groaned.

Where was he and what was going on?

He looked down, seeing grass and shook his head, putting his hand out to lift himself but stopped.

The stains on his hands were turning brown and black but he knew what they were originally by the coppery scent.

Why was his hand covered in blood? He looked around, slowly realizing it wasn't just his hand but his entire naked body.

Shaking, he stumbled to his feet, feeling every ache in every joint. He walked forward, ignoring the stickiness that glued his toes together and the overpowering scent of blood in his nose. God why did he even know that smell?

Taking in the brightening sky, he realized he was on the highway, just past the sign that welcomed people to the mountain. He raced to hide behind it as sirens sounded off. He put a hand over his mouth, seeing dozens of cop cars race past him, as well as four ambulances.

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Hiding along the treeline, Cole stumbled his way back to town, thankfully stealing some blankets out of a truck nearby.

Eventually he made it back to Main Street and was slightly grateful the commotion took away from his strange appearance. The only reason he wasn't being stared at though was the fact that Main Street had been wrecked. Store windows had been busted open and at two different points, people were being loaded into ambulances.

Why couldn't Cole remember what happened last night? All he knew was that there was a fight at First Fries, he and the guys had been thrown out.

The guys, where the hell were they?

He slipped behind people, racing towards Mason's neighborhood when he heard a particularly wretched cry. Looking back, he gaped. A man was being loaded into an ambulance, crying out in pain, holding his arm.

No, only part of his arm. Cole barely held back his puke as a paramedic shot him with something and he whimpered, falling to sleep.

He turned away quickly, trying to shake the image from his mind. He had a sickening idea of how he got blood on him now and he didn't like it.

"Holy shit, Cole! Cole!"

Cole ducked away, fearing the worst but sighed as Mason raced up to him. His relief didn't last long though as he noticed Mason was filthy, covered in mud and scratches, his long black hair



knotted and twisted as if he'd been thrown around. Cole felt the urge to puke as he smelled something like blood coming from him.

"Dude we have been looking everywhere for you."

"What happened?" Cole asked, his voice hoarse as he used it for the first time.

It was strange, scratchy and almost like a stranger.

"You don't remember, do you?" Mason asked, his voice haunted as he put a hand on Cole's shoulder. "Come on man, we gotta get you out of here."

Cole nodded, shaking over what was happening.

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Cole was quiet as they told him.

It didn't sound possible.

It didn't sound believable.

But seeing each of his friends, each of them wearing their own type of bite mark, he had no choice but accept the truth.

He had become some sort of monster, screaming as fur, claws and a tail took over his body. He had turned on his friends, chowing down before being distracted and racing through town. The crowd at First Fries had heard the commotion, come out to see what happened and he had chewed through them like a hot knife through butter. Then something, somehow, had drawn him away from town and into the mountains.

Three people were dead, five were injured, one of them was Gage.

"What the hell?" Cole whispered looking at his hands.

They were clean now. He'd spent an hour in the shower at Andy's house scrubbing himself clean. Thankfully with Andy's parents as Rangers they'd left the house early and empty.

Allowing the boys to take the house for themselves. With the attack on Main Street, school had been canceled.

"Dude I don't know," Tyler said, he'd been bitten on the back of his leg.

"Whatever happened though, no one would ever believe it," Andy said, he'd been attacked on his back.

"I don't even believe it," Cole whispered, his voice still sounded like a stranger.

"Whatever happens we have to keep this to ourselves," Mason said, rubbing his arm where his mark was.

"Ourselves?" Andy asked. "No kidding! If we said anything we'd be locked up like crazy people!"

"Maybe I am crazy," Cole said, his voice devoid of any emotion.

"You're not crazy. None of us are," Tyler argued. "It may be crazy but we didn't lose our minds."

"Maybe its rabies," Mason suggested, "some infection from the Gorge."

"No way, no animal or plant causes that kind of reaction," Andy argued.

"Ok so what's your theory?" Mason snapped.

"Drugs?" Andy gestured.

"You're kidding," Tyler rolled his eyes.

"I don't see you coming up with any ideas!" Andy snapped.

"Guys stop!" Cole stood up, "Look we have no idea what happened and I am so sorry about it. I wish I could tell you what happened but I have no idea!"

"To be fair I don't think you were exactly yourself," Mason said  
"We need answers," Tyler insisted. "What happened last night, what if it happens again?"  
"No way, it only happened once," Mason said.  
"It happened cause of the Gorge," Andy said.  
"You don't know that for sure," Tyler shot back.  
"Cole goes down to the Gorge, Cole gets bit, three days later he turns into that... that thing!"  
"Three days later!" Tyler said.  
"Okay so three days to find a cure," Mason said.  
"A cure?" Andy snorted. "You think this is some quick fix to the doc?"  
"Maybe," Tyler said, "This happened when Cole's mark went away. Maybe that's how much time we have."  
"My mark," Cole said, pulling back his shirt to look at his shoulder.  
"What about it?" Mason asked.  
"You guys knew about it first. But you weren't the only ones."  
"Yeah the reason we got thrown out of First Fries is cause Tyson exposed you," Tyler rolled his eyes.  
"But he wasn't the first to find out," Cole said.  
"Britney?" Mason asked.  
Cole shook his head as Andy snapped his fingers.  
"Reyna."

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With no idea where else to look, for some reason Cole and the guys found themselves pulling into the empty school parking lot.  
"Why would she be here?" Tyler asked.  
"Call it instinct," Cole said, slamming his door shut.  
"I think we'd rather not be on the receiving end of your instinct again," Andy grumbled, dropping out the bed.  
Cole ignored him as he surveyed the school. Something told him she was here.  
"I'll check the front, Tyler you get the back, Andy you check the theatre, Cole you want to take the fields?" Mason suggested.  
"Sure," Cole said, only half paying attention as his friends split off.  
He walked through the open gate to the football field, sighing. Something was telling him he wouldn't be back on the field for the foreseeable future and his heart sank.  
He turned around, hearing a sharp whistle. He cringed, twisting his head as it went off again. Looking around he figured it came from the locker room. Despite the high pitch noise repeating, he walked towards it, finding it came from the girls side.  
He took a deep breath, smelling something alike to pine, just like the air did this morning.  
Cole turned the corner, finding Reyna slouched on the bench with a dog whistle between her lips.  
"You made it," she smirked.  
"Okay enough games. Tell me what the hell happened," Cole demanded, walking forward.  
"How about no," Reyna smiled adorably, mockingly.

"How about you tell me what's going on or I'll tell everyone-"

"Tell everyone what? All that people know is that some wild animal came into town. Killed three, maybe even four depending on Gage," she smirked.

"You were there last night, you were there this morning! This isn't a joke!" Cole hissed.

"No, no it isn't," she dropped the mocking tone and matched Cole's stare. "You know what happened last night. You're not that stupid. Hopefully. And you know what the truth is behind the wild animal attack."

"Then help me. Obviously you know what's happening."

"Know? Of course. And I told you to stay indoors. I told you the Gorge was dangerous. You didn't take my advice then. What makes now so different?"

She stood up, gracefully even and stepped within inches of Cole.

"Because..." Cole struggled to come with words. "Because what happened last night was insane. Because it can't be real. Because its ridiculous!"

"Well when you don't find it ridiculous you can find me. Because I can give you all the advice in the world but it ain't going to make a difference till you actually accept what happened. And you're clearly not at that stage," she tapped Cole on shoulder with a sarcastic smile and turned away.

"I can handle it," he snapped, grabbing her arm.

"Get your hand off me," she hissed, slowly, venomously. "Before I remove it myself."

Cole let go, amazed at how hard he'd gripped her. But he couldn't help himself, the blood in his body was rushing, it felt like a tsunami.

"Find me at the top of the mountain where the look out is when you're ready. Your bite healed, there is no turning back. Same goes for your friends."

Cole shook his head, gripping his shoulder again. Before he looked up though, he knew she was gone by the scent of pine vanishing.

"There has to be a logical explanation for this!" Cole cried out, annoyed with the lack of answers.

He couldn't be well whatever he thought it was. It was just too crazy to think about. He looked down at his hands as Reyna walked off. They were clean, not drenched in blood like they had been hours ago. Even so, he could still smell the coppery scent hidden beneath the soap.

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"You are not seriously taking the advice of Reyna," Andy raised an eyebrow.

Cole had filled the guys in on what happened. They had met back up at his truck and they all stood in a circle debating what they knew. What was suspected and where to go.

"You can't believe what she said. She won't even tell you what the bite is from!" Tyler insisted.

"I think it's because she knows," Cole said. "More than that I think she's involved."

"Obviously," Mason rolled his eyes. "That's why we came to find her!"

"No, I think she's the one that attacked me," Cole said. "It would make perfect sense."

"Because she keeps dropping these hints?" Mason asked.

"Because she was going down the mountain Sunday morning. She was in the woods the same time I was Saturday. Something had to pull me out of the Gorge. Something had to leave me on the highway!"

"That does track," Andy conceded.

"She wasn't at First Fries," Tyler noted.

"Sure but maybe that's cause she was doing what she recommended to me? Not to go out? I lost control," Cole said, collapsing against the truck.

The full weight of what happened was finally hitting him. He'd been hearing sirens all day, as the morning went on and people went to work, he could hear them on the radio inside cars as they drove past. Everyone was talking about a wild animal attack. It had torn through the town, wrecked stores, attacked people, no, killed people.

He killed people. He was the animal.

"Oh God," he whispered, sliding down the side of the door.

"That wasn't you," Tyler said, kneeling down. "Cole, that wasn't you."

"But it was," he stammered, feeling tears in his eyes. "Tyler, I attacked you guys. I attacked those people. I killed those people."

"Cole," Mason started, but he pushed him away.

He turned towards his truck and screamed.

It was one born of pain as tears streamed down his face. His stomach was empty, like a black hole as his heart pounded. His scream was deep, guttural as he let loose his anguish. There were no words to describe the drowning feeling in his gut and the rage in his veins. Blood beat relentlessly in his head as flashes of the night went off behind his closed eyes. He could hear the terrified screams of his friends, the agonizing cry of innocent people being brought down between his jaws and the scent of fear and blood thick in the air. He punched his truck, roaring with guilt.

He fell to his knees, sobbing. Even with the sizable indent in his door, there was no damage to his hand.

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The boys spent the day mostly in silence. They drove to the hospital where dozens of people pleaded to see the injured. And the dead.

Cole's heart dropped as a woman did, sobbing over the doctor.

Despite his friends saying he didn't have to, Cole felt a need to visit. He caused this terror, this carnage. He needed to know.

Listening, it was easy as breathing to hear conversations in separate rooms. Straining to hear what he wanted, he pushed himself to hone in on specific voices. Cole learned the names of the deceased and learned two of the injured were severely weak. The other three were injured mostly by being caught in the chaos and not directly by him.

With his friends, he managed to slip past security and deeper into the hospital. He wanted to find the two that were worse off.

Eventually he recognized voices and hid behind a gurney as a woman and a doctor walked out of a room.

"Gage will be okay, we just want to keep him under surveillance for a night or two," the doctor said.

"Is there anything you can tell me about what attacked him?" the woman asked tearfully.

"I'm not sure," he said, "there's numerous wild animals. Bears, cougars, even a wolf or two have been known to travel here. I can say though that this is particularly hostile."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that the animal had to have something wrong with it. The attack, the brutality of it, it's not normal."

The woman burst into fresh tears, allowing the doctor to lead her away and Cole swallowed. How much damage did he bring? How brutal was he when he changed?

Checking to see that no one else was around, he snuck through the door into Gage's room. He could smell it before he turned around.

The overpowering and contrasting smell of blood and sterilizing agents. He slowly turned around, resisting the urge to run screaming.

Gage was sleeping, at least it looked that way, but covered in tubes, wires and bandages. Lots of bandages. Half his face was covered and one arm was in a cast. Cole swallowed back his bile as his eyes zeroed in on a thick bandage covering his hip.

He knew that's where it was, where he'd bit him. He walked over to the bed carefully as Gage mumbled, twisting against the equipment. The longer Cole looked at him, the worse he felt. He had a black eyes, red skin covered in scratches, wherever it wasn't covered by thick bandages and even though he was sleeping, the way his muscles tensed, Cole could see he was in a lot of pain.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered as Gage's eyes began fluttering.

Ashamed of what he did, he slipped out the door, barely holding back tears. He didn't like Gage, he, like Tyson and Vance, were well off, had come from a different school and tried to take over. They were cruel and started the fight at First Fries, let alone goaded him into going down to the Gorge in the first place. But that didn't mean he wanted them dead.

He stumbled down the hall, trying to erase the image of Gage laid up from his mind.

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"There's no way that's possible," Andy groaned.

"What else do you expect?" Tyler snapped.

"Guys come on, relax." Mason said, spinning around in the chair.

The boys had gone back to Andy's house, digging up any and all conspiracies about the Gorge and the monsters that laid within. The stories were wild from Native American curses to BigFoot and everything in between. Cole knew though what had happened, he was just too scared to say it out loud.

"Bro, you cannot think that he got cursed by some spirit of the forest," Tyler mocked him. "That makes no sense."

"Well what do you think?" Andy shot back. "This mountain was settled long ago by Indians. They called it their Holy Mountain. Maybe we fucked it up by building on it."

"And why would they curse Cole?" Tyler asked. "His family moved here in the nineties!"

"Guys this is ridiculous," Mason slammed a pamphlet down. "He was physically forced into being some sort of animal. That sound like a holy nature god?"

"Sounds like a shapeshifter," Cole muttered, but he was ignored.

"Whatever it is, we have no idea if it'll happen to us. I mean in all the years that people have gone missing in the Gorge there have never been crazy animal attacks afterwards," Andy said.

"That's not true. The 73 massacre. Thirteen people mauled by a bear," Mason said.

"A bear that was poisoned by hunters. Not exactly a mystery," Andy shot back.

"Did they ever catch the hunters?" Mason asked.

"Guys stop, we can go over this a million times but we all know where to get answers," Cole slammed his laptop shut.

"She's crazy," Tyler shook his head.

"You got a better idea?" Cole asked, standing up.

The hair on his skin was on edge, his senses were overloaded and his brain was pounding. He glared at the window, seeing the sun was beginning to drop. For some strange feeling he felt as if it was a sign. After all, everything that had happened was last night.

Maybe night time was the key.

"Guys," Tyler said softly.

"What is it?" Andy asked, seeing Tyler was transfixed by his phone.

"Gage just got released. Home rest for the future. Broken arm and a couple ribs too. But he's okay and talking," Tyler read off his phone slowly.

"Why do I feel there's more?" Mason said hesitantly.

"The other guy in the hospital, a guy named Thomas, he's dead." Tyler locked eyes with Cole. Cole looked down, as a fresh wave of guilt crashed over his heart. Four people. All of them dead because of him. He grabbed his keys and turned towards the door. He was going to get answers tonight.

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The ride up was silent. Unfortunately they passed by Main Street, still mostly covered by cops as they slowly cleaned up the destruction and Cole gunned his truck up the road.

It was almost dark by the time they reached the end of the road, the look out. Nothing was here, most people used for photography and to park when they hiked in the forest. But as the boys stepped out of the truck, Cole felt a chill run up his spine.

There was more in these woods than he'd ever thought to be.

"Okay we're here," Cole called out, walking in a circle.

"Dude chill," Tyler said. "If she's what you think, then she'll hear you."

"Still can't say the word can you?" Reyna said.

"Jesus!" Mason jumped back at the sudden appearance of the brunette.

"Oh you'll want to have a talk with him later, I'm betting," she chuckled.

"This isn't funny," Cole stepped forward. "We're here, we're ready to listen to you."

"Oh are you?" She mockingly bowed to them, "thank you. I don't know what I'd ever do without your attention."

"Cmon, just tell us how to fix this," Mason said, holding his arm.

"Fix what?" She raised an eyebrow.

"You know..." Cole shrugged, "the issue?"

"Oh c'mon Cole. You can say the big bad word can't you?"

"Dude how do we even know that she's legit? What if she's just messing with us?" Andy argued.

"Yeah I mean she isn't exactly screaming monster of the woods," Tyler added.

"Monster of the woods?" Reyna walked up to Tyler, a savage grin on her face. "How do you think they've survived this long? It's called keeping a secret."

"You said you would tell us," Cole said. "Can you?"

"I can do more than tell. I can prove it," Reyna cocked an eyebrow at Cole.

"Prove you're some monster? I don't feel like being attacked. Again," Tyler snapped.

"Oh please, she's not a monster!" Andy threw his hands up.

"Maybe she's a spirit," Mason mocked him.

Cole face palmed, this was not going the way he wanted. He glared at Reyna who twirled her hand, admiring it for some reason.

"I think its fair we get some. Then we can figure out a way not to be a... you know," Cole struggled with his theory, it was simply too out there.

"A what?" She asked slyly as she twirled in a circle.

Reyna walked backwards as the boys lined up in front of her. She held up her hand, thin, tanned, ordinary. Nothing like what Cole had seen on his own hands last night.

Sharing a look with Cole and flashing a smile, she flexed her fingers.

Within a blink, her fingers curled in and long sharp pale yellow nails grew out of her unpainted nails. She twisted her hand, admiring the curved nails that sprouted out of nowhere.

"Say it," she said in a seductive voice.

Her smile widened and two thick curling fangs had grown from her teeth. Blinking slowly, her eyes glowed a soft golden aura.

He swallowed as he and his friends stepped back in fear at the human yet not so human appearance of Reyna.

"Werewolf."

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He knew it. He freaking knew it.

Reyna stepped forward, her eyes still golden, fangs resting on her lips and nails, or were they claws now, outstretched, towards Cole.

"Accept what you are," she said in a husky voice. "And it will be easier."

"Easier?" Mason asked, his eyes wide at Reyna's appearance. "You mean to tell us that werewolves exist?"

"You were just arguing over the existence of Indian gods," she countered.

Mason shrugged in response as Reyna blinked, her eyes, fangs and nails becoming normal again.

"How?" Cole asked, swallowing back his fear.

"It's a long and complicated history," she said as she glanced at the other boys. "Nice job listening to me by the way. Going out, getting into a fight, shifting at the peak of your emotional turmoil and the moon. You're lucky you didn't kill the whole town."

"I didn't mean to-" Cole said quickly but Reyna held her hand up.

"The first thing you need to realize is that your emotions are tied to your wolf. The stronger you feel, the stronger he feels. The stronger he is, especially when you shift, is the most dangerous time to be around you. You've already doomed these morons."

"Is there a cure?" Andy asked.

"Sure," Reyna smiled brightly at him. "Would you like it in the head or in the heart?"

"What?" he asked.

"It's a bullet. Doesn't even have to be silver. It just has to be lethal. So in the head or in the heart?" she asked sarcastically.

"This isn't funny!" Tyler snapped.

"Am I laughing?" she dropped the smile.

"Did you do this to him?" Mason asked. "Did you attack him because you couldn't control yourself?"

It was a brief moment and then Reyna burst into laughter, she leaned back, shaking with joy. Cole stared at the sheer openness as her body rolled with the laughter. This wasn't just the most open he'd ever seen Reyna be, but it was as if she was a completely different person. It made so much more sense now on why she didn't do much at school.

"You moron," she sneered. "I didn't attack him, I saved him! There's a whole pack of blood thirsty vicious wolves at the bottom of the Gorge. Why do you think no one survives?"

"Why save me then?" Cole asked.

She glanced at him and shrugged.

"Not sure. Something told me to. So I did."

"But you knew what would happen. Why didn't you say anything?" Mason pressed. "People are dead!"

"Oh please, like you would have believed me. You can barely believe it now."

Cole nodded, she was right on that account.

"Look, I tried my best. Sometimes a bite doesn't mean a change. Sometimes people get lucky."

"Really? How do you know?" Andy asked.

"Take a guess," she glanced towards Andy's side where the lump of the bandage covering the bite was visible.

"If it heals," Cole connected the dots. "That's why you weren't sure till yesterday."

"Bingo."

"So in three days if its not healed we're fine, if it is we're..." Mason struggled to say it.

"Werewolves?" Reyna supplied. "And no that's not how it works. Last night was the full moon. His bite healed because the moon was at its most powerful. You guys, you have an entire month. The power, the infection if you will, waxes and wanes with the moon. You'll know if it heals by the full moon."

"That's comforting," Tyler frowned.

"It's called facts," Reyna snipped.

"How long have you..." Andy struggled to say the last word.

"Good god, you'll have to say it eventually," Reyna rolled her eyes. "How long have I been a wolf? My whole life. I was born not bitten."

"That's a thing?" Cole asked.

"Oh you have no idea what's a thing," Reyna smirked. "Look there's a lot you don't know, a lot you'll need to learn. I don't do this well ever but my secret is at risk just as much as yours. So I propose we stick together."

"What? Move down to the Gorge with that pack?" Andy asked. "No thanks,"



"I'm not a part of them," Reyna groaned. "They're brutal, sadistic. They've lost their humanity. I may not like people but I enjoy some things."

Cole picked up on that bit easily, silencing Andy with a look. He locked eyes with Reyna.

"What do you mean by lost their humanity?"

Reyna looked away, turning away from them slightly. She rubbed her arms as if she was suddenly cold and spoke softly.

"The wolf inside you, it seeks something darker than what you can comprehend. Whatever you want to call this, an infection, a curse, it doesn't matter. What matters is that the wolf fights you, because its following a darker, more base instinct. Everyday you have to fight it, even when the moon is at its lowest point, the wolf is still slumbering within you. The wolves in the Gorge, they're not just normal werewolves, they're werewolves who have no memory of being human. They're dark, viscous. Brutal cold blooded murderers, and the worst part is that they can't even comprehend what they did was wrong because to them it's not. It's just survival."

The boys said nothing as she explained. Her voice had changed, from fun and sarcastic to haunting and grief stricken. Cole felt as if she had run into them, maybe that was how she was a full blown werewolf. He felt a chill run up his spine as she refused to look at him.

"I'm sorry," it was all he could say.

"Meet me here tomorrow night," she said abruptly. "Dusk. And don't be late. Try not to kill anyone in the next 24 hours will you?"

Before any of them could counter, she vanished, fleeing the scene in a blink of an eye.

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School was canceled for the rest of the week. So the boys decided to visit Gage.

"You sure you want to do this?" Andy asked as they walked up to the pristine, two story, gated property.

The driveway was so long, Cole swore it could fit two limos.

"We have to tell him," Mason insisted. "He's going to wander around for the next month and then what? Turn into some monster and kill someone?"

"Bro," Cole gestured.

"Sorry," he shrugged. "But it is kind of true."

"Guys, it doesn't matter if he won't believe us." Tyler pointed out.

"So what do we say?" Mason asked. "Congrats you got attacked by a werewolf you may or may not be one by next month?"

"It's too crazy," Andy shook his head. "If we didn't see it ourselves..."

"I should talk to him," Cole said as they stopped at the gate.

He pressed the button on the intercom and turned to the guys.

"This is my fault. You shouldn't have to deal with it."

"We're already dealing with it," Tyler said. "We agreed to do this together. So that's what we'll do."

"Hello who is it?" the intercom asked, it was a woman's voice.

"Hi, it's Cole, Mason, Tyler and Andy. We called about seeing Gage," Cole said.

"Oh of course, come on in, but he gets tired very quickly so you can't stay long."

The gate rolled back and the boys walked up the clean stones and crafted bushes. Tyler snickered as they passed by the pile of cards, balloons, flowers and more that was accumulating on his porch.

"Hopefully he can be more subtle when we tell him what actually happened," Mason said, sharing a look with Cole who shook his head.

They were quickly greeted by Gage's mom, a model-esque brunette with frazzled hair and dark eyes. She guided them to a room on the left side of the house. After thanking her and refusing any sort of snacks or drinks, the guys managed to get her out of the room and alone with Gage. Who looked better but was clearly still bedridden.

"Hey guys," he croaked, lifting his arm to wave but only partially.

Not only did he see the IV drip as well as other wires, but Cole could smell the medicine and sanitizer filling the room.

"Bro, we are so sorry," Tyler said, fidgeting slightly.

"Why? Not your fault," Gage said. "It's yours."

Cole took a step back at the accusatory glare.

"What?"

"You walk into the woods, messed around, next thing you know some mountain lion or whatever is pulling me out of my truck!" Gage snapped.

"Gage that's not what happened," Andy said.

"Don't even start, if your parents did their jobs there wouldn't be any wild animals trying to kill us!"

"My parents?" Andy shot back. "You have no idea what's actually going on!"

"Andy chill," Tyler said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't even know why you're here," Gage growled. "My mom let you in, but that doesn't mean I can't throw you out!"

"We're trying to help you," Mason argued. "We know what happened. We got attacked too!"

As the argument shot back and forth, Gage cringing everytime he tried to sit up, Cole caught the smell of fresh blood and saw the bandage on his hip was peeling off.

"Hey Gage, how's that bite on your hip?"

The arguing stopped as Gage glanced at his hip and then back to Cole.

"What?"

"I said: how's the bite?" Cole repeated.

Gage pressed a hand to the bandage and tried to pull the covers up over it but Cole was faster than him, reaching over and pulling it off.

The bite was deep, brutal, Cole looked away as fast as he could but he couldn't deny there was serious damage. A good chunk of his hip wasn't just torn, but bit clean off.

"Doctor said I'll have to get skin grafts," Gage growled. "More than one or two. Said whatever attacked me wanted me for dinner the bites were so deep."

"I'm sorry," Cole whispered, refusing to look even as he heard Gage putting the bandage back over the wound.

"He said I'm lucky it wasn't an inch lower otherwise I couldn't even walk. Not that it matters. My leg's busted in 4 different ways. I'll be lucky with therapy to run senior year!"

"That might not be true," Mason said softly.

"What are you talking about? My parents are flying out professional therapists and doctors."

"We mean you could be walking a lot sooner than that," Tyler said, sharing a look with Cole. Cole swallowed, he didn't want to do this, he didn't want to tell Gage everything he knew was about to change. It was crazy. But no matter how many times he blinked, Cole couldn't shake the image of missing flesh out of his mind.

"What are you guys getting at?" Gage demanded.

"There could be a change," Cole said slowly, wringing his hands on what to say. "You could be walking by this time next month."

"What is some specialist coming? Some new miracle drug?"

"Oh you could say miracle," Andy bit his lip.

"Look, I'm not going to tell you everything," Cole decided, "You wouldn't believe us if we did tell you. But you might want to be careful on who's operating on you. And watch how fast that bite heals."

"Heals? A part of my hip is missing Cole! I don't think I can grow back new skin!" Gage shouted.

"You remember his bite?" Mason asked. "That wasn't fake, it wasn't some trick. An animal attacked him, now his shoulder is healed."

"So what? I'm supposed to believe in fairytales about the Gorge? What? Did you find a nice monster that wanted to give us superpowers?" Gage mocked.

"It's crazy but it's true," Tyler added. "Trust me man, you're going to realize that sooner or later."

"The important thing is that you don't tell anyone," Mason said. "It sounds crazy but its true. What happened in the Gorge? What happened to Cole and now you, it's real!"

"I think you all need to be in a nuthouse!" Gage exclaimed. "Coming here trying to pull some prank? Are you for real?"

"It's not a prank!" Andy insisted.

The arguing started up again, louder and it wasn't long before Gage's mom kicked them out for disruptive behavior.

"Well that went great," Andy sighed as they walked away from the closed gate.

"What did you expect? He's not wrong. If we didn't see it ourselves I'd be questioning our sanity," Tyler said.

"It's obvious that we show him. Bring Reyna over," Mason suggested.

"I don't think that'll work," Cole shook his head. "His mom told me we couldn't come back if we were going to bother him and I'm pretty sure he'd count that."

The boys stewed over the situation, climbing into Cole's truck.

"It's almost dusk," Tyler said.

"Yeah," Cole mused, watching the way the sun dipped behind the mountain.

He couldn't explain it but the electricity in his veins seemed to jump the darker the sky became. In fact he felt the same way last night, as if he was more awake now. He wondered if that was a side effect of who he was now.

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"Hey, you going to ever just show up like a normal person?" Tyler shouted.

The guys were waiting at the same treeline as yesterday with no Reyna in sight.

"Wow, rude." Reyna snipped.

Cole bit back a smile as he smelled her before she spoke. He turned around with the guys to see Reyna leaning up against a tree.

"How are you doing that?" Mason asked, gesturing to her sudden appearance.

"Wolves are fast," she shrugged. "Once you learn control, you can call on that speed. Even as a human."

"How do we do that?" Cole asked.

"Well you just do. How do you walk to begin with? How do you breathe? You don't think about it. You just do it. There's no trick."

"I doubt that," Andy muttered.

Reyna rolled her eyes and walked up to Cole.

"Look, it's going to be easier for you than them. You've already shifted, you can call on your wolf. Them? Maybe, maybe not."

"Thanks," Mason snorted.

"I speak the truth," she sighed. "Now give me your hand."

Cole shrugged, holding out his hand. What she did was not what he expected.

With a smile, she grabbed his hand roughly and pressed on his wrist in two spots. He screamed at the pressure and the exploding pain, pulling his hand back.

"You trying to break my hand?" he demanded as the guys screamed.

"Look at your hand, you big baby," she rolled her eyes.

"Holy shit," Mason pointed.

Instead of plain fingernails, Cole's had elongated, with thick, yellow curling nails coming out of each finger. He twirled his hand in front of his eyes, amazed at it.

"Dude you're bleeding," Tyler said.

He was right, at each cuticle blood was evident, not a lot, but certainly noticeable. Using his other hand, thankfully still normal, Cole felt each hardened claw. Even knowing it was real, he couldn't believe what he was feeling.

"How?" he managed to choke out.

"Okay I lied," she tossed her head side to side, bringing her own hand up, with her own claws.

"Pain, at least until you can bring it out on your own, pain is what drives your wolf. I didn't break your wrist. I pressured the nerves till your body couldn't take it. Your claws came out as self defense."

"Self defense?" Mason asked.

"What better way to get someone off you than striking at them?" she chuckled. "Your claws are powerful, you can clear pathways, climb, tear limbs apart with them."

Cole felt sick at the idea of that last one but stayed quiet.

"He's bleeding though," Andy pointed out. "And you're not. Is that cause he just doesn't have control?"

"No," she held her hand out, allowing the guys to look at her claws. "My nails bleed too. It's just the way it is. But your body heals rapidly. Look at yours, not bleeding anymore right?"

Reyna was right, upon closer inspection, Cole saw that the blood hadn't only dried but stopped completely.

Still twirling his hand around, he wanted to ask a thousand questions but couldn't decide where to start. It was simply too surreal to see it. He remembered nothing from the full moon and

seeing Reyna with her claws yesterday was surprising but not nearly as much as seeing it on himself.

"Retract them," she said.

"How?" he asked, annoyed at the repetitiveness of his question.

"How do you take a breath? Or blink?" she asked. "Just imagine it. Your wolf will know."

Cole closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath and thought to retract his claws. Opening his eyes he groaned at their continued appearance.

"How does a cat retract her claws?" Reyna asked again. "Imagine it. Focus. This isn't something you can do half ass."

As if to mock him, she flexed her hand, the claws vanishing. Cole pouted as Andy talked.

"Can't you just press on his nerve again? Make it go away?"

"She said he did that for self defense. I doubt self defense is taking away the claws," Tyler argued.

"You know we don't really understand how this works but maybe if we all had claws..." Mason trailed off.

"You can't," Reyna shook her head. "You're still too new to this. If I try to trigger a response, there could be really bad consequences."

"How so?" Andy asked.

"You might not have it," she explained. "The venom, it's making its way through you sure but it's weak, it might not be potent enough to change you. Only after your bite heals, only after you've changed for the first time is it locked in your body."

"That makes no sense," Tyler frowned. "A snake bites you, the poison is instant."

"Well then please be my guest, go down to the Gorge and ask the flesh eating werewolves about the speed of their infection," Reyna shot back.

"This isn't helping anyone," Mason stepped forward trying to calm the argument and Cole turned away.

The claws were still present on the tips of his fingers and as much as he thought about them vanishing he couldn't make it happen. What was wrong with him?

He closed his eyes, seeing the gaping wound on Gage's side, the brutal bites on his friends and the bloody scene on Main Street. There was just too much going on, how could he hide this from everyone? Sure he had the guys but what about his parents? What about Britney? Hell he was supposed to call her and had already forgotten.

Instead he was too focused on his new reality. Of his new curse that not only he had, but had given out to others. Cole had hoped something like this could be controlled, practiced. It couldn't be that hard, after all Reyna had managed it her whole life!

Reyna, the girl who was always alone, didn't bother with football and was known for fleeing her fosters. Maybe that was what the future was for him now. Just being alone. He certainly couldn't lose control playing football, and he could never imagine hurting Britney. But Reyna, she knew about this. Maybe he could learn, maybe eventually things could be normal again.

Cole opened his eyes, feeling a sting of pain and sighed in relief. His fingertips, not claws, were bloody but human.

"Nice job," Reyna raised an eyebrow in approval. "Now do it again."

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"You're cancelling on me again?"

"I'm sorry Britney but I can't go out tonight. I have to do something with the guys," Cole said, juggling the phone while he packed a bag.

Despite everything that was happening, he wanted to be prepared. So he was planning to leave a pack of camping gear out at an old Ranger post. Andy's parents ran several of them but this one in particular was abandoned, off the beaten trail and perfect for Cole to set up a bag for whatever Reyna was planning for them.

"This is ridiculous!" Britney moaned. "There's been a crazy animal attack, school is closed, no one has any idea what's going on. You're my boyfriend. You're supposed to protect me, be here for me."

Cole stopped packing as he stared at his hands, thankfully human and sighed. Protect Britney, if only she knew what did happen.

"I'm sorry but I can't come over right now. Just give me an hour and I'll be by," Cole pleaded. "I promise I'm not a total jerk okay?"

He could tell she wasn't that mad as she sighed into the phone, her tone teasing.

"I suppose that'll give me time to change into something a bit cooler. It is really hot today."

"I love you babe," he smiled and then hung up.

Just as he was about to run out the door, he caught himself in the mirror. He stepped back, realizing his eyes were yellow. He walked forward, blinking repeatedly. He couldn't be seen walking around with yellow eyes!

An inch from the mirror and he put a finger just under his right eye. The yellow was striking and something about it entranced him. It didn't feel any different and the more he stared, the more familiar he felt. He shook his head and closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath. He just had to imagine his normal, ordinary eyes. Just like Reyna had said, relax and it would happen.

Of course relaxing was the last thing on his mind. How could he possibly handle being a werewolf? How could he hide yellow eyes and claws? And Britney? She was scared of whatever monster had slaughtered those people on Main Street. If she knew the truth, if she knew it was him, she'd never forgive him.

He opened his eyes, seeing that blazing yellow in the mirror. He screamed, turning in circles. How did Reyna do this? How did she learn control? No one suspected her of anything, let alone being a werewolf.

Of course, Reyna was the resident loner. Cole guessed it would be easy to have secrets if you had no one around. He didn't want that, and the longer he thought about this, he realized that was just as much of a curse as changing into a dog every month. Alone? That was a hell he never thought he'd have. He always had his family, his friends, Britney.

He closed his eyes, twisting his hair in his hands as he debated the consequences of the Gorge. Maybe he couldn't have everyone in his life right now, he didn't want to pass his curse onto anyone else, but maybe this changed things for the better for Reyna. Maybe he could help her as much as she would help him.

He opened his eyes, sighing in relief at the warm brown tone in the mirror.

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The next three weeks flew by. Once school started again, the boys kept up excuses to avoid football. While they despised seeing the prep boys on the field, they understood keeping the secret more. Instead they spent free period and football trying to train themselves.

Britney despised his excuses, she didn't believe him when he said that he and the guys signed up for a volunteer group after school and all the spots were filled. Soon their passionate makeouts turned into heated arguments. Cole always left quickly when it turned ugly. He could feel his claws and fangs threatening to come out. Even in the middle of an argument he could never imagine hurting Britney. It wasn't her fault he was a monster now.

In the meantime Reyna was adamant in training them. Cole learned how to summon and retract his claws, learned how to use his improved senses and hide the way his fangs wanted to grow or his eyes glowed. Even the others noticed an increase in their own hearing and smell. The way they could run faster and could lift more. No one else could grow claws or other more wolf-like traits but Cole suspected they would be like him.

He tried to convince Reyna to see Gage but she refused, she couldn't risk the secret being out in the open if he never shifted at all. After all, she reminded him daily, he nearly killed Gage to begin with. His body could be too damaged. Cole refused to entertain the possibility, using every ounce of free time to spy on Gage and his progress. It was surprisingly easy after all. With each sunset, he gained a sense of renewed energy and with the wolf inside him sleeping, he was able to leap the gates and listen in on the doctors almost every night.

The diagnosis wasn't exactly great.

The night before the full moon, Cole was walking along the side wall to Gage's house. Less than 24 hours to go until his second shift, till his friends' first. He'd just left the guys at Andy's house, promising to catch up with them later. All three of them noticed their bites were healing better, not completely but way better than any normal animal bite would have after such a short time. With such little time left, Cole had to find out how Gage was doing.

He eyed the top of the eight foot tall wall that encircled the property and grinned. Pulling from the wolf that slumbered within him, he leaped with ease on top of the concrete barrier.

Aside from the uncontrollable rage that consumed him that first night, being a werewolf didn't seem to be too bad.

He leaped down and crept to the house, staying under the windows and out of the light. He was silent as he came up under the closed window to Gage's room. As usual, the doctor was inside, checking Gage one last time before leaving for the night.

Cole cocked an ear, listening as clearly as if he was standing next to the doctor.

"How is he?" Gage's mom asked.

"His wounds finally seem to be closing, as soon as you're approved for the surgery, we can begin prepping him for skin grafts," the doctor's voice was gravely, but optimistic.

"Closing? He's missing half his waist!" Gage's mom countered.

"There's still no infection, in fact there's no evidence of what attacked him at all. Of course he'll need the grafts but the wound is clean. I'd just like to wait another week before I submit him for the list."

Cole felt conflicted hearing the news. Like his friends, Gage seemed to be healing more rapidly the closer they came to the full moon. That was good, and the fact that they couldn't tell what attacked him and there was no sort of poison or venom was even better. That meant their secret was still intact.

On the other hand, they were talking about skin grafts, if his own experience was anything to go by in about 12 hours Gage could wake up completely healed save for some nasty scars. How could they explain that away to doctors?

"Hey mom, it's really hot. Can you open the window?" Gage asked.

"Sure sweetie," Cole ducked down, even knowing he was hidden, as Gage's mom walked to the window and slid it open.

"Alright Gage, go ahead and take your last round. I'll be back in the morning to check on you," the doctor ordered and Cole heard him count out several pills, all of them a cocktail of pain suppressors and more.

"Do I have to take all this crap?" Gage asked. "It doesn't even hurt that much anymore."

"You think that but in a few hours you'll be begging for them." The doctor chuckled. "In the meantime your mom and I can discuss a date for grafts. Shall we?"

"Of course. Would you like a ride to town? I'm picking up pizza from down the hill."

"I would, thank you."

Cole waited, debating, as Gage's mom and the doctor left. Turning around towards the front of the house he waited to hear the two of them leave in the car. Satisfied they were gone, he looked up to see the rest of the house was dark. That meant Gage's dad and whoever else lived in this mansion were gone.

Despite knowing the risks, from both Reyna and Gage, Cole stood up, taking a deep breath.

"Here goes nothing," he said as he peered in the window to the room.

"Hey Gage, mind if I come in?"

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It only took two minutes. Gage screamed, yelling for his parents and struggling to get out of the bed, but Cole jumped inside the room and snatched the cell phone off the bed before Gage could grab it.

"I'm not here to hurt you man."

"Like hell! Give me my phone!"

"I can't do that. You gotta listen to me."

"Why would I do that?" Gage growled

"Cause you got no choice. No phone, no parents in the house and you're not exactly mobile yet," Cole argued.

"I'll kick your ass once I get my surgery!" Gage yelled, floundering in the sheets.

"I don't think you'll need it. I think you're going to walk out this house tomorrow morning," Cole said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Cause it happened to me. Listen tomorrow morning, you're going to wake up and your body is gonna be burning. You'll find everything is healed. Just like my shoulder was a month ago," Cole explained.

"Seriously? You think I'm going to be magically cured? What are you? Crazy?" Gage demanded.

"I think so."

Cole whipped around to the new voice, tensing his muscles for a fight and sighed in relief. Reyna.



"I told you to let this go," Reyna snipped, crawling through the window. "Obviously your hearing needs to be checked."

"His body is healing," Cole argued. "Just like the others. Just like me!"

"I'll be the judge of that," she said, walking up to Gage.

"Who the hell are you? Get away from me! Hey- ow!"

Reyna pulled Gage's arm up violently and narrowed her eyes.

"Good god are all of you this whiny?"

"What are you doing?" Gage gasped as Reyna kept his arm lifted.

"I'm checking to see if you're dying or not," she snapped, dropping his arm.

Gage rolled away from Reyna, clutching his arm. With his bandaged waist exposed, Reyna ripped off the bandages with ease. Gage howled with pain and Cole grimaced in solidarity.

Reyna was many things but subtle and gentle she was not.

Despite that, he stepped closer to Reyna to see Gage's wound.

It was still raw and fleshy, Cole wondered how close to the bone it was as fresh blood pooled under the light. Beyond the immediate damage, Cole saw the skin was scarred and a dark nasty red.

Unbothered by the traumatic injury, Reyna's hands hovered over the wound and then moved to the rest of Gage's pale skin, stroking it once.

"It's not good," she said simply and walked away.

"What do you mean?" Cole asked as Gage angrily grabbed a new bandage.

"Look at this," she said, holding up his old ones. "Notice anything?"

Cole shrugged, the bandages were a dark bloody red with patterns of the damage imprinted on them. It seemed ordinary to him.

Reyna rolled her eyes and tossed them to Cole.

"Smell it."

Cole hated this part. Being a werewolf had given him new strength and allowed him to eavesdrop easily but it also gave him a stronger nose. He could hardly walk past the locker rooms anymore without gagging. Regardless he took a whiff and barely held back his lunch at the overwhelming scent of rotting meat.

"What is that?" he asked, keeping the bandage at arms length.

"What is what? What are you two going on about?" Gage demanded.

"His blood is red but the smell, it's wrong. At this point it's 50/50. He could heal in the next few hours and be fine. Or he could not," Reyna explained. "But if his blood goes black, it's all over. You see his veins?"

"No," Cole shook his head.

"They're black, it's not good," Reyna said.

"What can he do?" Cole asked.

"My arms aren't black!" Gage argued as he looked over his arms under the light.

"Of course you couldn't see it," Reyna shook her head, flashing yellow eyes at Cole and he understood.

He closed his eyes, willing to see the world as a wolf and opened them.

Everything was mostly the same, Gage in a bed, pissed as hell, but he could see what Reyna described as an aura surrounding him, it was a sort of light that surrounded him. Cole walked to Gage's side and gestured to his arm.

"Can I?"

"What the hell is with your eyes?" Gage asked, alarmed, he shied away as Cole grabbed Gage's hand, turning it over in his own.

Just beneath Gage's skin and hair were faint black lines, and while he'd never seen them before, Cole guessed they were veins and they weren't supposed to be black.

"What can he do?" Cole asked, dropping gag's hand and blinking, shifting his eyes to normal.

"Nothing," Reyna shrugged. "Right now it's a waiting game."

"What's a waiting game?" Gage demanded.

"It's been a month! We've done nothing but wait!" Cole shot back.

"I'm sorry that's how this works!" Reyna snapped. "He got bit, not everyone survives. That's just how things are."

"What about the others? Are they okay?"

"They didn't have this kind of damage," Reyna said. "It's different."

"I can't let him die! There has to be something you can do!" Cole begged.

"Cmon I don't wanna die!" Gage added.

"You could survive," Reyna said. "It's just a toss of the coin. I can't do anything. No one can. Not even the best doctors in the world can fix this."

"How soon?" Cole asked. "How soon would we know?"

Reyna sighed, crossing her arms and glaring. Cole knew what she was thinking. He had already risked too much by coming in here, he had shown his eyes and while they hadn't said anything definite it was obvious something more than a random animal attack was going on. And Gage wasn't having any of it.

"How much time do I have? Tell me dammit!"

Reyna took another deep breath, uncrossing her arms. She shook her head, pointing at Cole.

"You never should have come in here. You shouldn't have been stalking at all."

"It's my fault. I have to know."

She glanced at Gage and went back to Cole.

"Dawn. If the bite heals, then you can tell him."

"And if it doesn't?" Gage asked.

Reyna said nothing but Cole could tell the look in her eyes.

The bite would either heal.

Or Gage would be dead.

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The night was long.

Despite begging for answers Reyna left without another word and Cole struggled with what to say next. Hearing the car return however made up his mind.

"Whatever you do, you cannot tell anyone we were here. Or what we talked about."

"And why would I do that? You won't even tell me what's happening! All you're saying is that I'm going to die!" Gage argued.

"It's a 50/50 shot," Cole insisted.

"That is a load of bullshit!"

"I have to go. Just don't say anything. I know we aren't friends but trust me. If it works, you're going to love it."

"Love what?" Gage hissed as Cole leaped out of the room.

Even though he knew it would be smart to leave and get some sleep after all in preparation for tomorrow. Cole stayed under the window as Gage's mom came in, forcing him to down the pills and eat some pizza.

Cole decided against joining Gage again as his mom left for the night and simply waited out the night. Gage didn't say anything about Cole or Reyna thankfully and Cole prayed his silence would be rewarded with the truth.

After all, dawn was only a few hours away. He could relax once he knew Gage was alive, a werewolf but alive.

Of course, relaxing wouldn't be in the cards ever again.

Sometime during the night Cole had nodded off but was quickly awakened to the sounds of screaming.

He scrambled to his feet, blinking as lights flashed on inside the house. He stayed back from the window as both Gage's parents raced in to find their son choking.

From the shadows, Cole watched horrified as Gage choked, sputtering black blood from his lips. The rotten meat smell now permeated the air, thick, cloying and unavoidable. Shaking, Cole collapsed to his knees as Gage's father dialed 911.

"I'm sorry," Reyna's voice was still, measured, but soft as she placed a hand on Cole's shoulder.

"My fault," Cole whispered, hardly registering anything as he watched Gage thrash in a panic on the bed.

"We need to go," she said.

"My fault," he repeated, allowing Reyna to guide him away. Too numb to do anything but stare at his former bully.

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School was canceled again.

The boys were collected in the school parking lot in the back of Cole's truck. Mason, Tyler and Andy had all woken up at the crack of dawn to burning skin and newly healed bites. Cole knew what that meant for them. While he wished they didn't have his curse, he was glad they hadn't ended up like Gage.

A freak situation, they said. An unexplainable infection.

Cole never felt worse.

Without a word, he leaped out of the truck, tossing the keys to Mason and stalked away. With no destination in mind and the guilt that clawed at his heart, he didn't even care if he walked into traffic. Better yet, off the mountain.

Of course, knowing his condition, he'd just heal.

Unlike Gage.

He stumbled around, kicking at rocks when he smelt pine needles and shook his head.

"I'm sorry about Gage," Reyna said, her tone surprisingly gentle.

"Thanks," Cole said, staring at the dirt.

"It'll get easier."

"I killed him," Cole said, his voice was hollow. It didn't even feel like his voice.

"Debatable," Reyna said. "You lost control. It happens with your first time."

Cole rounded on her, fury building inside him. How could she be so casual about this?

"But you knew what was happening. You could have stopped me!"

"Who says I didn't?"

Cole stared at Reyna, confused. He didn't remember anything concrete from that night but he's sure he would have remembered her.

"I tried to stop you from going out," she explained. "I knew that it would be dangerous. Once your bite healed that was kind of the final mark on the checklist."

"My bite healed before I changed," Cole nodded.

"Yes, if it heals that means the venom has completed itself. The infection is complete. I knew you were healed when you came to school. I knew you were a wolf. I figured if you stayed home you couldn't hurt anyone but yourself."

"I'm so stupid," Cole shook his head, hating himself. Because he went out, he changed and attacked his friends, killed those people. Killed Gage.

"Not like I was much help that night," she said. "I thought about telling you but you saw how you couldn't even accept it. If I told you you never would have believed me."

"Sometimes I don't believe it," he said, flexing his hand, each finger on its own.

A month ago long yellowed claws had ripped through his nails, fur covered his body and he became a monster. And it would happen again tonight and every full moon for the rest of his life. Now of course they were simple ordinary hands, human hands.

"Like I said," Reyna put her own hands over his, "it'll get easier. Now that you're more accepting, you'll be able to control yourself."

"And Tyler? Mason, Andy?" Cole asked, "what about them?"

"It'll be hard but hopefully you and I can keep them from killing anyone else. First shifts are always the hardest. They're the most painful, brutal transformations. You've already gone through it. Your mind will be better adjusted," she said.

"Great," he muttered. "Still changing into a monster."

"A wolf," Reyna corrected. "Not a monster, a wolf."

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"No," Britney frowned at him. "You can't seriously think about camping now?"

"We've been planning this for a month," Cole said.

"Yeah and Gage just died this morning!" Britney argued.

"I know," Cole looked down, he could hardly stomach the reality.

But the moon was only a few hours away. He and the guys had to meet Reyna in the woods early. She was going to lead them away from town. So there wouldn't be anymore Gage's.

"So your idea of staying here, of honoring him is to leave?" she asked. "God I know you two weren't buddies but god Cole, have some humanity!"

"I can't stay here!" Cole shot back, "Okay I can't! I can't stand it!"

"Cole,"

"No, no okay, listen to me!" Cole yelled. "I can't be here! Not because of Gage but because of my parents, school, the attacks, you! Things have just gone crazy and I can't. I need a break!" Britney stared, jaw dropped at Cole as he screamed. She stepped back from him, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Is that what you want?" she whispered. "A break?"

Cole struggled with the words, seeing the hurt on her face.

"No, no that's not what I meant." he said.

"Then what do you mean? For the past month, you've been acting like a completely different person. You skip school, you've basically quit football, you haven't been to the memorial in town and no one's seen you at Fry's since that fight. You always ditch me for the guys and disappear. What do you want Cole?"

Her, Cole wanted Britney but he couldn't tell her what he had done. He sighed, looking down.

"I just don't want to hurt you," he whispered.

"You won't," she said, coming in to hug him. "Not if you let me in, not if you let me help."

"You can't help me with this," he moaned, sinking into her embrace.

"Don't go tonight," she begged. "Stay, talk to me."

The urge to tell her was overwhelming, he opened his lips, practically tasting the strawberry shampoo in her hair under him. As he stared ahead, he could hear the cars driving up and down the block, see a bird landing in a tree fifty feet away, smell his neighbor's secret sauce being poured over his burgers on the grill.

Cole debated the secret, and the weight of it crushed him. He wanted to tell her everything but she would never understand, she couldn't understand. Hearing the particular coughing sputter of Mason's car coming from a block away, he pulled back from Britney.

"I love you," he said, cupping her chin. "But I have to do this myself, I gotta clear my head and just..."

"It's okay," she said, even though her tone said otherwise. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"It's a date," he kissed her, hopefully showing her that he did care.

She squeezed his hand before walking away. Mason and the guys pulled up just as she left.

She waved to them as Cole paced by his truck.

"Girlfriend troubles?" Mason asked.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Cole sighed.

"I'm telling you, it's better if she doesn't know," Tyler said, tossing his camping gear in the bed. They wouldn't need it for obvious reasons but they had to sell the illusion they'd be camping overnight.

"I don't know why you don't break it off. Stringing her like this, keeping half your life secret, it ain't going to end pretty," Andy added.

"I can't," Cole said, staring in the direction that Britney left in, "she's my girlfriend."

"Well let's hope then that one day she gets you a fire hydrant in your apartment," Mason joked, slapping Cole on the back.

"Oh very funny," Cole shot back, jabbing at his friend.

With the sun setting, the boys piled into the truck and headed off to the top of the mountain.

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"I don't know if I can do this," Andy shook.

"It's going to be okay," Mason said as they walked along the tree line.

"I don't know. After what happened with Gage..." Andy trailed off.

"Our bites healed," Tyler pointed out. "That means we're okay."

"Lucky," Cole muttered.

He could feel the electricity in the air, feel the night growing and the wolf inside him starting to wake up. The moon was only an hour from cresting, only an hour from forcing them all to become werewolves.

The idea of it was terrifying, but also intoxicating.

"Well aren't you all downers," Reyna said, stepping out from behind a tree.

Cole took a step back, amazed at the way she was dressed.

Typically she'd worn jeans and t-shirts, nothing striking but tonight, she wore only a sports bra and shorts and was barefoot.

"Well hello," Tyler grinned, clearly appreciating her well toned body.

"Cute," she tilted her head and gave the boys a once over, "Strip."

"Excuse me?" Mason asked.

"Strip. Get naked. Wear your birthday suit. Streak. Etc," Reyna said.

"Whoa whoa wait is this needed?" Cole asked. "Why don't we hike normally?"

"You're scared of the woods," Reyna shook her head. "You don't need to be."

"There's a rival pack of werewolves at the bottom of the Gorge," Tyler complained. "I think its logical that we are afraid."

"Yeah well if Cole here didn't trespass on their territory he never would have been bit and you guys never would have been bit. So suck it up buttercup, werewolves like any other animal have territories. They will defend it. At any cost."

"So if they have this as their territory why are we here?" Andy asked.

"Because this is a little section I carved out for me," Reyna smirked. "And as the only resident werewolf who doesn't want to kill you, I'm going to share my territory with you. Be grateful."

"Thank you?" Tyler guessed.

"Anywho," Reyna paced lightly on the balls of her feet. "Best way to learn the territory and your skills is to run it. As a human. If you know the terrain as a human, you'll know it as a wolf. You know it as a wolf, your wolf will want to stay within it. They don't want a fight."

"Who? Us or the Gorge?" Mason asked.

"Yes." Reyna pointed happily at him. "Now strip."

"You're sure we need to?" Cole asked. He wasn't afraid per say, but revealing himself to potential campers, to potential victims wasn't exactly a thrilling idea.

"Do you plan on wearing a suit when you shift? Its easier, you're more nimble, agile, faster when you go bare."

"Won't people see us?" Tyler asked.

"Not this far deep," Reyna shrugged. "But if it makes you feel better you can wear boxers. You'll learn to be free though after a while. Getting your clothes caught is annoying."

"I wore clothes last month," Cole pointed out.

"And we found you naked the next day," Tyler said.

"Okay guess that's true." Cole nodded.

"C'mon ladies, get moving." Reyna's eyes glowed, "The moon's almost here."

The boys stripped down to their boxers, none of them were brave enough to go completely bare after all and they followed Reyna into the woods. She spoke softly, almost reverently about what would happen. Her words washed over the boys, making them feel stronger, powerful.

"This run through is going to help you in more ways than one," Reyna explained. "You'll have to use all your senses. Sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste. Even human your body is stronger and more attuned. You can't hold back. You have to let it go. Let everything go. That's when you'll feel the wolf. And that's how you can take control."

She stopped, turning to face the boys.

"Its terrifying," she said. "Its overwhelming. You're going to feel like you are being eaten alive. But let that pain, let that fire consume you. You'll feel its heat, it's power in every cell of your body. Once you surrender, you'll be able to control yourself."

"Surrender and we can control ourselves?" Mason asked. "How does that work?"

"Its like falling. You can fight gravity all you want but its still going to bring you down. But if you fall and your body is in the right position you'll land easier," Reyna explained.

"I don't know. It sounds crazy," Tyler shook his head. "How will we even know what to do?"

"Yeah I mean I had no idea what was happening when I shifted," Cole added.

"Because you had no prior knowledge," Reyna chuckled. "You had no idea what to expect and you fought it every step of the way. Let it go and you'll find yourself enjoying the night."

"Enjoying," Andy snorted. "Its crazy. I'm up in the mountains in nothing but boxers and I'm hot as hell."

"That's your wolf," Reyna smiled. "We run hotter than most."

"And yet you're still single," Mason retorted.

"By choice," Reyna rolled her eyes. "No one can keep up with me. Shame really. No man can really take control these days."

The boys oohed and laughed at the innuendo as they followed Reyna past a large tree into a small clearing.

"Like I said," she said as they stood under the night sky. "This will be your territory as well as mine. Open your senses. Breathe it in."

Cole closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath. He could smell pine, a musky scent that Reyna had told him was deer and a sharp tangy smell that he recognized as poison ivy.

"Now listen," Reyna's voice was quiet, soft as Cole followed her words.

He could hear the rustle of leaves in the wind and the breaking of sticks under his bare feet, hear the gentle call of an owl and the lapping of water over rocks in the shallow creek.

"What do you feel?" She asked, practically a whisper.

He could feel everything. She was right to make them strip, he could feel the tiniest pebbles in the ground and the cool wind whip through his hair. There was something more though, an electric fire that made the hair on his arms stand up and his heart beat faster.

"Taste the woods," she instructed.

Cole swallowed, not only his fear but the thick taste of woods, dirt and all of nature danced on his tongue. It was different out here, he had grown accustomed to sensing metallics in town, evidence of civilization. But out here there was nothing but a wild untamed beast.

It called to him and he opened his eyes.

"Do you see it?" Reyna asked, walking in front of him.

Even in the darkness, without any sort of light, Cole could see everything. Each tree had its own outline, every bush waved in the breeze and his friends stood beside him, bathing in nature. More than that though he saw her, Reyna.

Sculpted like a warrior, her poise was strong, confident and unafraid. He could see the sweat on her forehead and her biceps flex, her legs were tense, ready to fly on a moment's notice and Cole believed in her power.

She shook back her hair, meeting his gaze with her own.

Fearsome golden eyes matched his as her ears slowly curved upwards beyond her hair. She turned the rest of her body to him and he realized that she was now completely naked.

"Oh cmon," she teased, "not like you haven't seen boobs before."

"I..." Cole was breathless as he tried to come up with an excuse for staring.

She grinned, showing off her fangs and waved a clawed finger at him.

"Now don't forget. You're tracking me. You got my scent?"

Cole nodded, flustered at her brashness as she turned to the others. He'd briefly forgotten they were there until she addressed them.

"Its going to hurt like hell," she said, "but don't fight it. I promise you it'll be better in the long run."

"How long do we have?" Tyler asked.

"We left about 8:00. Moon is supposed to crest about 8:40," Andy said.

"So any minute," Cole nodded.

He could feel the pull now. All day it had been inside him, something telling him to return to the mountain.

Now that he was here though, the pull was almost painful. It was coming and coming fast.

"Stay on me. Your wolves want to hunt, you can't exactly kill everyone in town so track me. We'll go up, stay away from town and the camping grounds. The end point is the top of the mountain. Think of it like tag."

"So we tag you we win?" Cole asked.

"If," Reyna corrected. "If you tag me before the top."

"Are you kidding? We got this," Mason laughed. "We all run for football. We can catch you easily."

"Really?" Reyna sauntered to Mason.

Cole shook his head, he hadn't known Reyna long but with that walk and her sly grin he knew she was going to pull some trick out.

"How about whoever catches me buys first round at Frys? For everyone."

"Deal," Mason smiled as the other two nodded in agreement.

Reyna glanced at Cole, winking before turning her attention back on the boys.

"I like my burger medium rare," she whispered.

Before Mason could retort, she sped off into the woods, nothing more than a blur and an echoing laugh.

Cole exchanged a look with the boys and they nodded.

Cole led the way, launching from his position he felt like a bullet.

Inhaling the intoxicating smell of pine needles he followed the path Reyna cut through the woods with ease. He leaped over fallen logs and barreled through bushes with hardly a care.



The branches and leaves nothing more than a tickle on his skin as each tear was healed instantly.

Instinctively his body twisted around each obstacle with speed and agility that rivaled any Olympic athlete.

Even with his speed though he could see, smell and hear everything as if in slow motion.

The owl that darted over a mouse on his right? He saw every moment as if it was an HD movie.

The sounds of his friends behind him, he could hear every crunch of leaves and feel every landing. Reyna's trail? He knew he'd never shake that smell out of his nose.

The speed was exhilarating, the absolute freedom of it, intoxicating! As he pounded an unmarked trail, he finally understood Reyna's carefree attitude and disdain for normalcy.

This right here, this was thrilling, powerful, freeing!

He burst through the trees and without hesitating, Cole pressed off the ground and leaped over the river that gushed in front of him.

As he sailed in midair he whooped with pure joy, letting the wolf inside him free at last.

Landing in a solid stance he stopped to take in the moment.

Fast on his heels, his friends sailed over the river and paced around him cheering.

"Goddamn that's amazing!" Mason cheered.

"I've never run like that!" Tyler gushed. "I didn't even know how or where but its like-"

"Its like a freaking rocket!" Andy finished for him.

"Dude, look at you!" Tyler pointed to Cole.

Cole smiled, feeling the tips of his fangs protruding and looked at his hands. Seeing the claws and not even feeling the pain or summoning them on purpose was definitely something to take notice of. He tapped his ear, feeling its new curve as it shaped.

"Holy shit," Andy said. "Maybe this won't be too bad!"

"Are you kidding? This will be awesome!" Mason laughed.

Just as Cole was about to say something he doubled over.

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A fire had erupted in his heart and he screamed. He looked up just as the moon passed over them.

Cole screamed again as his friends followed, all of them so happy moments ago, now falling to the dirt in agony.

The fire raced out, building and spreading all over his body. Cole screamed a third time, deeper, more guttural as he felt bones crack and fur appear on his hands.

He gritted his teeth, trying to hold back his pain and realized he couldn't.

"Let it wash over you."

Reyna said the more they fought it, the worse it would be!

Despite hating the fire that coursed through his veins, Cole forced himself to ride out wave after wave of pain. Closing his eyes, he felt his muscles relax as the change continued.

It may have been seconds or it could have been hours but Cole soon realized the pain was gone and he was running free.

More than that though, he was a wolf, fully, completely and he could FEEL it!

Four legs working in sync, a long tail that stretched out, he kept close to the ground.

Before he could do anything else, he blacked out, losing control.

There, again!

He had no idea what the passage of time was, but once again he felt in control as Cole raced along a canyon wall. His paws were quick, nimble as they skipped over the crumbling path, knowing where to land when he leaped and the confidence was a tidal wave, crashing his mind again.

More time gone and now he was in a field face to face with four other wolves.

He barked, actually barked at them as they snarled and leaped at each other. Two of them fell, biting at each other, cruelly, viciously and Cole barked again, slamming his paw down.

The wolves stopped for a moment and Cole tilted his head at the sight. But too soon he was swallowed up by darkness.

A longer break this time but now when Cole took charge he saw a humanoid figure above him.

He whined, walking up to the figure, something was familiar here but he didn't know what.

Before he could investigate further, a fire racked his heart, exploding with pain. He fell back, howling as the moon above passed over him.

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Cole blinked slowly, his entire body throbbed with pain and he dared not to move because of it.

"You'll have to get up eventually," a familiar voice chuckled.

Turning his head, painfully at that, as he was on the ground, Cole saw Reyna sitting on a boulder.

"The pain never stops completely but you'll get used to it."

"Ouch," Cole moaned, slowly raising himself from the dirt.

"Congratulations," she continued with a smile, "you have your own pack. And you didn't kill anyone."

Cole finally sat up and looked behind him to see his friends slowly rising.

Each of them were butt naked but alive and better, not covered in blood and gore from killing.

Cole looked back to Reyna who'd already dressed herself in her own sports bra and shorts.

"How'd you get dressed so fast?" He croaked out.

His voice was as sore as his body but he wondered if she had stashes of clothes scattered all over the mountain.

"That's my secret," she winked. "Cmon I got a surprise for you."

With some time the boys got up gingerly, staring at each other in amazement.

"Did last night..." Mason asked.

"I think so..." Andy nodded.

"I had no idea..." Tyler whispered.

"I can't believe it..." Cole muttered.

Even after a month he still couldn't believe what happened. More than that he realized that his friends were in the same nightmare now, but thankfully alive.

He stared at his hands, clenching and unclenching them, still remembering the powerful thick paws that he had only hours ago.

"Cmon," Reyna repeated, walking around the boulder.

The boys shared a look and followed her, taking a step down behind the boulder to find a secluded pool of crystal blue water.

"Your body just changed. Its sore right?" Reyna asked. "Take a dip, this pool is untouched by humans. Water straight from the sky. And the plants that grow on the edge release a substance that soothes you."

"Seriously?" Cole asked.

The water looked inviting but it couldn't be magic could it?

"You're questioning healing pools when an hour ago you were a giant furry?" She raised an eyebrow and he relented.

As soon as Cole stepped into the pool his entire body relaxed. He sighed with relief as whatever magic was in it, worked its way into his sweaty filthy skin.

The others followed suit, gasping at the cold soothing sensation.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, Cole thought. Maybe they could make this work. He glanced up at Reyna who had opted out of the relaxing waters and couldn't help but smile.

It was all thanks to her, she had helped them so much and somehow last night it clicked. She met his gaze and smiled back. And Cole realized it wasn't just a sarcastic smirk but a genuine smile. And he wondered what changed over the night.

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A few hours later, everyone was walking up Main Street to Fry's.

"Last night was incredible," Mason repeated, playing the night over and over in his head. "I don't know what it was but I felt..."

"Powerful?" Tyler grinned. "I felt like... like flying!"

"I'm just glad we didn't kill anyone," Andy said.

"Yeah," Cole nodded. "That was definitely the biggest relief."

"With Reyna here, we got nothing to worry about," Mason joked.

"We are masters! We don't need a babysitter!" Tyler crowed, still riding the high of the night.

"That's what you say," Reyna rolled her eyes. "This is your life, forever. You'll never have full control. But at least you'll have an Alpha."

"Alpha, like a leader," Andy said.

"Like hell you're our leader," Mason shook his head.

"I'm not," Reyna shrugged, pointing at Cole.

"Me? No, no. I'm not some alpha leader."

"Actually you are,"

"What makes you say that?" Tyler asked.

"Last night he took charge, it wasn't long, wasn't much, but he established himself pretty quick," Reyna explained. "It's hard to explain but when you have a bunch of wolves, there's always going to be a fight for top dog. Cole here shut it down though, thus making himself the Alpha."

"Wow..." it was all Cole could say.

He could hardly remember the night but he knew there had been at least one moment where he'd seen wolves fighting. He wanted them to stop and somehow they did.

"So what does that mean?" Tyler asked.

"Just means that whatever he says, you follow," Reyna said.

"Slaves?" Andy asked.

"Hardly," she rolled her eyes. "You've been friends before the bite, you trust each other, you're now a pack. Whatever loyalty, whatever strength you had between you all before, just like your strength and speed, it's magnified now, it's stronger."

"And what about you?" Cole asked. "You part of my pack?"

Reyna laughed, throwing her head back. Cole couldn't help but feel his cheeks grow warm at it, the way she moved, the way she laughed, he wanted her to stay, but it scared him too.

"God no," she shook her head, "I'm a lone wolf. Literally. I'm only helping you out to protect my own secret. You get exposed, I get exposed, we all end up facing a rifle from some crazy hunter."

"Okay okay, funny." Cole muttered. "I just thought since you were there and..."

"And what?" she raised an eyebrow. "Just because you bark, doesn't mean I attack."

"Okay fine, you're the big bad loner wolf and we're a pack. I don't know about you guys, but I am starving! Time for some breakfast!" Mason said as they walked up to the door of Fry's.

"That'll happen," Reyna chuckled. "Shifting takes a lot of energy. Plus you did run the entire mountain."

As they walked inside though, Cole looked back to see Reyna pause at the door. She smiled, looking away and then back to Cole.

"Say hi for me. I'll see you guys tonight."

Within a blink, she was gone and Cole sighed, confused. He looked back inside where the guys had claimed a table and then took a deep breath, inhaling eggs, bacon and strawberries.

"Cole!"

"Britney!" he smiled as his girlfriend's car pulled up outside the diner and she stepped out.

The two of them hugged and kissed. Cole felt every electric pulse under her skin, the strawberry shampoo was overwhelming as her hair bounced around her head.

"How was camping?" she asked.

"Fantastic," he said, being honest for the first time with her.

"Good," she wrapped her hand around his, "you can tell me over a fruit plate about it all."

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The next month soon became a whirlwind of craziness.

Cole and the boys continued to juggle their lives as normal high schoolers and training to keep their werewolf side a secret. Even after shifting she gave them no rest.

"You have to learn how to fight, how to defend yourself," she said.

The boys were well versed in summoning their claws now and used them to fight.

"From rival wolves, you may have to use every ounce of your power. In a pissing match in the cafeteria, you may have to hold back."

She was brutal, driving them to their limits. Knowing they could heal, she held back nothing.

Each punch felt like getting hit by a truck and each kick felt like red hot whips against their skin.

Cole for some reason was enthralled by it. Each night they drove to the top of the mountain and worked out in the woods. Running, learning the terrain and tracing their territory. Each night they brawled, not only beating on each other but the woods they now called home.

Thick trees and giant boulders were no match when met with hyperactive teenage wolves of course.

That said, it was fun in the woods, learning and pushing their limits. Cole felt stronger and more in control every night. He felt no fear running along the canyon walls and drove forward every punch against his friends. After the drills were done, they all hung out at some cliff on the edge with a roaring bonfire and snacks.

He loved that time the most, he knew his friends obviously but it was intriguing to see Reyna relax.

Turned out she knew a lot more than they thought. She didn't talk much but she listened.

She knew about Mason's crush on Becca, she was over the drama with Britney. She knew about Andy's parents as rangers and Tyler's beer obsession. She didn't attend the rallies or the games at school, didn't eat at Fry's often but she knew about it all.

Unfortunately every time the guys asked about her she waved them off, always coming up with some excuse to cut the party short.

Down the mountain, that's where things got complicated.

Britney pleaded with Cole, everyday, to tell her the truth. She knew he was hiding but he couldn't tell her. They argued at Cole's house, at Fry's, at school, there was no stop to the constant hurt they both held. The boys had agreed to quit football permanently, their supernatural strength and speed gave them too much of an advantage and could easily hurt the other players. Even at home the boys faced the pressures of their parents demanding to know where they went and why they came home so late and so exhausted.

"You can't tell anyone who you are," Reyna repeated. "If one person knows then we'll all be exposed. And we'll all end up dying."

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School was relatively normal for Cole. The full moon was later tonight but for this morning he'd woken up refreshed and ready for it. With no one at risk from last month he didn't worry about any new wolves popping up, nor any attacks since Reyna had successfully trained them to keep to the mountain.

With the boys jumping out of the truck and the day already bright he didn't think anything could go wrong. Even Britney had eased up on him this last week deciding there would be no changing his "volunteer trip" tonight.

"Hey Babe," she kissed him lightly on the cheek and Cole almost swam with the overwhelming scent of strawberries.

"Hey you. Thanks for not being mad about tonight," he kissed her back and she giggled.

"Well you know that I have that trip with the girls tomorrow to town. You have your boys night tonight. It all works out."

Cole threw an arm around her as they walked into school. Ever so slightly he nodded to Reyna who hung back, hidden from view as usual.

Even though he was dating Britney he still felt a flutter in his heart as Reyna slipped away between the other students.

He shook it off, the moon was coming tonight, probably nothing.

Of course he should have known better.

"So I've been asking around..." Britney trailed off at lunch.

"Not this again," Cole moaned.

"You've been going up to the lookout a lot. You and your boys. You messed around in the woods before Cole. You almost died. You really want to try that again?"

"Believe me. I'm not trying anything. We just go up there to hang out."

"So why not invite me? Or Becca or anyone?" She pouted.

"It's a guys thing." He shrugged.

"Is it? Cause I heard that little freak goes up there too." Britney frowned.

"Freak?" Cole asked knowing who she asked about.

"Ya that Ryan girl. The runaway. They say she goes up there and like does shit. Weird shit."

Britney muttered. "You're not doing anything weird right?"

"No," he lied. "You know I'm not doing drugs or some shit like that."

"Good," she pecked him on the lips. "Cause you know I'd never let you do that."

Cole chuckled, looking away as Britney and Becca chatted over shoes or some crap.

He felt a chill run up his spine, the dismissive way Britney talked about the lookout and Reyna, he knew it was normal but something about it didn't feel right.

No one in school knew the truth. For obvious reasons. And of course even he thought of her as the local weirdo before getting to know her.

But maybe that was it.

Knowing who she was and what she went through. What he struggled to keep secret himself it made him emphasize with her. He wanted to defend her. No one here should be talking about her like that.

"Babe,"

"Huh?" Cole broke out of his musings and stared at Britney.

"Are you sure you're ok?" She placed a hand on his cheek.

"I'm fine," he nodded.

They kissed again but Cole hardly felt it. Too consumed by guilt in the way he and his friends had treated Reyna over the years.

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It was 3:00. School was over and everyone was heading home.

"See you before your trip?" Britney asked.

"Nah I gotta meet up with the guys," Cole said.

Britney pouted, "at the lookout point?"

"I told you. It's just guys hanging out."

"And that Ryan freak." Britney muttered.

"Reyna," Cole corrected her without hesitation.

"I knew it!" Britney crowed. "You do know her!"

"Cmon jist because I know her name doesn't mean anything." Cole stammered. "And you shouldn't call her a freak or a different name."

"Are you cheating on me Cole?" She asked.

"No!"

"So why are defending her?"

"I'm not!" Cole shot back.

"So what are you doing hanging out with her?" Britney demanded.

"What are you talking about?"

"Beccas brother saw her. And your truck. I'm not stupid Cole!" Britney yelled. "You went out to the woods. You start acting weird. And you keep going to the lookout. Where she goes!"

"Britney..." Cole bit his lip trying to turn this around.

She was right. It didn't look good. But how could he explain that he was a werewolf? He could never imagine hurting Britney let alone killing her. But the way she looked at him now. He knew she was already in pain from his lies.

"Well?" Britney threw her hands up. "I'm waiting!"

"Its not what you think-" Cole began

"Quit being an idiot." Reyna snipped.

Cole blinked at her sudden appearance. How did he not notice her walking up?

"Excuse me?" Britney asked.

"Hes not cheating on you. Good god he talks about you enough." Reyna rolled her eyes. "Hes obsessed with you."

"And you know this how?" Britney demanded.

"Because we're both volunteers. You idiot. When he got caught trespassing they forced him to be a volunteer. They stuck him with me," Reyna explained, her voice dripping with contempt.

"He has to work. Its not a choice."

"Theres always a choice." Britney countered.

"Okay. He can go to Juvie down the mountain." Reyna smiled.

Britney said nothing, choosing to simply glare.

"Shes right." Cole lied. "When I went hiking down to the Gorge. I went onto some old guys property in the woods."

"A hermit," Reyna shook her head. "Juvie or community service."

"I didn't want anyone to know." Cole grabbed Britneys shoulders. "I'm sorry."

Britney looked to Reyna and back to Cole. He could see her debating to believe the lie or not. He sighed in relief when she nodded.

"You didn't have to lie. I wouldn't have told."

"I know. I know. Im sorry."

"Speaking of volunteering..." Reyna drawled, clearly not caring about the couple.

"Okay okay I gotta go." Cole said and kissed Britney forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow night." Britney smiled.

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"That was close," Reyna said.

"Dont even joke," Cole sighed in relief. "Whyd you do that anyway?"

"Your secret is linked to mine. You wanted to tell her. Couldn't let you do that," Reyna explained.

"Clearly she wasn't going to accept any more of your bullshit."

"But now she knows you and I..." Cole trailed off, unsure of what to say next.

"You and I what?" Reyna raised an eyebrow. "Work together?"

"She thought we were..."

"Oh Cole... you gotta be a lot more mature if you're getting in my pants," Reyna smirked. Cole chuckled as she walked away. Reyna truly was something different.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the woods the boys stripped, down to boxers per usual and Mason put a hand on Coles shoulder.

"You doing ok?"

"I'm fine," Cole shrugged him off, feeling anything but.

"You keep lying to Britney things are going to end up bad for you. You know that don't you?" Mason asked.

"Its been 3 months," Tyler added.

"You could break up with her," Reyna sang.

"No!" Cole practically shouted. "I can't lose her."

"She isn't going to accept you lying forever," Andy said. "You have to break up with her. You could kill her."

"I know that!" Cole snapped, feeling his blood boil.

"You could tell her the truth," Mason suggested. "Yeah it could go bad but-"

"Absolutely not!" Reyna roared, her nostrils flaring. "Telling her who you are could put you in more danger than anything else!"

"Like what?" Cole asked. "Its a risk but I'm already losing her by lying to her."

"If you wont dump her lying is the best option."

"How do you figure?" Mason asked.

"You tell her she tells everyone. Hunters hear about us. We all get shot!" Reyna explained, her tone sharp, unforgiving.

"You don't know that." Cole said. "I trust her!"

"Do you?"

"Yes!"

Reyna pursed her lips and looked up to the sky. Cole could tell the way she searched the stars she was tracking when the moon would be overhead. She looked back to Cole, her eyes narrowed, focused.

"Put something on. We only have about forty minutes but you need to see that Britney is not all you think she is."

Without a word, Reyna turned and sped off towards the highway. Cole shared an apprehensive look with the guys before grabbing a pair of shorts and following her.

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"Where are we going?" Cole demanded as he followed Reyna down the mountain.

Her timing was close, too close. In less than forty minutes he would change, become a werewolf, slave to animalistic urges. Why the hell was she leading him down the mountain? To the city and its people?



"You have spent all of your time carefully creating two lives," Reyna said, stopping short of an exit. "You lie to your parents and your coach and your girlfriend. You think that you are the only one with a secret."

"I never said that," Cole tried to argue.

"Shush," Reyna held up a finger. "You need to realize wolf or not, everyone has secrets. And most of the time they are not supernatural. They are not hiding a magical curse. They are hiding plain ordinary shitty ass secrets."

Cole said nothing as Reyna spoke. She was blunt and straight to the point, gesturing to the city beyond. Her eyes were dark, Cole could tell there was anger in them, but he didn't understand why or how it had anything to do with him.

"You know Britney's scent right? Strawberries? Think you're good enough to track her?" Reyna asked.

"What?" Cole stepped back. "Why? I mean yes I know her scent but shes not in town tonight."

"You wanna test that theory?" Reyna smirked.

"Shes going out shopping tomorrow. Tonight she's home," Cole insisted.

Reyna chuckled. She pointed to the city.

"You know the bar across the highway that has Teen Nite right?"

"The Grand, ya what about it?"

"You're little girlfriend is down there right now. She's there and she is not loyal to you. You're not the only liar here Cole. She's been cheating on you for months."

"What?" Cole shook his head. "You're crazy! She's not cheating on me!"

"Track her," Reyna challenged. "You got some time. Tell me you don't smell her stinking strawberries across the highway."

"Lot of people have strawberry perfume." Cole shot back.

"Prove me wrong than," Reyna held her arms out.

Cole shook his head, closed his eyes and inhaled.

The familiar smells of gasoline and fast food filled his nose. He almost gagged at the sharp tang of it since he was so close to turning. Shaking his head he focused on the cloying smell of the bar across the highway and the smell of hundreds of teenagers gathered inside the building.

"I can't..." He began to deny Reyna's claims when he caught the faintest smell of strawberries.

Opening his eyes he met with Reyna's who were cold as ice.

"Go," her voice was bitter. "See if she's loyal. See if she would honestly trust you and your secret."

Knowing time was short, Cole didn't respond, instead choosing to run across the highway.

Reyna had to be wrong, he thought. There was no way. Maybe Britney was here with Becca and the other girls. Maybe there was a reasonable explanation for all this.

Knowing that without his wallet he couldn't pay and go in through the front, Cole snuck around the back by the dumpster.

He fought the urge to puke, focusing his nose and his ears on the bar inside for Britney.

Her perfume, so strong and familiar he knew without a doubt she was inside. But hearing her giggle along with another guy, he couldn't believe it.

"God Tyson this is so awesome!" She laughed.

"Hey im just glad we can have a night without you know who." Tyson's preppy confident voice was instantly familiar.

"Are you kidding?" Britney shrieked with laughter. " Almost 4 months and he hasn't even suspected it. Too busy working off that stupid dare you forced him to do."

"Hey I had to get him out of the picture somehow. I thought the Gorge would do him in but whatever works!" Tyson roared. "Loser has community service now! No body to cover up!" Cole opened his eyes, stumbling away from the dumpster. He felt sick and it wasn't the dumpster this time.

His heart was pounding in his ears and the wolf within him was waking up, hungry and eager to break down the mental door Cole had built to keep him in. He hardly registered the blood seeping down his fingers as they shifted to claws and his fangs broke past his trembling lips.

"Don't, " he heard a faint voice.

Cole looked up to see Reyna, her golden eyes locked on him.

"Don't, " she repeated, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Cole let loose a low growl at the touch. The betrayal of Britney, the nerve of Tyson, the audacity of Reyna keeping this from him.

"You wanna hunt something, " her voice was measured but held a taste of vengeance, "hunt something that'll fight back."

Without warning, she slapping him clear across the face.

Acting on instinct Cole lunged at her, roaring. She danced out of the way, beckoning him.

"That's it, come on follow me."

She danced light on her feet and Cole snarled, lunging again and she chuckled. Cole hardly noticed the way the moon crested over the building and she sped off back towards the mountain. Feeling the fire from the change coming, he looked back to the bar.

He could let loose right now, he could change and break in the door. He could tear Tyson apart, limb from limb, he could take him down.

A sharp whistle sang through the air and Cole turned his head back to the mountain recognizing Reyna.

He screamed as the fire erupted inside his chest. Falling on all fours, he arched his body changing on its own. As darkness overtook him, he howled to the sky.

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Cole blinked against the brightening morning. His body ached like hell and he stretched one hand forward in the dirt patch.

Groaning with pain, he stared at his filthy arm, he was covered in dirt and leaves.

But not blood.

"Swore you were gonna kill him," Reyna said.

Cole rolled on his back, looking the other way to see Reyna toss him a pair of shorts.

"I wanted to," he croaked, staying flat on his back.

He stared up at the blue sky, disbelief filling him.

"Why?"

"Everyone has secrets." Reyna said. "Some are just as lethal as any gun or pair of fangs."

Cole stayed quiet. Britney was cheating on him. She had been cheating on him for months.

Even before he was bit and changed. Hell if he understood Tyson right the whole reason he was a werewolf was because Tyson wanted to get rid of him.

He sat up straight at that realization. Tyson dared him to go into the Gorge. Not because it would be some stupid bet but because he and Britney were screwing each other and he wanted Cole out of the way!

"Your heart is going a million miles an hour," Reyna said, still calm. "You are going to get yourself killed if you look at this emotionally."

"You expect me not to be emotional?" Cole stared at her in amazement.

"I expect you to be smart. You have no reason to keep up this stupid charade. Dump her. She's clearly moved on. And you can't give out your secret."

"How long have you known?" Cole demanded. "You could have said something before. Weeks ago!"

"I'm not here to be your relationship manager," Reyna snapped. "I'm here to keep you from being stupid and getting us killed!"

"But you knew! And you knew I wanted to keep dating her!" Cole shot back.

"You think I care? I tracked her because she was a risk. Because you were too blind to see she didn't love you."

"She does love me!"

"So why is she cheating on you?"

Cole closed his mouth, Reyna had a point and he hated it.

"I..." He stood up and paced, refusing to look at Reyna. "I don't know."

"You need to realize that she doesn't love you. She never did. It's gonna hurt like a bitch but you have bigger responsibilities now," Reyna said.

Cole finally met her gaze, seeing that while her voice was cold. Her eyes held some sort of softness. She felt bad for him, she was open to his grief, but her duty to keeping the secret overshadowed any pity. He didn't know what to say and he shook his head.

"Dump her. For your own sake," Reyna repeated and sped off.

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It didn't take long for Cole to find the others at First Fries. In a short defeated tone, Cole explained what happened.

"I'm sorry bro," Mason slapped Cole's shoulder. "Are you sure you heard Tyson? Are you sure she's cheating on you?"

"Of course I am!" Cole shouted.

"It doesn't even matter. How would you say you found out?" Andy asked. "Hi I eavesdropped on you using my werewolf hearing?"

"Why does he have to explain anything?" Tyler asked.

"I can't just dump her. Not without a reason," Cole argued.

"Course you can. She's a cheating bitch," Tyler shrugged.

"You should talk to her," Mason suggested.

"I think you're missing the point. Cheating or not. He dumps her there has to be a reason," Andy insisted. "One that doesn't tell the whole school we turn into werewolves every month!"

"I don't think anyone would suspect us of being werewolves," Cole pointed out. "People break up and no one suspects that."

"That is true," Mason agreed.

"I just can't believe it," Cole put his head in his hands. "We've been together almost two years. Why?"

"Why do girls cheat in the first place?" Tyler rolled his eyes. "Cause they're crazy and don't know a good thing when they see it."

"You could always catch her in the act," Andy said. "That way you aren't the bad guy."

"I don't care about being the bad guy. I care about the fact my girlfriend is cheating on me!" Cole moaned.

"Speak of the devil," Andy gestured up.

Cole looked in the direction he glared in, seeing Britney Becca and the other girls walk in. They laughed and giggled like they typically did and Cole's blood boiled at the sight.

How the hell could she act so giddy while cheating on him?

Ignoring his friends' protests he stood up and marched over to Britney.

"Can I talk to you?" He asked, his tone sharper than he wanted it to be.

Britney, startled by his abruptness, brushed back her hair and raised an eyebrow.

"I guess so?" She walked away from the table and Cole followed.

"Where were you last night?" He asked.

"Excuse me? Are you my mother?" She demanded.

"We've been together for two years. You love me. Don't you?"

"Of course I love you," she said, but the words sounded hollow and Cole felt his heart shatter.

"You know before last night I wouldn't have even questioned you. But for some reason today I can't."

"What are you talking about?" She placed her arms around his neck, coming in close. "You know you're the only guy for me."

Cole turned his head away, fighting that cloying strawberry perfume. God how could he have found that attractive? It just made his stomach flip and he pushed her arms down.

"I know about last night. I know about Tyson."

Her eyes went wide as he whispered.

"What about him?" She asked, her voice wavered as she tried to fake being naive.

"I know you were at the bar. I know you were with him. I just want to know- why?"

Britney looked away, not speaking and Cole grabbed her face, turning her back to him. Gazing into her blue eyes, he realized the light in them was long gone and that Reyna had been right. Britney didn't love him.

"You haven't been there for me-" she began and he shook his head.

"No, no. That's bullshit."

"You've been the one lying. I looked up your volunteer group," she snapped. "It doesn't exist. What does exist is that tramp Reyna."

"What is your deal?" Cole shot back. "There is nothing going on with me and Reyna! You're the one who's cheating!"

Cole stepped back, hearing the audible gasps of the others in the diner. He didn't mean to yell, to cause a scene but now everyone was watching them.

Britney flipped her hair and adjusted her shirt. She sneered, leaning into Cole.

"It's not cheating. If I never wanted you in the first place."

She pushed back Cole, turning to face him again.

"We're through Cole. You've been lying for months. I didn't cheat on you. Your secrets were more precious than me. You pushed me away. And if I found comfort in someone else you have no one to blame but yourself."

Cole was frozen in place as she turned away, joining Becca and the others, laughing and talking as if their relationship meant nothing. He couldn't believe it. In one conversation she had hurt him more than any transformation had. He swallowed nothing but air as he stumbled outside, only vaguely aware of his friends calling for him.

Cole couldn't understand, it didn't make sense. How the hell had he missed it? Four months. Four months they had been together.

He looked up, hearing the distinct roar of sports bikes and growled.

Tyson.

This was all his fault!

He ignored his fangs piercing his lips and the blood from his cuticles as Tyson rolled into the parking lot.

"You," he snarled, marching up to the pretty rich boy.

"Hey Cole how's-

Before he could finish, Cole decked him. The crunch of bone on bone was satisfying as Tyson fell in a heap.

"Cole!" Britney screamed from behind them.

Cole looked behind him to see that Britney and the others had come out.

Mason pushed her side, coming to Cole.

"Bro your eyes!" He hissed.

Cole shut his eyes, not even realizing they had shifted as Tyler and Andy checked on Tyson.

"He's out but alive," Andy said, feeling for a pulse.

"What are you thinking?" Tyler asked. "You could have killed him!"

"So what?" Cole snarled.

"Bro let's go," Mason said, pulling him as Britney pushed past them to see Tyson.

"Someone's get some ice!" She yelled.

Rolling him onto her lap, Tyson's entire right side of his face looked like it had been hit by a truck, quickly swelling and turning purple.

"Cmon," Tyler insisted.

As the boys pulled Cole away, he fumed. How the hell could they pull him away? Tyson deserved that punch and more! Why couldn't he just cut loose? Why did he have to be in control all the time?

As they climbed into the truck, he kept his eyes fixated on Britney who pleaded with Tyson to wake up.

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"Nice job controlling your temper," Reyna smirked.

All five of them were at the look out point. Word had spread quickly about both the break up and Cole knocking Tyson out.

"All I did was punch him," Cole muttered.

"Yeah and broke his jaw," Reyna said.

"They're broke up. Who cares," Mason said.

"You're stronger than you think," Reyna repeated. "You could have killed him with a punch."

"Hes lucky that'd all he got," Cole growled.

"And I thought I was blood thirsty."

"Look I dint think they're going to be hanging out. So does it matter in the long run?" Tyler asked.

"Suppose not."

"Awesome. So now what?" Mason asked.

"We get our boy here drunk off his ass," Tyler clapped a hand on Coles back. "No better cure for a cheating whore than a couple of beers!"

"Yeah remember we tried?" Andy rolled his eyes. "Nothing works. We have too high of a metabolism. Hooray for being a werewolf. We can't even get drunk."

"I wouldn't say that," Reyna shrugged. "Believe me, you think werewolves haven't figured out how to get wasted?"

"You told us no," Tyler said.

"I told you a lot of things," Reyna said. "You weren't ready. You probably aren't still. But in light of our poor dear wolf who's broken hearted, I think I'll help you out tonight."

"Tonight?" Mason asked.

"Meet here tonight. And uh make plans to be out late. Lie and tell your families you'll be out over night. Where were going is a bit far."

With a smirk and a whiff of pine in the air, Reyna fled into the woods.

"Far?" Andy wondered. "Where the hell is she taking us?"

\*\*\*\*\*

After coming up with a last minute excuse to go to the city, the boys arrived back at the lookout point with overnight bags.

"Where the hell are we going?" Tyler asked.

"Its a surprise," Reyna chuckled as she stepped out from behind a tree.

"I don't feel like surprises," Cole grumbled.

"Trust me," she smirked. "You'll like this one."

"Well we got the truck gassed up but I have a feeling we aren't road tripping," Mason said.

"Youd be right. But you'll want to strip and carry your bag. You'll need to look half decent where we're going and to get there in time you'll have to run fast."

"Great," Cole muttered.

He wasn't bothered by stripping but he didn't feel much like running for kicks out to some random mountaintop. He wanted to either kick back with some pizza and beer, despite his inability to get wasted, or go tear off Tyson's head.

But he was here so he might as well go along with Reyna's plan. Whatever the hell it was.

"How far is it?" Andy asked as he shouldered his bag.

"Yeah I mean we've run far but you make it sound like it's crazy far," Mason added.

"Just follow me," Reyna turned and sprinted.

Cole shook his head and followed the soft scent of pine amd earth through the trees. He didn't falter as Reyna cut north, away from thier usual territory.

Typically these woods would be echoing with cheers and shouts from his boys, but Cole looked behind him, seeing as hard as they ran, they were silent. Even Reyna hadn't made a quip or sarcastic remark. The only sounds in the forest were the cracking of broken sticks and the sigh of falling dirt. They ran so quick and nimble, hardly any other animal stirred in their presence. After about two hours of running, Reyna began slowing down, pausing to sniff the air and then sprinting forward. Cole took in a breath, but noticed nothing different. Slowly she waited longer at each stop until she stopped completely at a waterfall.

"You brought us out here to swim?" Andy was aghast at the idea.

"Seriously? That's what you think?" Reyna groaned. "No I brought you here to refresh. Where we're going is down the hill. But you should probably not reek like dogs. At least if you want to impress."

"Impress? Impress who?" Tyler asked.

Reyna gave a coy smile and disappeared around the waterfall with a laugh.

Cole slipped into the pool of frothing water, noting Reyna's shadow behind the thin cascade. He shook his head as he rinsed himself clean of sweat and dirt alongside his friends and changed into street clothes.

Reyna stepped out, wearing a surprisingly sexy low cut black top and blue jeans. Cole knew that he had seen her in less, hell less than ten minutes ago she'd been straight up naked. Something about the way the top hugged her frame and flared at her hips though, it made him weak in a way he'd never experienced before.

"Follow me," she smiled, jogging at a casual pace.

Cole and the others followed, realizing they were in a new city, larger and brighter than the one they lived in. Even with as late as it was, there were still hundreds of people out and about, cars flying down the streets and a general upbeat attitude.

Reyna led the boys through the crowd, tying her hair up in a messy bun, eventually coming to a decrepit looking building.

She rapped her knuckles on the splintering wood as the boys shared concerned looks.

"Did you bring me somewhere to get murdered?" Cole asked.

"Oh please," she rolled her eyes. "If I wanted you dead, I would have killed you months ago."

"That's comforting," Andy muttered.

The door cracked open, a chain holding it back as a gravelly voiced man spoke.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"We're here for a good time," Reyna replied.

"Not interested," the voice snapped back.

"You sure?" Reyna countered, her eyes glowing.

Cole looked between her and the darkness beyond the crack. He was about to speak when he saw the faint yellow glow beyond the crack. The door was quickly shut and he heard the chain drop. The door opened fully again and Reyna chuckled.

"You've grown soft, come on guys."

Reyna walked in, the darkness quickly swallowing her and the boys went to follow.

"I want proof," the man towered above the door frame, baring entry.

"Come on boys, hurry up," Reyna's voice drifted out.

Realizing what the man meant, Cole turned to his friends flashing his eyes their golden sheen and they nodded, following suit. The man stepped aside, letting them in.

"I can't see anything," Mason complained.

"Use your eyes," Reyna's voice was light and as usual exasperated, Cole had the feeling she expected them to know automatically what was happening but how could they?

Regardless, he followed her instructions, seeing the unlit hallway now clear as day. It was barren but tuning into his other senses, he could hear music and dancing at the other end behind a door.

"We're going to a club?" Tyler asked. "Why not the one by our place? Down the hill?"

"Oh Tyler," Reyna shook her head, looking back at the boys. "There's a reason."

She pushed the door opened and Cole blinked at the explosion of light and sound.

It was certainly a club, but not like any other club he'd ever been in.

Hundreds of people were dancing to the loud bass that shook the walls, neon lights were bouncing crazily, smoke drifted along the ground and at one end was a packed bar with more people clutching brightly colored drinks.

Cole would think it was an ordinary club except for the fact that the drinks were held by thick clawed hands. When the smoke on the floor was kicked up, everyone was barefoot, just like he, Reyna and the boys were. Lastly every time the strobe lights bounced off of people's faces their eyes glowed, like a dog during a flash picture.

"Wolves," Andy whispered, even through the chaotic nature, Cole heard him clear as a bell.

"Damn right," Reyna shook her shoulders, "God it's been so long since I swung by!"

The boys followed her to the side of the club where there were several large booths. They all sat down and Reyna gestured to the club.

"I don't get it. I thought wolves were.." Tyler trailed off.

"Rabid, wild, not really into this," Andy finished.

"I never said that," Reyna said.

"But the Gorge-"

"Those are rabid, doesn't mean all are," Reyna shrugged. "And before you round on the territory bit, this doesn't belong to one pack. This is just a stop, a break, sort of a meet point between all territories."

"So it's neutral, like Switzerland?" Mason asked.

Reyna chuckled, nodding.

"I wasn't going to bring you guys here yet. You still need to learn control and all that but Cole needed an out."

"Thanks," Cole sighed, propping himself up on an elbow. "Don't know if I'm up for dancing though."

"Oh who said you were dancing," Reyna popped an eyebrow as she waved someone over.

"Oh holy-" Andy's mouth dropped as Mason whistled.

A bombshell beautiful model of a woman walked up to the table in nothing but a blue mini dress that had a slit down the middle. She had thick curly platinum white hair and pale skin. Her makeup was heavy with gold and blue colors accentuating her glowing eyes and white canines.

"Hello," she purred, stepping on the table and twirling.

"Stripper?" Tyler asked, his eyes noticing the lack of a bra under the open backed dress. It looked like only a few strands held the material in place and in a way that made her breasts pop.

"Come on guys, this is for Cole," Reyna pulled on Mason's arm and got up from the table.



"Uh, I don't know if I want..." Cole tried to protest but Reyna had already vanished into the crowd.

He looked at his friends who shrugged as the woman continued to dance on the table.

"Drinks?" Mason asked.

"This is a place full of wolves, maybe they have something that'll take the edge off," Tyler suggested.

Cole shook his head. He didn't feel comfortable here, yes the woman in front of him was a drop dead knockout, but something was bothering him.

And for once, it wasn't Brittney.

Glancing at his friends though, he realized they were excited about this new place and possibilities. Hell Andy hadn't taken his eyes off the dancer since she got up on the table.

Knowing he couldn't deny his friends what little happiness they could get, he relented.

"Alright, get me something good!"

Mason laughed, punching Tyler in the arm as they walked off, dragging an already drooling Andy behind them.

Cole looked up at the seductive curve of the dancer's hips, biting his lip.

Maybe he could get excited about this place too.

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An hour later Cole and the guys were on the floor, rocking out to the beat of the DJ. The stripper had been nice to look at earlier, but Cole had realized he wasn't ready for that kind of fun anytime soon. Being on the floor however was more than enough with dozens of thick sweaty bodies rubbing up against each other. It was a good time and Cole had completely forgotten about Britney and her cheating ways.

Swaying on the dance floor, he was jostled by yet another beautiful blonde bombshell. She wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning in close.

Even with the thunderous beat of the music, he heard her whisper clear as a bell.

"How about you and I go in the back for some fun?"

Cole stepped back, snapping out of the haze he'd been in. He blinked as the girl furrowed her brow in confusion.

"What is it?" She asked.

"I... I don't..." Cole shook his head.

Fun. Fun was something he imagined with Britney. He wasn't stupid, he knew exactly what fun meant to this girl. As he tried to come up with an excuse his gaze slid over to Reyna who was grinding up against another guy.

Her hair draped across her face, thick and wet with sweat and her lips turned up in a sly smile as she wrapped one hand behind her onto the guy that she danced with. The lights flashed above her and Cole was struck by the beauty he'd obviously missed.

What was he doing?

"I'm sorry, I gotta go," he said, pushing aside the blonde and towards Reyna.

Something about the way the blue and red lights danced on her figure and how relaxed and confident she moved, it was as if everything fell into place. Her golden eyes looked up, clearly

not seeing Cole and she turned towards her dance partner. Just as he was about to grab her shoulder, to dance or talk, he didn't know yet, he paused.

Reyna locked into a passionate deep kiss with the other guy who wrapped his own clawed hands around her ass, lifting her up slightly.

Cole quickly turned away, pushing past other dancers and ignoring his friends as the song ended.

He pushed past the guard and out into the dark hallway, breathing heavily. His heart dropped and he didn't even understand why! What the hell was he even doing? Reyna had made it clear that she had no interest and with Britney cheating on him was this really the right time? Why was he so attracted all the sudden? He'd known Reyna for months! Trained with her, learned all the secrets of being a werewolf from her. He'd seen her naked only a few hours ago, not to mention every full moon! Why was he suddenly so into her? Why did he want to hug that sleek supple shape, hold her small face and run his hands through her hair?

"Hey, you alright?"

Of course she would follow.

Cole turned to see Reyna with her typical judging eyebrows.

"Sorry, felt queasy."

"Uh huh," she pursed her lips, clearly not buying Cole's weak excuse. "Your boys told me you came to get me then bailed."

He rolled his eyes as started walking out.

"It's nothing. I'm just gonna head home. Thanks for..." he struggled to come up with the right words.

"Dude, don't be ditching now. You got all night. Don't tell me the party animal has lost his stuff since getting bit."

Cole shook his head. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He didn't know what to even say. He knew Reyna had pulled this off to get his mind off Britney and it had worked but something else was coming up now.

"Who was that?" he asked, refusing to look at her directly. "That you were dancing with?"

"I don't know," Reyna's response was flippant, brushing it off.

Cole bit his lip as he paused at the door to outside the building. Did he want the truth? Did he even want to admit what he was thinking?

"Why'd you kiss him?"

Reyna's laugh was brief but loud and Cole turned around to face her.

"Are you kidding me? What are you my mother?"

"You just... never mentioned you had a boyfriend."

"I don't genius. I don't even know his name."

Cole didn't respond and she waved off the question.

"Look I'm a werewolf. My options for fun are limited. That's what it is for us. Just like during runs on the mountain, sometimes you gotta let the wolf out."

"So the wolf wants to make out? With random people?" Cole was even more lost now on what he felt.

"Animals, all animals, even humans, want to feel a connection. Why would a werewolf be any different? Kissing a dude in a nightclub does not make him my boyfriend. I'm not bound to anyone. You know that," Reyna explained.

"So did you want to kiss him or not? You talk about a connection. Letting the wolf out. But you laugh and say you've got no one?" Cole asked.

Reyna walked forward, dropping her smile and taking Cole's hand.

"Just because I kissed him doesn't mean I have a connection. I want to kiss Chris Evans. But I probably would have nothing in common with him. There's a difference between a momentary flash and a genuine connection. Something deeper than a random kiss in a nightclub."

Cole didn't speak but he couldn't pull his hand away from Reyna either. His heart was pounding and he didn't know what to do. He knew there was still so little he knew about being a werewolf and he wondered if this was just one more thing he'd have to learn to live with. Was this sudden urge to take Reyna just the wolf inside him wanting a connection? Without Britney he didn't have a girlfriend anymore. But to be honest he never had such a strong urge to hold Britney than he did now for Reyna. Even his parents or his friends, nothing drove him like Reyna.

"Okay," Cole's voice sounded hollow. Okay was all he could say as thoughts about Reyna spun in his head.

"Cmon. I think Mason's wasted. You're going to have to carry him home." Reyna's lips turned up in a signature grin as she guided Cole back to the club.

He let Reyna take him back down the hall and just as she was about to open the door, Cole drew his hand back. Reyna stopped short of the door too as she locked eyes with Cole.

Goosebumps ran up Cole's arms and he nodded, understanding Reyna's silence.

Something was happening.

He closed his eyes and inhaled, taking in every scent in the dark hallway.

Muffled music still pounded from the other side of the door and the cheering of the crowd was still exuberant, excited from the party. He turned his ear towards the other end of the hallway, hearing nothing but the occasional car driving down the pavement. It was normal, ordinary, so why did he feel like something was off?

He opened his eyes and shrugged as Reyna frowned. Whatever he felt, she was clearly sensing it too.

Despite feeling off, he reached for the doorknob when there was a massive bang behind him.

Cole whipped around to see the other end of the hallway was lit up by the streetlights outside, the door knocked down and three guys fighting with the bouncer.

Cole looked back to Reyna who snarled, her fangs bared and claws fully extended.

"Hunters!"

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"Hunters?" Cole gaped as Reyna shoved him aside.

"Get out!" She commanded as gunfire went off in the suddenly claustrophobic hallway.

Cole ripped open the door and ducked inside the club as Reyna roared.

"Mason! Tyler!" He screamed, pushing through the crowd. "Andy where are you?"

Before he could find his friends the door fell in and Reyna, the bouncer and others fell into the club.

Reyna's ears were laid back, her eyes wide with fury and she snarled, her face covered in blood. The scent filled the room and other wolves locked onto the scene.

Human.

Three men in heavy looking leather jackets and jeans with burly guns stood up, glaring at the crowd. The music dulled and Cole felt the energy in the room change.

"Filthy bitches," one man spat and raised his gun.

The room turned into a nightmare! Cole searched the room seeing more men knock in other doors armed to the teeth. They started firing indiscriminately as wolves either ran or fought.

"Andy!" Cole shouted, recognizing his friends crouched behind a barstool.

"Cole! What the hell is going on?" he asked as Cole tripped and fell into him.

"Reyna called them hunters. We gotta go!"

"Where is she?" Andy asked.

"She'll be fine! Let's go!" Cole shouted, grabbing his arm and running. "Tyler!"

Cole stopped as Tyler stumbled towards him, holding his arm.

"I thought we were invincible," Tyler gasped as Cole saw blood gushing through his fingers.

He had been shot in the bicep and it wasn't healing, at least not quickly.

"What the hell?" Andy repeated as Tyler leaned on him for support.

"Anyone seen Mason?" Cole asked.

"He went to get a drink before..." Tyler gestured wildly at the carnage around them.

"Go, I'll find him!" Cole ordered as another wolf howled and collapsed next to them. "Watch each other!"

Andy nodded and they both headed to the opposite side of the club and Cole bit his lip, panicking. This is what Reyna must have been talking about when she had told them to be prepared to fight. He took a deep breathe, inhaling now the sickly smell of blood and fear instead of alcohol and fun. Turning in circles and diving away from gunfire, he finally looked onto Mason's scent and tracked him to a corner.

"C'mon man you good?"

"I don't know," Mason was shaking and Cole's stomach dropped at the look of blood on his hands.

Clearly Mason had to claw off an attacker and by the look of the body in front of them, Cole guessed it was a hunter. The man was clawed up the stomach and face, blood pouring in rivers around his body and the smell of rot had already started. What shocked Cole the most was the defiant crunch in his eyebrows and vacant expression clearly seeing nothing now. Cole looked away from how tightly the hunter still gripped a pistol in one hand and a dagger in the other.

"Cmon Mason let's go," Cole pulled his friend up who rocked in fear and shock and stepped over the body.

Mason winced and Cole felt wetness on his shirt. Poor Mason had been sliced on the side of his stomach and the movement caused him to bleed more rapidly.

As much as Cole wanted to scream and run, he gritted his teeth and let Mason fall on him, guiding them both along the wall. He couldn't let Mason fall and be killed and he couldn't afford for either of them to stay where they were.

Just as they reached a door, to where Cole didn't care, he took another breath and he recognized the second most deadly smell that night.

Looking over the raging fight, the flashing lights and screams of both wolf and man, gasoline filled Cole's senses and than an orange burst went off.

The club quickly turned into an inferno, flames leaping up from the bar and traveling quickly. Screaming, Cole jammed against the door, finding it was barricaded from the other side.

"Cole," Mason coughed, collapsing.

"Mason!" Cole screamed as his friend slumped to the blood and glass soaked floor.

He shook Mason repeatedly, screaming as smoke filled the air and the fights disappeared behind the haze. Cole looked up, baring his fangs as a figure stepped forward. He could hardly recognize anything about him except for the barrel of the rifle that came to rest in front of his face. Cole growled, anger shaking his whole frame as he stared up at the looming hunter.

"Abomination," the voice was thick, older and cracked with malice.

"Speak for yourself!" a second voice rang out as the rifle swung away from Cole and went off. He briefly saw another figure launch itself at the hunter and tackle him down. A guttural roar echoed in his ears as they fought.

Cole coughed and fell on top of Mason just as Reyna came through the fog, blood soaked and tossing away a rifle. He closed his eyes, feeling a strange sense of relief as she revealed a bloody smile.

"What would you do without me."

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Cole blinked slowly, his eyes felt like they were burning. Looking up he saw the dark sky and glittering stars. His chest ached and a deep breath turned into a coughing fit that forced him to sit up in pain.

"You alright?" Reyna asked as Cole's lungs sucked in clear air gratefully.

"What the hell happened?" He croaked as he leaned back.

Feeling another body on his back, he looked to see Andy was coughing and Tyler was already standing.

"Mason!" Cole gasped, remembering what had happened.

"He's fine," Reyna paced back and forth, gesturing to Mason who sat away from the group, his arms wrapped around himself.

"You never do get over your first."

"Your first what?" Tyler asked, stalking towards Reyna.

"You know what," Reyna rolled her eyes.

"His first kill," Cole said softly.

"No," Andy shook his head. "He didn't-"

"He did," Cole said. "I saw it."

"Doesn't matter. We have bigger problems than the moral quandary of kill or be killed," Reyna said.

"Seriously? What's bigger than that?" Andy asked.

"How about the fact that Hunters found us?" Reyna asked. "We're only a few miles south of town. Thirty minutes on the freeway and they'll find us!"

"Are you saying they'll follow us?" Tyler asked.

"They ain't in town for a picnic!"

"So what do we do?" Andy asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Reyna chuckled. "Grab your shit and run for the border. Once we cross the range to the desert there's no way they can track us."

"We can't run away! We're sixteen!" Andy argued.

"We're also werewolves! We can survive."

"There has to be another option," Cole stood up, putting himself between Andy and Reyna.

"You won't like it."

Cole said nothing and walked away, shaking his head. He hardly heard Tyler and Andy arguing with Reyna as he leaned down next to Mason.

"You okay?"

"I think I'm healing," Mason said, his voice was hollow, dead and he stared out blankly at the city expanse.

"Not what I meant. But I'm glad," Cole said.

"I can see his face," Mason took a shaky breath. "I can sense how angry he was. I can feel my claws in his chest."

Mason looked to Cole and fresh tears were cutting a path on his grimy ash covered face. Cole's heart shattered at the broken look on his face and he embraced Mason tightly. As his friend rocked with tears and muffled cries, Cole's mind raced with what they could do. Unfortunately there was just no answer.

"If you're done, we need to go."

Cole looked up at Reyna who was standing with her arms crossed. He finally took notice that somehow she had hauled them out of the burning club to the woods, injured herself at that, and still had blood on her.

As he released Mason Cole spoke.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Seriously Reyna. You got us out. Are you okay? You got blood well... everywhere."

"I healed," Reyna was blunt. "Someone had to save your ass."

The boys stood up and Mason walked away, joining Tyler and Andy. Cole stepped forward, intending to comfort Reyna but she held up a hand.

"You don't want to leave. I get that. But you better be ready. Once Hunters know where a pack marks their territory, they don't leave."

"I'd ask how you know but I got a feeling you've been here."

"Let me show you something."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and ran. Cole whistled to the others and they ran after her. Thankfully it seemed everyone was healed and able to run without help.

It was only a quick jog around a treeline and Reyna stopped at the edge overlooking the city. She pointed to where three firetrucks and dozens of cop cars and paramedics surrounded a smoking building. Cole quickly recognized it as the club and he felt cold.

"Hunters found us. They slaughtered us. And then they burned the evidence. They do this. And they have people in position to make it go away. They'll be no report on this. They'll be no corpses. They'll be no record," Reyna explained. "They'll disappear. And they will do it again. And again and again!"

"Oh my God," Andy said.

"There is no God," Reyna's bitterness was clear.

"Why didn't you say anything before?" Tyler asked.

"You weren't ready to know!" Reyna shot back. "You've barely held your own against me. You think you're ready to take on trained killers?"

"Who said we're taking them on?" Andy stepped forward. "Why do we have to fight?"

"Good Lord you are an idiot," Reyna shook her head. "Those Hunters found a club full of werewolves. They didn't kill us all. What do you think they'll do?"

"They'll follow us," Cole said.

Reyna nodded and Mason shook his head.

"How could they even find us? I mean it's not like we're out there flashing our fangs!"

"It's not about flash. It's about patterns."

"What possible pattern could we leave? We haven't even killed anyone," Tyler argued.

"You haven't," Cole said. "But I have. And we all quit football. We've all basically ditched being in town. We spend more time in the woods than even Rangers."

"You're finally catching on," Reyna half smiled at how quickly Cole had put everything together.

"So you're saying that us ditching football and Friday nights at Fry's is a code for being a wolf?" Andy asked. "That doesn't make any sense."

"To most it wouldn't. But to someone who's looking to kill a wolf? You're looking for the weird shit."

There was no response to Reyna's rebuttal and Cole sighed in defeat. Before he could ask what they should do next, she turned and sprinted away.

Looking back to the burned skeletal remains of the club, Cole felt his heart drop. How could he be so stupid to think he'd finally gotten a hand on this werewolf business? Looking back at his friends, they shrugged with little regard, but he could see the pain and fear in their eyes.

He turned away from the club and the lingering smell of smoke and without waiting for anyone, took off after Reyna.

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It didn't take long to get back to town. Reyna however had vanished, masking her scent. With a handy spare set of clothes and a river, the boys were able to clean up and head home with little question from their families.

With the next two days being the weekend and Reyna nowhere to be seen, the boys decided to stay home and play video games, a welcome departure from their adventure in the woods. But even the allure of gorgeous graphics and intense thrills hardly distracted them. Sunday afternoon Cole threw his controller in frustration, shattering his TV.

"Yo, what happened?" Andy asked, coming into the living room with a bowl of chips.

"He was winning, you got me," Tyler grumbled, tossing his own controller down.

"What are we doing?" Cole asked. "Video games?"

"What do you expect? Reyna's nowhere to be found. Not to mention the you know who's could be running around the woods," Andy said.

"My parents are gone. We can talk about it," Cole rolled his eyes.

"OK fearless leader. What's your plan?" Andy asked, falling onto the couch next to a subdued Mason.

Ever since the club, he'd been quiet. Cole wanted Mason to say something. But knowing the nightmares he had when he went on a rampage through town, he didn't push the subject.

"We should look for Reyna," Tyler suggested. "I know the risks but she's alone. What if she got caught? Or worse?"

Cole's stomach dropped. He couldn't imagine Reyna gone. He still wrestled with his feelings from before the attack.

"Are you kidding? She's either eating those Hunters or she's halfway across the country," Andy said. "She wrecked those guys in the club. I ain't worried about her."

The boys sat in silence as they mused over what they could do. The fact was though, they had no plan. Reyna was right after all. Cole had searched the web for any news on the fire and nothing had come up. Not a blip or a passing mention. These Hunters, whoever they were, were pros.

Cole looked up at the sound of shattering glass, confused. His parents had gone down the mountain. They wouldn't be back for hours. Who would be upstairs regardless? Then it hit him. Hunters! What if they found him? What if they knew him?

Without even speaking, he leaped over the couch and took the stairs two at a time. He heard his friends behind him, but paid them little attention, calling on his claws and teeth.

"Well aren't you ready to rumble?"

"Reyna?" Cole asked, staring at the girl who had just broken his window.

"No, it's Beyonce!" She rolled her eyes and walked past the boys. "Put away your claws. Not like you'd actually use them."

"You broke my window!" Cole followed her down the stairs, indignant at her casual attitude.

"Send me the bill. We have more things to worry about."

"We thought you left?" Tyler said as Reyna walked into the kitchen, casually taking a water out of the fridge.

What was she doing, walking in like she owned the place?

"Oh I did," she popped an eyebrow. "I ran a few hundred miles north. Led the Hunters away. Hopefully."

"But you're back," Andy bit his lip, nervous at the idea.

Reyna took a long drink. She put the bottle down and smiled, locking eyes with me.

"He's a real genius. You should keep him close."

"Can you stop being sarcastic? What are you doing?" Cole asked.

"I came back for you. Obviously. There's some ridiculous itch that's telling me to help you morons," she rolled her eyes. "Even if those Hunters believe my little ruse, there's no guarantee that more won't come this way."

"You want to protect us?" Andy asked.

"Doubt it. She doesn't want to protect us. She wants to turn us into killers." Tyler countered.

"I'm sorry. Do you plan to hug the Hunters? Do you think they'll listen to reason?"

"We aren't monsters!" Tyler shot back.

"You led them away, who's to say they'll even come back?" Andy added.

"I take it back, dump him," Reyna pointed to Andy.

"Guys!" Cole shouted.

He ran his hands through his hair, frustrated at the situation. What the hell was going on? The way that Reyna had snipped at them was normal, but everytime he locked eyes with her, there was something else. Her eyes would soften for a moment, almost with fear and then in a blink it was back to a cold steely resolve. Then he realized something else as he looked at everyone crowded around the small island.



Tyler and Andy were clearly against anything having to do with Hunters and maybe even Reyna herself, he had no idea what to do but Mason had stayed quiet. The lack of any response made Cole afraid.

"Mason-" he started just as his friend turned and left.

"Still not past what happened is he?" Reyna said, her tone barely softer.

"Don't even start," Cole shook his head, chasing after Mason.

Outside Cole saw Mason break into a sprint, quickly disappearing into the treeline at the end of the block. He was about to run after him when Reyna came out, calling to him.

"I wouldn't bother. This is something he has to go through himself. Killing isn't easy."

Cole rounded on her, fuming.

"You'd know wouldn't you? Have some experience?"

"I do what I do to survive. I'm not going to apologize for that!"

"You could have a heart!"

"Have a heart? This isn't some Disney movie. Having a heart will get you killed. If it wasn't for me you would have been barbecued inside that club!"

Cole had no answer for that and said nothing. Reyna walked up to him, lowering her voice.

"Look, I get it. You've been raised in this small town, and you've never had to question your place. You knew who you were. Now you're a wolf. You lie. You go off in the woods. You change. Hell you've killed. Your entire world has shifted. It's scary. But if you don't get a grip, Mason is going to be the least of your problems. You could get killed. Your friends could get killed. I can help you. But only if you want the help."

Cole said nothing still, digesting what she said. He looked at her eyes again, seeing that subtle shift of fear in them. But instantly it was gone. That made Cole even more fearful. What did Reyna have to fear? It wasn't the Hunters, the club massacre was obvious. She wasn't afraid to run, she had gone all the way north, maybe even to the border.

What the hell made Reyna so scared? Because whatever scared her, should absolutely terrify him and the rest of his friends.

"What do I do?" He asked.

"Pray," she said flatly. "Pray and listen."

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It was a fight. A long and ridiculous but ultimately fruitless argument to convince Andy and Tyler they had to listen to Reyna. Mason had no argument and simply agreed when Cole texted him about everything.

The next day after school the boys ran to their typical meeting point in the woods. It was strange to Cole, not having any sort of excuse to give Britney. Hell it was almost freeing the way she didn't seek him out during school or text him about a date night. Of course he spent the day not so subtly searching the halls for Reyna. After everyone had agreed to hear her out she had left, promising to at least look over Mason. Today however she had not come back to school. Cole's heart twisted in his chest when he failed to see or catch her scent among the dozens of students.

She was probably just checking on something, making sure they were safe, he reasoned. Plus it's not like there was anything real between them. Hunters after them was far more important.

Whatever caused them to attack the club, to come after them, it was far bigger than any fleeting feeling he may or may not have had in the hallway.

Despite what he told himself though, Cole couldn't help but push himself faster when he caught Reyna's scent as they neared the cliffside. He glided into the campsite they had built with the others hot on his heels.

He took a deep breath, inhaling the familiar scents of the trees and the abandoned fire pit, cold for the last three days and wondered where Reyna was.

The arms on the back of his neck raised and he ducked as a leg came swinging from behind him.

"Your reaction ain't bad," Reyna smirked as Cole crouched, calling his claws forward.

"Dammit Reyna what the hell?" he asked, straightening up.

The other guys relaxed as well as she circled them. She was dressed in her usual clothes, a sports bra and shorts, bare feet of course for running and Cole was careful to note not only that she was more wolf like but that there were several bruises and cuts on her.

"Unfortunately a fair number of the Hunters followed my trick up north, they left a small group behind. I don't think it'll be a problem though. They don't look like much," Reyna explained.

"So what than?" Tyler asked. "We can't just go killing a bunch of people?"

"We won't, there's only six of them. And to be honest I doubt any of them are real blood thirsty. Maybe one to lead but the rest are well weak."

"And how do you know this?" Andy asked as Reyna paused before him.

"Because I followed them today. Math seemed less important."

"You don't think ditching is going to set off an alarm?" Cole raised an eyebrow.

He practically had to pull Mason by the teeth to school this morning. He figured if they kept up public appearances and a routine they'd be less likely to stick out. After all quitting football may have put them on the Hunters watchlist after the "animal attack".

"Please," she snorted. "I ditch enough for them not to notice."

She narrowed her eyes at Andy, biting her lip and shook her head. Before he could react, she sucker punched Andy. He fell to the ground, howling and holding his chest in pain.

"What the hell?" Tyler yelled, stepping between them.

Cole stepped forward at the same time but Reyna had already sidestepped away closer to Mason who hadn't reacted at all.

"Not a flinch," she said glancing over Mason and then back to Andy who sat on the ground, whimpering.

"You don't want to kill. You don't have the instinct. You're gonna have to learn to be fast. Fast or die."

"What are you doing?" Cole asked, annoyed at her lack of clarification.

"There's only one way to do this since you won't kill and you won't leave. We have to deter any Hunters coming back. That means not letting them leave," she explained and pointed to the woods.

"You want to turn them?" Andy gasped.

"Hell no."

"You can't kill them. Killing them is wrong," Cole said walking forward.

"It wouldn't be my first," Reyna snapped. "Or did you forget who saved your ass?"

"That was different, it was an ambush!" Cole shot back.

"Don't get your panties in a twist," she walked closer to the treeline, dropping her arm. "I couldn't kill them all on my own anyway. There's a third option that you've clearly forgotten."

Cole looked to his friends and back to Reyna not understanding what she was saying. He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Reyna groaned, clearly annoyed by them.

"The Gorge," she said flatly.

"You don't mean..." Tyler trailed off.

"You want to lead them to their death," Andy whispered.

"Took ya a minute didn't it?" she smiled.

"That's still murder," Cole said. "There has to be another way."

"There isn't."

Cole turned in shock at Mason's voice finally breaking.

"There isn't another way," he said, his voice sounded so hollow, so dead after three days of silence. "It's either us or them and we have to choose us."

"Mason..." Andy stood up, walking over to Mason.

Fear and disgust were clear on his face as he shook Mason's shoulders. Cole noticed that ever since he'd spoken, he'd refused to look anyone in the face. Andy let him go with a push and turned on Reyna.

"You cannot think that this absolves you of murder!"

"Murder? This is survival!" She snapped. "You have a choice, you can either fight yourselves or make someone else fight for you. They know we're here! Running was an option before. Now it's not!"

"Why isn't it an option?" Tyler asked, taking a step forward. "Why do we have to engage at all? Why don't we just lay low? Once they realize there's no wolves here they'll move on right?"

"And tell me what happens next month when the moon is full? You think they'll leave after a week? They'll stay for the next moon. They'll track any stories. Including your fearless Alpha and his little trip down Main Street," Reyna shot back. "We have to end this now. While we still hold the advantage!"

"So we just let the wolves in the Gorge eat these Hunters alive. Who's to say that won't lead more Hunters here?" Andy challenged. "Them dying in the Gorge would make news."

"It's us or them. I can't do it alone. Only two of you have killed. And judging by the looks of things neither of you will do it again," Reyna explained, her tone growing more agitated. "This is a weak group. No one will miss them. No one will suspect us. And that's the key. We have to stay out of their way. Even if word got to other Hunters, they know the Gorge and they know it's reputation. They won't risk a full assault."

"How do you know that?" Andy argued. "Do you know them? Did you recognize them? How do you tell if these Hunters are the top of the line best or just rookies?"

"Do not question me!" Reyna snarled, racing up to his face. "There's only six. If they had real legit fear of what's here, of who we are, they would have burned the mountain by now! The stories of the Gorge are beyond us, they are exaggerated and inflated. Not only will this rid us of Hunters it will ensure our anonymity!"

"We're hiding behind the story of the Gorge," Mason added quietly.

"You knew," Cole said.

No wonder Reyna had seemed to eager to check on him. She knew he would be the hardest sell with him being the only other one who kill and with such intensity. She knew the rest of them

were cautious but you really only knew what it was like to kill if you actually well killed. And Cole wasn't in his right mind when he killed so his experience would be clouded.

Mason said nothing but finally met Cole's eyes and he saw tears in his friend's eyes.

"None of you know what it's like," Reyna said, her tone softening. "We could take them ourselves. But if you can't deliver the final blow they will come back. And they will kill us all. The Gorge is protection. Why do you think I stay here."

"We can't agree to this," Andy shook his head. "Cole you gotta say something."

"I..." Cole stuttered at a loss for words.

No matter what way he looked at it there was no right option. Either they killed the Hunters or the wolves in the Gorge did. even if they did run, who was to say more Hunters wouldn't find them. And at sixteen they couldn't exactly get far.

"I can't do this," Andy shook his head and walked away. "I can't be a part of a murder. Even if it's protecting our secret I can't lead people to their death."

Without another word he leaped into the woods, running back to town.

"You need to watch him," Reyna said.

"I don't think he'll want to see you. Either of you." Tyler said after a moment. "I'll talk to him."

He stepped back and looked in the direction where Andy ran. He looked back to Cole and sighed.

"This is just too much man. We... we gotta take a breath."

He turned and ran, slower than Andy did but still vanishing into the woods with haste.

"She came to me last night," Mason explained. "I haven't slept since the club Cole. I've been running the mountain. Everytime I close my eyes I see my claws in his chest. I feel his heart in my hand. I can still smell his corpse rotting."

"I know," Cole said quickly.

"You don't," Reyna said. "Not completely. Your shift. Your mind was buried underneath your wolf. Whatever you remember is only a fraction of what actually happened. Mason saw it completely and he wasn't under a spell or lucid. He was aware. And that is a hell that no one can walk out of in one piece."

"We can't do that," Mason said. "They know we're here. They know there's wolves. It's only a matter of time before they know it's us. We have to end this now."

"So you want to murder them. But have someone else do it?" Cole asked, shocked at his friend's callousness. "How is that better?"

"Those are animals. Reyna said it herself. They gave themselves over to the wolf a long time ago. They buried their humanity," Mason argued. "They don't have to live with this. Not like we would."

"If we had run the first night," Reyna said, "We wouldn't be here. But we can't go back. And the longer we wait the more risk we run of them learning who we are."

Cole bit his lip, pacing in the clearing. Everything lined up but he still hated it.

"Not tonight," he said, simply refusing to look at either one of them. "This is too big to rush."

"Don't wait too long," Reyna said. "The motel is empty. Right now."

Cole nodded, acknowledging her warning for more Hunters and heard her disappear into the woods. He glanced at Mason who shuffled uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he said. "That I wasn't sleeping."

"Don't be," Cole said. "I didn't sleep either."

He looked in the direction of the Gorge. His stomach was twisting itself in knots and he knew it was only going to get worse.

"I have a feeling we won't be sleeping much for the future."

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After failing to convince Andy and Tyler of the logic of Reyna's plan, Cole skipped school Wednesday and went to the woods. Everything was just too crazy. Hell he knew being a werewolf would be, but planning to lure people to their death, even if they were looking to kill him was just too much. Even after explaining the logic of the Gorge, Cole wasn't fully convinced. How could he justify such a plan? Surely there had to be another solution? Maybe he could think of something new while he ran.

He stripped to nothing more than a pair of jean shorts and kneaded the dirt beneath his toes, soaking in the cool feeling. Whatever madness that had consumed his life the past few months, Reyna had been right about one thing. Once he let go and really tuned into the wolf within him, there was nothing more satisfying.

He focused on the treeline ahead and took a breath. It was barely 8am and the woods were already teeming with activity. He pushed off, diving into the heaviest part of the forest, seeing every branch, bush and minor animal as if they stood still. Leaping over fallen logs and squeezing between overgrown brush, he took pleasure in the lack of trails. No trails meant no chance of people, Hunters included, finding him.

The run was exhilarating, freeing as sweat poured down his back and he took deeper breaths. His feet practically sailed over rocks and dirt, accustomed to the rough terrain and his hands seemed to know where to grab before he did as he raced up trees and abandoned the floor. Before he knew it, he was soaring over the treetops, leaping and grabbing in a rhythmic pattern. Should he have been in school? Should he have been coming up with a plan? Sure. But in the moment when he sucked in a grateful breath of nothing but crisp mountain air, he could think of nothing else.

Seeing that he was coming up on the river, he slowed and dropped back to the forest floor, windmilling his arms in a grateful stretch. Cole glanced around, recognizing the invisible line that Reyna had marked as her territory. Subtle scratch marks healing in old bark and her scent permeated the air. Cole knew that beyond the river there was only a mile until the Gorge and the wolves at the bottom. Reyna wanted a wide berth between her and them, he remembered. She had her slice of the mountain and anything beyond it was too dangerous to push.

He walked along the river, putting a hand over a newer claw mark and realized it wasn't one of hers but his. He smiled at it as his claws matched perfectly in the healing imprint. Reyna had done so much. She had risked her life, her secret and her territory for them. There had been nothing in it for her. Sure Reyna said that protecting them protected her but judging by the way she fought, she didn't need much protection. She could fight, she knew how to hide and despite acting like she didn't care she had come back.

Reyna had come back. Even after running all the way to the border she had turned around for them. She had risked her own discovery. Hell she was willing to kill for them.

Shaking his head, Cole knew that it was only fair to follow her into this fight. She had asking nothing of them this whole time. She had taught them everything and now facing the Hunters

she only asked for them to lead the Hunters away. It was the least he could do. The least any of them could do.

Hearing a twig crack and the rustle of bushes, Cole whipped around to find Reyna herself walking up the riverbed.

"Cole," she greeted with a smile.

"Reyna," he breathed, relieved that she didn't seem to be in a rush or panic.

"Skipping school?" she asked as she knelt to drink water. "That's not like you."

"I had to think," he said as he sat down.

"You can't convince your boys can you?"

"No."

She didn't answer, instead choosing to sit on a boulder. Cole looked at her, marveling again at how beautiful she looked, even in nothing but shorts and a sports bra. The cuts and bruises were long gone now of course, healing without a trace. She shook her hair back and tilted her head up to the sun, closing her eyes in bliss. Cole felt his heart skip a beat as he remembered everything she had done.

"I don't think I ever thanked you," he said.

"For which time?" her lips turned up, her eyes still closed.

Cole wondered how it would feel to have those lips against his. They were so small but he knew how snappy she was with them.

"For everything," he said, looking away from her lips.

Unfortunately he found her long legs to be just as intoxicating. He'd seen them a thousand times, hell he'd been knocked down by them more than once but the shine of sweat on them and the pulsing of muscles as she crossed her ankles made his stomach flip.

"You didn't have to tell us anything. You didn't have to show us control or let us in your territory. You definitely didn't have to take us out to the club. Hell you saved us from the club. You've been helping us out for months and I've never been grateful for it."

"I told you," she opened her eyes and looked at him. "I'm doing this for my own safety. You get caught, it's only a matter of time for me."

Cole took a sharp breath as he looked in her eyes. They were golden of course, she hardly masked her wolf traits in the woods and they had a fire crackling in them. They were focused, determined and yet comforting. He knew that he could trust her, even before he really understood what it meant to be a wolf, he had seen something familiar in her eyes and wanted to follow her.

How had he not noticed though? How had he failed to see the love in them, the softness and care that she had. As powerful as she was, Reyna at the end of the day was still just someone like him. Hiding a secret and putting on a front. There was snark but there was also fear. There was something as ridiculous as it was, human in her eyes.

"So why didn't you run?" He asked. "Not just this weekend but before. When I got bit, when I turned, you could have ran. you didn't have to save me, you didn't have to protect us. You made it to the border and back in one weekend. I don't exactly doubt your ability to disappear."

Reyna leaned forward now, uncrossing her ankles and pointing to him with a clawed finger. Her voice was soft, with no hint of sarcasm or snark. Cole swore she was almost breaking when she spoke.

"Isn't it obvious? There's something more here. I've been on my own for so long. But you... you drew me back."

Cole didn't respond, instead realizing what he had been feeling since the club, she had been feeling since they met. She had just been responsible enough to not let it distract her. He and the others were brand new werewolves and she had to teach them. She had been warning him about Brittney the entire time. Despite her claim that it was for the safety of their secret, maybe it was more than that.

Cole looked down, afraid of the heat in his cheeks as everything clicked. How could he have been so dumb? So blind? Reyna's reputation as a loner was obvious, her attitude put off everyone. Yet she had chosen to help him. She had opened her world, her heart. And he'd done nothing about it. Sure he had been dating Britney but to be honest ever since that first night on the cliff he had failed to have any long lasting spark with her. With Reyna though? All he could do was think about her. He searched for her in school, he followed her through the woods, he trusted her in a way he never could with Britney. From the first thing in the morning to the long nights he thought little of anything else besides her.

Realizing he hadn't responded, Cole turned away, feeling his cheeks grow warm.

"I didn't... I don't..." He mumbled and she chuckled.

He looked back at her, her laugh was deep, full of life and energy. Not the high pitched trill that Britney or so many other girls had. It wasn't like any of them. She threw her whole body into it, unashamed of her expression and amusement.

"Don't worry about it. If we survive, maybe we can catch a movie," she joked.

With that, Reyna stood up, stretching her limbs and looking beyond the river. Cole bit his lip as he realized he didn't care about the danger anymore. He wanted her. No, he needed her.

Whatever was happening he didn't want her to risk her life for him anymore. He didn't want to see her dead like the wolves in the club. He didn't want the next time there was blood on her for it to be hers.

Hell he was an Alpha right? And Alphas protected their pack. Despite her attitude and self preservation he knew she belonged with their pack. Not just their pack, but his pack.

"I'm going to run the territory. See how much I can push our border," she said. "Care to join?"

Cole's heart jumped. It wasn't the first time, but knowing what he knew now, hearing her say our border made him smile.

"Sure."

Without hesitation she sped off, mud flying in her wake. He took a breath and followed.

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They had run all day. And it was honestly refreshing in a way he hadn't expected. Reyna had led him down the river further from their territory and into the no man's land between theirs and the Gorge. He hadn't pushed the territory at all but sensed that Reyna had in the past few days. She practically danced her way through the trees, avoiding trails and campsites. She had known exactly where to step, to turn, to wait. It was magical to Cole, seeing her push boundaries and be free.

Every time they had been in the woods, every time she had to teach to be the leader and have all the knowledge on hand. She had been guarded, protecting herself, shutting off any attempt

to connect. But today had been different. her body language was relaxed, open. Her laughter was wild and she didn't look at Cole with judgement or disdain. at least not as much as she normally did.

They had come up finally to the edge of a waterfall that led directly into the Gorge.

"Why did you do it?" She asked as they walked the perimeter of the cliffside.

"Did what?" Cole asked.

"Go to the Gorge," she gestured. "Everyone knows the stories. You could have been killed."

"I told you. I was drunk and on a dare."

"Please, I've watched drunk people. You were hardly buzzed."

Cole stopped and crossed his arms. It was a ridiculous question. He went off to find the fabled monster. He was drunk and Tyson had goaded him into it. That was it, wasn't it?

"I don't know. I guess cause I was stupid?" He shrugged.

"Well we already knew that," she smiled looking back at him. "Still a funny thing though. You of all people taking the bait and going."

"Why don't we flip the table," Cole challenged as they resumed walking over the boulders that acted as a guard against the waterfall. "Why'd you save me? How did you even find me?"

It was Reyna's turn to pause now and Cole wondered if he pushed too much. But she spoke confidently.

"Are you kidding? I heard the screaming a mile out. I thought it was just another hitchhiker but something told me to investigate. The Gorge had been quiet for months. If they were getting restless they could push my territory. I found you bleeding by the creek. Wolf was about to tear your arm off."

"You scared it off?" Cole asked.

It wasn't that he doubted her ability. He'd seen Reyna get scary and it wasn't something he'd challenge anytime soon. It was more curious that she would scare a wolf off for him.

"Like I said, something drew me to you. I recognized you and I challenged his claim. He relented. I carried you up and out."

"Thank you," he said, noting again how little he had said those words prior to today.

"I wish I would have stayed," she said softly as they sat and overlooked the expansive Gorge.

It was truly beautiful in the setting sun. The light danced beautifully on the clear blue water that wound through the middle and the lush thick trees waved in the gentle breeze. Cole could even see small bursts of brightly colored flowers all over the expanse. It was certainly different than when he had first tumbled down into it.

"Stayed?" he asked.

"I dropped you at the highway," she reminded him. "The whole time you kept moaning and whining. I figured the shock of the attack would be enough without having me to explain my presence. I had no idea if the damage was enough to turn you. But I knew you'd live. It was better if you didn't see me."

"But I did turn," he said, more to himself but she nodded.

"You did. And while you may have chewed your way through Main Street those deaths aren't on you. They never were."

Cole raised an eyebrow, looking for the first time at the situation through her eyes.



She had saved him from the Gorge. She had left him to turn. She knew what the attack and subsequent healing would mean. Cole shook his head at how guilty she must have felt seeing the carnage after his first turn.

"It's not your fault. It's mine. If I had listened to you. If I had stayed indoors. I never would have attacked those people."

"You didn't listen to me cause you didn't trust me," she said flatly. "You didn't trust me. Cause I didn't trust you."

Cole was suddenly aware of exactly how close they sat together and how beautiful the scene was. He could feel her guilt radiating off her in waves and it was souring the mood. Aiming to prove her wrong, he laid his hand over hers which rested casually on the warm boulder.

Reyna's eyes snapped to his at the touch but Cole was grateful to see her hand didn't move.

"I trust you now," he whispered. "Is that enough?"

Reyna didn't answer, her cheeks flushing at the question and she took a breath. Cole smiled at the fact that he had finally made her speechless and leaned in closer.

Her golden eyes shone with a tenderness he'd never seen and her lips were pink and full. Cole wanted to take her right then and there. He wanted to show her she wasn't wrong to save him.

That she had made all the right choices including him to stumble through his first turn. He wanted her to know he didn't blame her and she shouldn't feel guilt over what happened.

With the softening hues of the day and the crisp air, it was about as perfect of a moment he could hope for.

Then he heard it.

The snap and crackle of a fire starting.

Reyna stood up quickly, perhaps realizing she had been leaning in too, and looked back in the woods behind them.

"You hear that?" she asked, her voice hard again, authoritative, commanding as she prepared to either fight or flee.

"Campfire," Cole nodded, standing up as well. "Sounds like it's only half a mile away."

"That's too close," she said.

Without further inquiry she stepped lightly over the rocks and sped off into the woods.

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Cole followed without question. They followed the sound and smell of the fire until Reyna motioned for Cole to stop. She quickly called on her claws and shot up a tree and Cole followed suit as they peered over a drooping tree into a small clearing.

A group of six men were gathered around the fire. They all seemed to be woodsmen dressed in loose flannels and jeans with thick boots and a pile of camping gear in a corner. Three of them were setting up tents while another was setting up a series of hot dogs on sticks to hold over the fire. One other was taking care of personal business in the far corner and the last was sitting on the ground with a laptop and dozens of papers scattered around him.

That was strange, Cole thought. There was no wifi this deep in the woods. Even if people wanted to bring their laptops they couldn't do much. Most professionals brought satellite phones if anything for emergencies.

And judging by their gear Cole assumed they were professionals. He looked at Reyna who barely concealed her rage as she surveyed the camp. That didn't make sense either. Sure she didn't like campers but the way she looked at them, he swore they were a personal attack on her. Then it dawned on him. He looked back at the gear and noticed the gun shaped cases among the backpacks and duffel bags.

These weren't just campers. These were the Hunters.

Knowing that even the slightest movement could alert them below Cole didn't dare to speak only watching Reyna carefully. Whatever happened he would follow her lead.

He cocked an ear to the ground as well. Listening to the Hunters clearly, as if he sat next to them.

"Hey Robb, where's the next coordinates? We haven't found anything out here. Meanwhile Trevors talking about how he got four of those mutts 30 minutes north," one Hunter, a balding man at one of the tents complained.

"Relax, Trevor runs his mouth about as fast as you run out of chips," the Hunter, Robb said as he tapped on the laptop.

"Not my fault you missed out on the party," another Hunter, the one walking back from the perimeter in a red vest, scoffed. "I would have had five if they hadn't all scattered behind the bar."

"Remember down doesn't always mean out, Trevor," Robb snapped.

"Yeah I mean did you see the bodies or were you gone before clean up?" Baldy chuckled.

"Course I saw. You think I don't know how to double tap?" Trevor shot back.

"Well you couldn't finish when it came to the wife," Robb smirked as the other Hunters joined around the fire laughing without care.

Cole felt sick. The way the men, grown ass men who could be the same age as his dad, were laughing and joking about shooting wolves as if they were at a football game. What the hell were they doing? How could they sit around eating hot dogs and joke about how many people they killed?

Cole turned to Reyna as she locked eyes on the Hunters. Her lips were curled and even in the dark, Cole could see her fangs clear as day jutting out. A low growl escaped her lips but luckily it seemed the Hunters didn't hear her as they continued to joke.

"I don't even know why we're here." Another Hunter, this one in a heavy looking black jacket moaned. "We all know it's suicide to go down to that valley gorge place. Hell the president won't even let us light up the ridge. We can't take those dogs on our own."

"I wouldn't say that," a new voice announced.

Cole looked to the far edge of the campsite to see a new man had joined the group. And clearly he was comfortable in what was going on. The man was tall and built like a tank. He wore jeans and black boots that had clearly seen some mileage. His green flannel was well worn as was his brown jacket. He carried a heavy looking shotgun and had an old backpack slung over one shoulder. His brown hair was graying in parts under his dark hat to match his shirt trimmed beard and his eyes were welcoming.

Cole's heart stopped and turned cold as he recognized the jovial blue eyes as the Hunter settled in the only chair that had been set up at the head of the campfire.

"Has the president finally decided to grace us with an appearance?" Baldy asked, handing the man a beet.

"Well you know how it is when your daughter trades boyfriends," the Hunter chuckled. "Gotta make sure they all know to fear me."

The Hunter, Cole quickly connected the dots, the president they called him. President of a group of Hunters sworn to hunt down and kill people like him. Kill werewolves.

He was Britney's father.

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Cole about fell out of the tree, realizing the truth. Good god Britney's father, Austin Miller was now his enemy! He was responsible for the slaughter at the club! And God knows how many others. Hell he could have killed Cole himself at any point! Cole grimaced realizing He wasn't as free of Britney and her fathers wrath after their breakup as he would have hoped.

Sweating, he looked to Reyna wondering how the hell they would escape without alerting the Hunters below.

Rather than seeing fear or restraint however she leaned forward even more, her lips twitching. Of course! Reyna had admitted to both researching Britney and the Hunters! She probably already knew about Britney's dad and had planned to ambush them tonight! Reyna was clear in one thing. She would do anything to protect herself and by extension him and his boys. Finding the Britney connection she must have forgone any idea of the Gorge plan. She knew they'd never agree to killing someone they knew!

Cole saw her muscles clench and he knew he had seconds to act. As much as he felt for her he knew he couldn't watch her die. And worse he knew he couldn't bring himself to deliver a killing blow. No matter his feelings he knew murder was off the table.

Risking his own discovery, he leaped from his perch to hers, hoping his tackle would send them away from the campsite. Luckily for them it did as they tumbled out of the tree and down a hill in the opposite direction of the camp.

"What are you doing?" Reyna hissed, her wolf features completely dominating her face.

"We can't take them!" Cole argued. "We have to run!"

Reyna growled, slamming her foot but nodded as she sped off. Cole followed quickly as they ran all the way to the lookout. As he retrieved his clothes she paced back and forth impatiently.

"Don't," he said, already seeing what she wanted to do. "There's now seven. You can't take them on by yourself and I'm not ready for that. None of us are! Don't go back! Please!"

She said nothing, continuing to growl and glare at the treeline. The treeline that had seemed so inviting this morning unfortunately now seemed incredibly dangerous. Cole threw his clothes to the ground and grabbed Reyna by the shoulders, forcing her to face him.

"Reyna listen to me! You can't go back!"

He finally looked eyes with her and he noticed for the first time tears in her eyes.

Tears and something worse- fear.

"What is it?" He asked, calmer as he held her.

He hadn't noticed before but she was shaking violently in his grip and her heart was pounding, wild and out of beat. Sweat coated her frame but Cole knew it wasn't just from the run.

She refused to speak, her jaw twitching as she tried to come up with whatever words she wanted to say.

"Talk to me, " he pressed. "Whatever it is I'm here."

She took a deep breath and broke free of his grip.

"One of them," she said, her voice tight. "One of those Hunters, he killed my father."

Now it was Cole's turn to say nothing as he stared. What were the odds? His heart sank as he came to terms with how absolutely insane his life had just become in the last five minutes let alone the last few months. His ex girlfriend's dad was the president of the Hunters and one of them maybe even Mr Miller himself had killed Reyna's father! And to top it all off he was absolutely feeling a strong attraction to Reyna that went beyond anything he'd ever felt before. No wonder Reyna was so wound up!

"You..." He struggled with what to say as Reyna hugged herself. "You can't do what I'm thinking you're thinking of doing."

Reyna glared at him in silence.

"Reyna it's wrong. We're thinking of a plan. You have to work with us! Don't. Please don't go back. Don't go after them," Cole begged.

"I don't know what to do," Reyna said simply, looking away.

"Promise me you'll wait. At least give me a day. Let's get the guys. Let's think this through. Please!"

"I can't promise that," she said, a single tear escaping her eyes.

"Reyna..."

Cole stepped forward but as quick as he could blink Reyna vanished.

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After he sent an SOS to the guys he raced through the woods, trying to track Reyna. How could Cole have been so stupid? Of course she had a way to hide her scent and Cole wandered the woods. Realizing she'd probably be after the Hunters he retraced his steps being careful to scale the trees and not leave any prints to be tracked.

Thankfully she hadn't returned to the campsite and he stared at the low smoldering fire. The fire and the men who surrounded it.

Austin Miller. The man he'd known for years, not a major player in town but liked enough and fairly quiet. He ran the Post Office and sold wood carvings on the side. Cole had spent the entire summer before freshman year at his house crushing on Britney before he had asked her out. Austin had cooked burgers on the grill for him and his friends all summer. They had played football in his expansive backyard. He had even taught them how to shoot after Cole's own dad had refused.

Cole's stomach dropped realizing now why and how he was such a crack shot.

He tore his eyes away from the campfire and the dozing men to look out over the trees. He knew Reyna was out there somewhere and she'd have no qualms about killing. He hadn't meant to stay out all night but he knew he couldn't go home and sleep knowing what he knew now. He shook his head, hating how messed up everything had gotten.

A sharp whistle pierced the air and Cole looked behind him. Recognizing the dog whistle and knowing only one person would have something like that out here he took off, careful not to make a sound as he raced in the direction of the whistle.

The whistle repeated and he grimaced at the pitch as he came closer to it. He was definitely outside the territory Reyna had marked, but surprisingly nowhere near the Gorge. He fell to the floor and walked through brush, seeing no clear path.

Finally the whistle stopped as he came up on a small clearing. Hardly his length if he were to lay down but it was bare of brush and foliage. Too small to be a campsite of course but a small collection of colorful rocks were set in the middle. With her back to Cole, Reyna stood over them, the whistle hanging loose in her hand.

"This is where it all started," she whispered and turned to Cole with tears in her eyes.

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Cole didn't move, afraid she would run but put his hands up in surrender.

"Reyna," he said softly. "What is this?"

"I was here," she spoke, her voice barely a whisper and shaking.

The way her voice trembled and how she refused to look at Cole made him nervous. This wasn't the Reyna he expected to find, this wasn't the Reyna he knew. Tears had run clear tracks through her grime and sweat covered face, her hair was wild as if she had been pulling it apart and her limbs shook.

"I shifted late, most can shift by the time they're three. I couldn't till I was seven. My mom, she... she died when I was born and my dad took me away. He wanted to protect me. We came here when I could shift. We'd been running from Hunters for years."

Understanding that Reyna was finally opening up about her past, Cole rushed to hug her but she sidestepped him. He cocked an eyebrow at her resistance, why tell her this if she didn't want comfort?

"I have to hand it to you, you boys learned fast. It took me almost a year to gain control. We stayed out here, we didn't want attention. But when I was nine, a Hunter caught our trail. I had no idea how... how brutal they were until that night."

Fresh tears spilled down Reyna's cheek as she hugged herself, clearly torn over the memory and Cole looked down at the colored rocks, understanding them. They were a memorial. This had been where her dad must have died.

"Reyna..." he whispered, unable to come up with the right words.

"They trapped him and they sliced him open," she said, her eyes vacant as she recounted the terror. "My dad hid me in a bush and said not to speak. He said he would lead them away but they came through."

Reyna's eyes drifted to a particularly thick and thorny bush just to the side of the rocks and Cole could practically see her hiding. No, not just hiding but witnessing an execution of her own dad.

"They drove him to kneel and they took a blade and sliced him like he was nothing more than bread. I sat and watched my dad bleed out and rot for three days before I could move. I buried him and I ran. Rangers found me and I already knew than not to trust anyone so I said nothing. I was thrown in the system. Thrown in and forgotten. I never imagined I would see his killer."

With her story finished, Reyna finally locked eyes with Cole and stepped forward.

"You ask me to wait. But is seven years not long enough?"

"Reyna," Cole bit his lip, knowing what he said next had to be enough. "I know you're hurting. I can't pretend to know what that feels like. But if you do this, if you go after him, it's not going to be right. You'll die."

He grabbed her arm and rubbed small circles on her. Her skin was hot to the touch and still shook, but with each around, she seemed to calm so he kept talking.

"I know that you've been alone. I know that you don't trust anyone, but please. We've been on the same side. We became a pack. Because of you. We learned how to control ourselves because of you. You trusted us and we trust you. We don't want to lose you. Don't go on a suicide mission. You have something here now. Your dad died protecting you. Don't let that sacrifice be in vain."

Reyna closed her eyes and took a deep breath. He stopped rubbing her arm, fearful she'd run again but she did something he never expected.

She fell into his arms and sobbed.

Holding her, they both knelt on the ground and he soothed her as she cried. Good god how had he managed to end up like this, Cole wondered. How was he the one now guiding and protecting her? When did he become the one she'd lean on? When did Reyna become someone who needed a shoulder? Questions spun in his head for hours as they laid there and she cried. She offered no more backstory and he didn't ask. She had divulged more than enough for the night and she wasn't on a murder hunt so he was more than content to sit with her.

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Judging by the positions of the stars and God how he hated he remembered Austin teaching him how to, it was about two am when he heard movement in the woods. Seeing Reyna had fallen asleep in his arms, Cole gently pulled himself off her and growled a warning. If Hunters had found them, the least he could do was stall.

Thankfully it wasn't them but his friends instead.

"Whoa what happened?" Andy asked as he joined Cole on the ground.

Knowing that it wasn't his story to tell, Cole shrugged.

"I found her, we talked, she fell asleep. She's not after them now so ya know I call it a win."

"Is it true?" Mason asked as he walked the small perimeter. "Is Mr. Miller really a Hunter?"

"I heard it myself," Cole nodded, knowing he'd only given the cliff notes version of what he saw and heard at the camp.

"Right under our noses," Tyler shook his head as he sat. "How do we even begin to deal with this? It's one thing to fight in self defense but we know him. I can barely stomach the idea of attacking anyone let alone someone we've known for years. He helped me on my spiral."

"He let us practice drills when the field got flooded remember?" Andy added. "The team took up his yard for a month."

"That doesn't matter," Cole said, looking to see Reyna had continued to sleep. "He's a Hunter. And judging by how happy they were, I doubt a few barbeques and football games will stop him from shooting us."

"Are you on board than?" Mason asked. "With the Gorge?"

Biting his lip, knowing he was walking into dangerous territory, Cole shook his head. Too much had happened, he'd discovered too much to make a decision.

"We can't talk about that yet," he said. "We can't do this. Not if half of us don't agree."

"Maybe we can talk to him?" Andy suggested. "I mean he knows us, maybe once he sees we're not monsters he won't kill us."

"That doesn't excuse everyone else," Tyler said.

"we have to try," Andy argued.

"Guys," Cole growled. "Not tonight. Just hold off. The important thing is that we don't get caught. I think we should stay out of the woods."

"What?" Tyler gaped.

"You can't be serious?" Mason stopped pacing. "The woods are ours! We can't just not be here!"

"We know how to avoid detection," Tyler pressed. "We'll just stay out of the Hunters way. They can't cover the entire forest."

Cole shook his head, knowing by the way Reyna had spoken, the Hunters were more than capable of such a feat.

"I said no!" he shot back, "Stay out of the woods! We can't do anything if we're dead!"

"Who put you in charge?" Andy asked. "You don't own the woods!"

"I'm the Alpha!" Cole snapped back. "And you know what? I am pulling rank! Hunters are here and they're after us! We can't kill them and they can't find us! Staying out of the woods is the only way!"

Cole snapped his mouth shut as he stared at his friends who had all bowed their heads at his tone. He felt disgusted at manipulating his title, hell he never even wanted it. But hearing how Reyna's dad had been tracked and killed, he couldn't imagine losing his friends, his pack.

"Alright mighty Alpha," Andy rolled his eyes. "Your word is law. We'll stay out of the woods."

"Guys..." Cole started to protest, he didn't want them to hate him.

"It's fine, it's smart," Tyler nodded. "We stay quiet hopefully they'll leave."

Cole didn't say anything, he could only imagine Reyna and her reaction to his idea. And he knew she'd scoff at the idea of Hunters leaving without verifying dead wolves.

"We should probably go then," Mason said after a moment. "We don't want to get caught."

"Go, I'll wake her up," Cole said motioning to Reyna who thankfully had slept through the conversation.

The guys agreed and vanished through the trees. Cole took a moment, making sure they were gone before he put a hand on Reyna's shoulder.

"Thank you," her voice was barely a cracked and broken whisper and she opened her eyes.

"You're awake. You've been awake?" Cole leaned back as she sat up.

"You boys suck at sneaking," she attempted the joke but her dark eyes and hollow voice betrayed her.

"You've never thanked me," he said after a pause.

It was so strange to have her gratitude, he was learning so much tonight and he wasn't sure he was ready for it. She stayed curled up on the ground, Cole almost saw her as a child, trying to hide as she met his eyes.

"You didn't tell them what this place was," she said and glanced at the rocks.

Cole had been worried his friends would play with them but thankfully the impending threat had been more than enough of a distraction.

"It's not my story to tell," he said.

She nodded and got up. He followed suit and stayed back as she honored her dad. Kissing two fingers to her lips and gesturing down at the rocks, he felt as if he intruded on a sacred moment and turned away.

The night was silent and he said nothing as a gentle breeze waved through. He knew she was in pain and didn't want to rush her. But he knew she was hurting so if he needed a shoulder, he was more than happy to wait.

After a moment of silence, it seemed even the wildlife avoided this memorial, Reyna wrapped her hand around Cole's.

Cole looked up in shock at the blatant show of friendship and she cracked a small smile.

"You pulled rank to protect your pack. You haven't agreed or disagreed with how to deal with the Hunters. But you pulled rank to protect them."

"It's not just about us," he said. "It's about us and them. I have to do what I can to protect everyone. If I don't try, I don't deserve to be Alpha."

"You were willing to risk yourself tonight. You should have gone home, but you stayed. And you haven't even made a decision," Reyna pointed out.

"Like I said I have to try. Alphas protect their own. And I think of you as part of our pack. So ya, I'll risk myself for you."

Reyna squeezed his hand and stepped directly in front of Cole. She searched his eyes, looking for something but Cole wasn't sure what.

"I can't watch you die," he said softly. "I don't know what I'd do if you did."

"Stay with me," she said after a moment, her voice was soft. "Overnight. If you're with me..."

Cole nodded, not needing her to finish. She wanted him close, to protect her, to hold her, to stop her. Whatever she needed, she clearly didn't trust herself anymore.

But she did trust him. And that was enough.

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Cole had never known where Reyna lived. In all the months he'd known her he'd only seen her at school or in the woods. He knew she lived with fosters so he wasn't sure what he'd see.

The average looking story small square house wasn't what he expected. She walked around the side of the house and scaled the siding easily, vanishing into a window. Cole followed after a brief moment, rationalizing that she had asked him to come and stay.

Stepping in through the window, the barren room made his heart crack. Clearly Reyna had done nothing to customize her space with nothing more than a black futon, dresser and a desk in the room. The desk had an old laptop that was at least a decade old and a backpack with a duct taped strap sitting haphazardly on it. The room wasn't like his at all, devoid of posters, lights models and more. Reyna was obviously ready to flee at a moment's notice and had no attachment. He followed her to the futon, stepping over a ragged duffel bag that was stuffed with clothes. Sitting next to her, he inhaled the familiar scent of weed and she rolled her eyes as he winced.

"How do you think I get out so much. All the money they get from hosting me goes to thier gardening habit."

"No judgement," he smiled. "Just strong."



"Don't worry, they won't bother me. They won't even know I'm back," she said. "I doubt they'll even notice you."

Cole said nothing as he tried to find something to make conversation but her clean walls and lack of any trinkets failed him. With nothing else he took a deep breath and asked what he was hoping not to.

"Are you going to leave? Or go after the Hunters?"

She said nothing, leaning back and Cole shook his head.

"I can't help you if you keep holding stuff in."

"I've told you more about me tonight than I ever have in my entire life," she countered. "You don't know what this is doing to me. How much I want to go back and rip them apart!"

"Don't!" he begged, he felt like a broken record but he grabbed her hand in hopes of holding her here.

"Why do you think I asked you to stay?" she asked. "I need someone who's not biased. I need someone who can look at this from the outside."

"I wouldn't say I'm unbiased," he said. "Mr. Miller is someone I've known for years. I dated his daughter."

"You did but you know the truth," Reyna said and pulled her hand away.

She wrapped a thick green blanket around her, the only item with any color despite its faded and rugged look. Cole felt conflicted seeing her so lost and unsure. If Reyna was anything she was a rock but tonight that rock had cracked and while he wanted to be there, to become her rock, he felt vastly unqualified for the amount of trauma she had.

"Did you?" he asked, fearing her answer.

"That he was a Hunter? No."

Cole said nothing and realized it was true. If Mr. Miller had been the Hunter who killed her dad, she would have slaughtered him long before now. Unfortunately that just raised more questions on which one was the Hunter. He looked at her, seeing exhaustion was prevalent in her eyes, human again now, and figured he'd drop the subject.

"You should get some sleep," he said.

He knew that she had invited him but he also knew it wasn't appropriate for them to be intimate. She nodded and laid against the arm of the futon. The pillow was small and lumpy, clearly old and not much for comfort. Reyna spoke softer now, fighting a yawn.

"You need sleep too. Don't worry, I don't bite. There's another blanket in the duffel."

"Thanks," he said, leaning down to retrieve the blanket.

Looking over at her again, he saw how she curled up, giving him more than enough room to stretch out and he sighed. She seemed to favor sleeping in as tight of a position as possible. As if she feared being found while asleep and unaware. Knowing how she'd live with her dad on the run, it made sense. He felt a pang in his chest at the idea of running. No wonder she'd been so okay with leaving. She had nothing holding her here. His room was full of pictures, books, games and more. Her room was bare and it felt like stepping into a hospital, sterile and devoid of any personalization. He debated if he could live like she did. Could he abandon his home? Could he take only a duffel bag of clothes and nothing else? Could he close himself off from all relationships just to stay alive?

As he watched Reyna's face slowly relax and sink into a deep sleep, he smiled. Maybe before he couldn't, but maybe now he could. With the right person, being on his own wouldn't be so bad.

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The next month was torture.

After having to lie and come up with a bad excuse as to why he skipped school and didn't come home, Cole felt oddly tense when he was grounded for such behavior. His truck keys were taken and was barred from going out after school.

Of course once his friends pointed out that they wouldn't be in the woods he felt better about his parents attempt to ground him. And it was a good attempt, if he wasn't sneaking out and spending nights with Reyna.

Once his parents were sleeping it was easy to sneak out and run across town to Reyna who surprisingly agreed to leave the woods alone. Provided that Cole stayed with her overnight. He suspected that the appearance of the Hunter who killed her dad and revealing her backstory was the cause of her nightmares and waking up in the middle of the night, claws and fangs out in a daze. They didn't do anything physical, he was too nervous to ask for that and she was too tortured by who had come to town, but he knew that simply sitting with her when she woke up in a cold sweat was more than enough.

While the nights had their terror, they were also strangely peaceful as she became accustomed to falling into his arms. Holding hands in the shadows while the moon went through its phases outside was comforting and Cole learned to appreciate the cold breeze that flowed through her window. She never shared more than what she had that first night and he didn't push. She would share when she was ready. And he was content with waiting.

Despite the allure of the long cold nights, the days turned into crawl that Cole despised. News of his and Britney's break up spread like wildfire and she wasted no time in throwing herself publicly with Tyson. Tyson who thankfully had recovered from Cole's hit and lorded his victory of Britney over him daily. They kissed, hugged and cuddled anytime Cole glanced at them and he reminded himself that Britney simply wasn't worth it anymore. Although he'd be lying if he didn't want to do the same with Reyna. But everyone agreed Reyna had to keep her resident loner status and the guys couldn't even look at her at school.

Of course that would all change the night before the next full moon.

It was lunchtime and Cole and the guys were sitting at a table next to the wall. Cole glanced up absentmindedly finding Reyna in the crowd across the cafeteria eating by a trash can. They locked eyes and he smiled.

"We need to check the camp," he whispered, knowing his words would reach not just his friends but her.

"What are we doing? We've been out of the woods for weeks and the Hunters are still around," Andy grumbled.

"I told you they wouldn't leave," Reyna's voice pierced through the noise of the cafeteria as clear as if she sat next to Cole.

"We have to try and shift out of town," Mason said.

"Go down the hill? The beach could work," Andy said. "They won't expect wolves down there."

"How do you plan to escape your families?" Reyna's sarcasm was clear.

"We'll figure it out," Cole growled.

"What about heading north? Past the town and the woods on the other side of the mountain?" Tyler suggested.

"They'll expect that," Mason said. "They still think we have a connection to that club. We'd have to go beyond any towns."

"Past the towns to the farms?" Tyler asked. "It's a run but if we leave early enough before the shift we can put serious miles between us."

"You have your truck back?" Andy asked. "We don't want to run the whole way and leave any chance."

"Ya," Cole nodded. "But I don't want there to be any risk with timing. We'd have to leave right after school."

"Pack tonight," Reyna said. "Cut last period. We'll get on the road before traffic hits."

"We?" Cole looked up, locking eyes with her again.

She didn't say anything but nodded with a smile of her own.

"Good thing it's the weekend," Andy added. "It'll be easy to get out."

"Get out where?"

Cole cursed himself for not seeing Tyson approach them. Britney as usual was draped over him, her strawberry perfume filling his nose. Good lord how had he ever found the scent appealing? She glared at Cole and turned, sinking a deep kiss with Tyson who laughed and broke apart.

"None of your business," Mason growled.

"Well you might want to check the roads, I heard there's something going on. No one's getting in or out this weekend," he smirked.

"Why?" Andy asked.

"Don't you know?" Tyson raised an eyebrow. "Your parents put out the bulletin."

"Bulletin?" Tyler questioned as Andy opened his phone to search for the news.

"That bear or mountain lion or whatever, it's getting caught," Britney sang, her voice dripping with contempt. "Your parents called in experts. They say they got it cornered so no one should be out. So they can kill it. Get justice for Gage and everyone else who died."

Cole's stomach twisted, knowing his part in everything that had happened. He glared at his ex, suddenly feeling his rage rise.

"Maybe if someone hadn't poked the bear it wouldn't have attacked!"

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"Maybe the bear wanted to have a nice night. But someone messed with him," Cole snapped.

"Look man, you lost, get over it," Tyson shot back.

"Maybe I wouldn't have lost if the game wasn't rigged!" Cole stood up, spilling his drink across the table as he stared down Tyson.

"Maybe the bear wanted something a bit more exciting," Britney sneered.

Feeling his claws pushing to come up, Cole ground his teeth as he stared at her.

"Maybe the bear missed out on something better."

"Cole," Andy whispered but Cole ignored him as Tyson planted his hands on the table and leaned forward.

"You think you're something? You wanna take this outside?"

"I knocked you out last time," Cole snarled. "Or did you forget?"

Tyson bristled at the reminder and Cole felt nothing but contempt for the jerk. He didn't even know why he wanted to fight, he wasn't into Britney anymore and hell the farther he stayed away the better it was for his furry alter ego.

"Let's go," Tyson hissed. "Right here right now. You've lost the game, the girl and now you're gonna lose the whole damn school."

"Not to mention the trash you keep looking at everyday," Britney added, tossing her head back. "Pathetic."

That did it!

Cole stepped quick around the table, to hit Tyson or shove Britney he didn't know but before he did, the scent of pine filled his nose. Reyna slid between the three of them and gently held Cole's face. He could hardly blink as her warm brown eyes filled his vision and she kissed him. It was electric!

Cole had kissed before, he considered himself an expert on it. But the way her lips molded to his and the heat of her hands on his cheeks, pine filling his nose and how the noise of the cafeteria dimmed to almost silence was something he'd never forget. Her lips were soft, warm, completely opposite of the way she acted with cold biting sarcasm. Cole had felt energy rise up in him completely overwhelming him on full moons but the spark of her kiss was something different. He closed his eyes, sinking into the kiss, savoring the hypnotic almost drug like taste of her lips. While it felt like it lasted forever it was only a moment before she broke off and turned to Tyson and Britney.

Cole stumbled back, feeling a cold echo on his lips as the noise of the cafeteria came back to his ears. He stared at Reyna who smirked at the other couple who gaped in surprise.

"If you don't mind," her voice was deep, sarcastic but so alluring, "I'd really rather you not get Cole expelled for taking out the trash you so lovingly referenced."

Reyna walked up to Britney, almost close enough to kiss and Britney stumbled back. Reyna inhaled deeply and nodded.

"I do have to give you credit. It is wonderful seeing you admit to calling yourself what you are. Pathetic indeed."

Without another word, Reyna turned to Cole, winked and walked away.

Britney stammered but no words came out and Tyson just stared. Cole felt like he was frozen in place as Britney huffed and dragged Tyson away.

"Cole!" Mason snapped him out of his freeze and Cole turned to see his friends still sitting but in shock.

"What?" Tyler gaped, "What was..."

"Did you know?" Andy asked.

"I had a theory," Mason shrugged.

"I..." Cole felt dizzy as the effects of the kiss faded and he turned around.

He wasn't looking specifically but he knew at the same time exactly who he was looking for. He looked at his friends who debated between themselves. They had no idea he'd been staying with Reyna or anything about her past. They had no idea how quickly he'd changed in his opinion of her. Did they suspect something? How had any of this happened?

"I need to go," he said not even bothering to grab his backpack as he speed walked outside.

Without even realizing, he caught the scent of pine and followed it towards the parking lot. Seeing her by the fence, Cole felt his heart skip.

Reyna was leaned up against the fence, he didn't know how he could miss her. She wore a pair of ripped faded jeans and a button up flannel that was loose on her shoulders. Her arms were crossed and an eyebrow popped as she smiled at him. He walked up to her, taking in a breath before he gratefully sank his lips into her.

She responded thankfully to his declaration and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close. This kiss wasn't quick and it wasn't a distraction but at long last an undying request from both fulfilled. Their tongues explored each other and Cole felt alive as electricity seemed to run without interruption from her to him. They pressed against each other, not letting go as thier lips danced around each other in a moment of fire. Eventually they both broke apart for a breath and Cole took in the fresh air, noting that while it was good, it was nothing compared to the heat that came from Reyna's lips.

"I guess we've both been waiting," she chuckled and he responded with a laugh of his own.

"You know I wasn't sure but..."

"I get it," she smiled. "Emotions run wild when you're a wolf."

Cole put a hand on Reyna's cheek, seeing her eyes had flared with thier golden sheen and he smiled, laughing again.

"I can't believe it took being a wolf to see this, to see you."

"I'm not offended," she drawled. "I could never be with someone normal."

"Normal's overrated," he whispered.

"You're goddamn right," she agreed, smashing her lips into him again.

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With emotions running high and in a good way, Cole decided to skip his afternoon classes. He knew the risks, not just being grounded but caught by Hunters, he honestly didn't care. He was sixteen and wanted to make out dammit. This wasn't about being a wolf, his wasn't about Hunters looking to kill him. It wasn't even about his friends.

It had been almost a month since he'd seen Reyna in the club dancing and looking the way she did. He'd been wanting to see that Reyna and have her for himself. And now he did.

They spent the afternoon in his truck parked just off the highway by the town sign, exploring each other. He had always known to control himself when he kissed Britney but with Reyna he didn't have that burden. And it was truly freeing to explore her without fear of her judgement. Eventually they broke apart and she giggled, leaning back. Cole bit his lip, appreciating the view. He'd seen Reyna naked before but it seemed different now. Feeling her slick skin under his hands, matching their heartbeats in rhythm and seeing her relax beneath him was something he'd never expected.

"Your boys are going to wonder..." she sang, glancing out the fogged windshield.

"Let them wonder," he huffed.

She smiled, her fangs pronounced and her eyes shining.

"You are an Alpha, you have to protect your pack. You have to be honest with your pack to do that."

"Are you a part of that?" he asked.

Her smile faltered but didn't completely disappear as she pondered the question. She sighed theatrically as he leaned forward, grabbing her.

"Cmon, admit it," he said, "You're one of us. You're part of this pack."

Reyna rolled her eyes and kissed Cole.

"Than I am in a hell of a lot of trouble," she said "You can't forget what Tyson said."

"Tyson is an asshole," Cole said.

"Not that," she rolled her eyes. "Closing the roads? Telling everyone to stay indoors for a wild animal hunt?"

Cole frowned, remembering the bulletin that Tyson had mentioned. She was right, they'd have to find a way to escape in time for their shift. The woods were too dangerous and if the roads were closed they'd have to run on foot.

"They know we're here. They're trying to corner us," she said. "We need to make a decision."

Cole nodded, seeing what she really meant in her eyes. Not just them but him. She handed him his phone and went to button up her flannel.

"Call your boys. Meet at the lookout. Tonight."

"Okay. But I need a favor first," Cole said as he grabbed her hand. He stared at her until she met his eyes.

"Whatever happens, we stick together. Whatever happens, okay?"

Reyna took a breath and simply nodded. Concerned with her lack of usual counter but too satisfied with everything else, he let her hand go and texted the guys to meet.

He started the truck and as the windows lost their fog, he looked outside and smiled. He looked at Reyna and pointed outside.

"This is where it all started," he said.

"Where I dropped you after your attack in the Gorge," she nodded. "I remember."

"I used to think this was the start of the end," he said as he shifted the truck into gear. "But now I couldn't be happier to be wrong."

"Same," she smiled.

They locked hands and Cole pulled out onto the highway smiling at the seemingly insignificant patch of dirt.

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"So what are we doing?" Tyler asked.

"I don't know. I know we don't want to fight but we may not have a choice," Mason said.

"I can't kill," Andy declared. "I can't I'm sorry!"

"Let's not think about that," Cole put his hands up in surrender.

"Every wolf thinks they'll get away," Reyna rolled her eyes. "None do."

Cole shook his head as Andy started another round of arguing with Reyna. He had no idea what they were supposed to do. But he knew there was no way he could stand by and do nothing. He'd already been responsible for this whole mess by going into the Gorge in the first place, murdering Gage and the others was his fault. Hell his friends were being hunted because he'd attacked them! He paced back and forth at the outlook as the sky grew darker.

"I still think the Gorge is our best shot. It's not the best but it's something," Mason argued.

"We don't all need to be the bait," Reyna sighed. "Clearly you're not ready for this."

"And you are?" Cole raised an eyebrow.

Reyna had not disclosed her past to the others and he wasn't about to. But he knew her emotions had been all over the place since that night and he knew shifting would only heighten her rage. Reyna narrowed her eyes at Cole, her voice becoming hard.

"Don't question me."

"While your offer to be the lamb of the slaughter is appreciated I don't think it's a good idea," Tyler said. "They know there's a pack. If they only see one, they may not fall for it."

"Trying to save me? That's cute," Reyna cocked an eyebrow in amusement at the idea and Andy shook his head.

"I still think running is best. If we shift out of town, the Hunters may think there are no wolves. They may leave."

"C'mon Andy, we've been out of the woods for weeks, they'll wait us out. And we can't run out of town every month," Tyler countered.

"Since when are you game for a fight?"

"I'm not! I'm just trying to see this from all sides."

"Okay enough!" Cole snapped. "It's clear we aren't going to agree. We know the dangers, we know what's at stake. We have to do something. Before we get caught. The moon gives us an advantage, we know the woods better than anyone. Home field advantage. But I'm not going to force anyone who isn't on board."

"What's the play?" Mason asked.

"Split," Cole held up a finger before Andy could argue and explained. "Anyone who's willing stays. Anyone who isn't goes to the next town over."

"Do you realize how dangerous splitting up your pack is?" Reyna huffed. "You're asking for either half to get killed. Fresh wolves in a new territory? They could be killing the residents of the next town. And with a lack of firepower here the Hunters could slaughter us. Scratch that, they will slaughter us!"

"I trust my pack," Cole shot back.

"Wait, you're staying?" Andy asked.

"This is my fault," Cole locked eyes with Andy. "The Hunters wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me. You guys wouldn't be in danger if it wasn't for me. I have to be here."

Andy broke contact first, shaking his head and turning in circles as he screamed in frustration.

"I'm staying," Mason said. "And don't you think about benching me. I killed the Hunter in the club. I have blood on my hands too."

"Reyna," Cole turned to her, holding her hand gently.

He didn't care what his friends thought anymore, the display in the cafeteria and his disappearance afterwards were more than enough clues to explain the change in his relationship with her. Thankfully with impending doom, it wasn't up for debate.

"You are right about one thing. It is dangerous for wolves to be in a new territory. We have control but it's not perfect. You've kept us in check. I need you to go."

"You're out of your mind!" She stepped back. "You are not going to send me away! I'm the only one here willing to do what is necessary!"

"We're going with Mason's plan. Lead everyone to the Gorge. I know I can control it," Cole argued. "This is the only surefire way."

"What about Mr. Miller?" Tyler asked quietly. "We haven't even talked about him."

Cole bit his lip and looked at his friends. Everyone here had good memories with Mr. Miller, to face him was impossible to think about. To kill him wasn't even a concept of a thought! He glanced at Reyna who was still fuming over his request and straightened up. It didn't matter that Mr. Miller had been there for them, no amount of football games and barbeques could change what they knew.

Mr. Miller would shoot them if he found the wolves. Friends of his daughter or not.

"I'm not asking anyone to go after him," Cole said slowly. "But he can't know us."

"He has to go to the Gorge," Mason agreed, his voice dropping with resignation. "It's us or them."

"And I choose us," Cole nodded, looking at each of his friends, memorizing their faces.

He knew even with Mason at his side, the likelihood of surviving tomorrow was slim. He needed to see them now, healthy and whole while they were now.

He stepped forward, grabbing Reyna's hand again. She looked away, refusing to see him. He knew what she was feeling but he knew there was no way he could watch her die. Not after everything they'd been through. He took a deep breath and squeezed her hand until she met his eyes, tears in her own.

"I choose us," he repeated in a whisper.

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The next day passed without much fanfare. He ignored the stares as he parked his truck and confidently walked up to Reyna. She arched an eyebrow in surprise as he took her hand and kissed her on the cheek.

If he was fated to die tonight, than word around the school on who he was with hardly mattered. "You are just throwing all caution to the wind aren't you?" she asked with a smile as they joined together at lunch.

He hated her eating alone at the trash can and his friends didn't mind the extra body. After all, this may be the last time they'd all be together.

"I really don't care who says what," he said as he nodded to Britney and Tyson's shocked faces.

"So we're cutting last period? Meet at the look out?" Tyler asked as he chewed on his sandwich.

"No need to meet," Cole shook his head. "You, Andy and Reyna should head out to the farms immediately. Mason you should run the highway, once you see the Hunters heading in, you head out too."

"I thought we agreed that one wouldn't work?" Tyler wondered.

"It won't. And I'm not running," Reyna declared.

"You're not going to leave me on the sidelines," Mason added.

"So what do you expect me to do? Watch you die? Die knowing there's no one to lead?" Cole demanded, slamming his fist on the table.

How could they all be so stupid, he wondered.

"And you expect us to leave you to die?" Tyler asked.

"Tyler-" Cole shook his head but Andy interrupted him.

"I'm not going."

"We know," Reyna rolled her eyes.



"No," Andy looked down, shaking his own head. "I couldn't sleep at all last night knowing what this was. I couldn't sleep knowing that you guys, my friends, my brothers were going to put your lives on the line."

"You want in?" Mason scoffed.

"I don't, but I do," he shrugged. "I couldn't live with myself if something happened and I could have helped."

"So I ask again- meet at the lookout?" Tyler asked.

"You all want to stay?" Cole's voice wavered.

"We're your pack, and we're stronger together," Andy said looking up to lock eyes with Cole. Cole bit his lip and looked away as Reyna wrapped her hand in his. He hadn't planned this. This entire mess was his fault and he was prepared to pay the price but with his friends, how could he do what had to be done?

"We need to make sure that all the Hunters are on our trail," Reyna said, taking over the conversation. "That means they may see us, they may recognize us. That means once we step in those woods, they have to go. They have to die. All of them."

"I should run the perimeter, by the highway," Andy said.

"You take from the end of Main Street up to the lookout," Tyler suggested. "I'll start at the neighborhoods and run the highway down to the Grand club."

"Someone has to watch the Hunter we know will be in town," Reyna pointed out. "Your former buddy Mr. Miller."

"We still need to be in the woods, directing them to the Gorge," Mason said. "I'll run the woods from the lookout down."

"I'll take Mr. Miller," Cole said quickly, sharing a look with Reyna.

"Are you sure you want that?" Reyna raised an eyebrow.

"I'll do it," he nodded firmly, "You're the fastest, if you catch any stragglers you can lead them to Mason. To the Gorge."

"You mean I can do what's necessary."

Despite the chaotic noise of the cafeteria, the silence between them all was deafening.

"Reyna," Cole breathed, unsure of what to say.

"We all know what we're getting ourselves into," Tyler said quietly. "We know what's at stake and we know what..."

He trailed off, letting the unspoken words hang in the air. Cole closed his eyes, feeling the burn in his soul.

Either the Hunters would follow them to the Gorge and die by the wolves within. Or they would kill the Hunters themselves.

He opened his eyes to see Reyna's were cold. It was almost as if he was back when he was first bitten and feeling useless again. He searched her eyes, looking for the warmth and love he'd learned to find in the past few weeks but found nothing. She was protecting herself, with her mask of indifference, she knew what the price of this fight was, she knew the risks of the Hunters. He wondered if he and his friends would survive and if they did they would create the same cold barriers she did. He leaned in, ignoring his friends as they talked about skipping last period and pressed his lips against hers.

She didn't yield to his advance and his heart skipped with fear as the bell rang.

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An hour and a half later, Cole sat in the bed of his truck with Reyna draped across him. His boys were sitting on the edges of the truck. Luckily skipping out had been fairly easy and thankfully the five of them had run the woods lining the lookout and seen no Hunters. Of course they had been busy passing out bulletins to every house and business in town. No one was to go out after dark. With Andy's parents acting as sponsors they had even implemented a curfew and even Mr. Miller had come forward agreeing with it. To protect the town the bulletin claimed, to protect your family, everyone was to stay inside.

Cole's stomach twisted and he sat up quickly, Reyna rolling to the side.

"What?" she asked, annoyance clear in her tone.

"We have to talk about something that we don't want to talk about."

"Haven't we already?" Andy's face grimaced.

"This isn't about the Hunters," Cole said. "This is about us. What we're doing tonight. Where we're going, it's dangerous."

"We aren't splitting dude," Mason sighed.

"No, but I think we need to be ready just in case."

"In case of what?" Reyna asked.

"In case we don't make it back," Cole said. "We've kept our secret. We've kept control. But if we don't come back, what does that do to our families?"

"I told you already," Reyna shook her head. "It's dangerous to tell anyone what we are."

"Reyna's right," Tyler agreed. "The whole idea is for our families not to be targeted."

"And what happens if we get into a fight tonight? What happens if a Hunter gets lucky? Or a wolf from the Gorge takes us as invading their territory and comes after us just as much as a Hunter?" Cole asked.

"We already made plans," Andy said. "We're going camping at the beach."

"That's not right," Cole shook his head. "Someone has to know the truth? If we go out, they'll know nothing, I know your parents will go crazy searching for you. What if that draws more Hunters here?"

"That's why we're doing the Gorge. We're making it clear," Reyna said. "This is our territory, and it's a no win territory."

"We can't tell our parents. They'd try to stop us, they'd try to go to the cops or something," Andy said. "My parents would call the entire Ranger force. They'd sweep the entire mountain, hell the entire state for us!"

Cole wrung his hands together as he slid off the tailgate and paced.

"You don't think your parents would do that if you didn't come home? Risking our lives is one thing, but if something happens they have no way to run, to protect themselves, to do anything!"

"Ignorance is bliss," Reyna countered.

"I hate to say it but I agree with Reyna," Andy said. "We've kept quiet and they've stayed safe. It's worked."

"And you're thinking like we're going to die tonight," Mason said. "And maybe you thought that when you wanted to do this Alpha solo suicide crap but we're all in. This is a pack. We're going to make it."

"We have the homefield advantage," Tyler said. "We'll make it."

Cole said nothing as he looked at his friends, could he really wake up tomorrow and tell Andy's mom that he had been shot? Or tell Mason's dad that he'd been taken down by another wolf? Would Tyler's family even understand that he was a werewolf and was fighting for his life? Cole took a deep breath and turned around, feeling the wolf inside him rise up. Would Reyna's fosters even care if something happened to her? He knew his own parents would be devastated if he didn't come home tomorrow.

"Cole," Reyna's voice convinced him to turn back to the truck as she and his friends stepped out.

She walked up to him with purpose, confident and strong as if this was any other full moon. She took his hand and gestured to his boys.

"You are an Alpha, you feel a protective sense over us more than we do for you, but that doesn't mean you need to carry us. That doesn't mean you need to care for our families. You've led your boys, you've done all you can. We're a strong pack, we can do this. We can win, we can survive."

Cole looked to his friends who nodded in agreement and he sighed.

"You've done everything right," Reyna continued. "If you hadn't I wouldn't be saying it."

That cracked Cole and he smiled. Reyna was nothing if not blunt about how they handled themselves. If she said they were ready they had to be.

Right?

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After another run in the woods, leaving clear and obvious markers for the Hunters to follow, Cole insisted that everyone head home to fulfill the beach trip lie. Cole felt guilty about another lie but pressed his parents that he would be safe at the beach. It was over an hour away and if he didn't leave the curfew would be in effect and his friends would be left without a ride. His parents relented, believing every word out of Cole, every lie of course.

Once everyone had made it out of their parents' hair, they had left Cole's truck parked behind the town sign at the bottom of the mountain and ran up alongside the highway.

Tyler took his position behind the last row of houses bordering the highway, Mason vanished into the woods and Andy sprinted off towards the top end of town. The plan would work, Cole believed. With the limited lighting and their wolf traits on full display, they'd rely on their speed to lead the Hunters in. All they had on them were shorts and phones but it was enough. As the sun dipped behind the mountain, they prayed the Hunters wouldn't recognize them and that speed and their know how of the mountain would be enough camouflage. They'd shift once they were in the woods and drive the Hunters to the Gorge. Cole's stomach dropped as each departed, they had never separated on a full moon before and it made him sweat.

"Don't worry, the plan will work," Reyna said.

"I hope so," Cole said. "You'll watch Mason?"

"I'm watching you,"

"Mason needs-"

"You need," she snapped. "you need me here. Mason is a big boy, he can handle himself."

Cole said nothing and jogged along barren sidewalks to the Miller's house. The town was quiet as the sky grew darker and Reyna surprisingly didn't add much commentary as they

approached the classic two story woodsman style house. Cole looked over the house, his heart twisting. While he didn't have any romance for Britney, guilt still clawed its way up his throat. If the plan worked out, tonight her father would die by a pack of ravenous bloodthirsty werewolves under the full moon spell.

He stalked around the large trees that peppered the perimeter of the house and looked over the backyard sadly. He could practically hear the echoes of the football team as they ran drills back here and smell the tantalizing ribs grilling on the barbeque from memory. Mr. Miller was a good man to the community. Why did he have to be involved?

Cole and Reyna stopped behind a shallow brick wall that acted as a loose barrier between the yard and the rest of the woods. It never occurred to Cole why it would be such a free open plan but knowing what Mr. Miller did now, it made sense he had no fear of any normal coyote or mountain lion coming into his yard.

Cole summoned his claws, seeing Reyna had already prepped herself and felt his ears curve upwards. The wolf within him perked up, the full moon was due to crest within the hour. It was only a matter of time before it was free and this wasn't their territory. The wolf within him felt anxious, ready to run.

"Cole," Reyna's voice was barely a whisper through her fangs.

"I know," he responded with a kiss.

The one thing he hated about shifting was the lack of memory. Occasionally he got flashes of what it was when he was a full wolf but for the most part after the shift he knew nothing about what happened. As his tongue danced and broke from Reyna's, he held her close.

"Did you ever think you'd be this close?"

"To death? Everyday," she said slowly.

"No," he shook his head. "Us, this will be my first shift not thinking about it. I can't explain it but I never saw much of a future. Whoever I'd be with would never really know me."

"And now it feels like it's going away," she said. "No matter what happens, you'll always have me. You've been there Cole, you've taken on so much since being bit and I'll always hold a part of that as my responsibility but you will never lose me."

Cole kissed her forehead, memorizing her heartbeat and warmth in his arms.

"I told you before, I don't blame you. And you need to know that you will never lose me either. I'll do what I have to tonight. I'll protect you."

She leaned back, locking eyes with him and smiled.

"You'll protect me? I'm the killer here."

"Don't forget my first shift," he countered.

"Don't forget my years," she shot back.

Cole chuckled at that, she did have the years over him. He brushed a strand of hair to the side.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I will be," she nodded, knowing what he meant.

As much as he'd hoped she'd follow Mason and protect him, he was glad she had decided to follow him. He could help her if they came across her father's killer in the woods. All Hunters had to die tonight but he wasn't sure if that particular instance would be better served by the Gorge or by Reyna's own claws. He wasn't sure he wanted to find out. Reyna had more control than any of them, she didn't have as long of blackouts as they did and if she remembered anything it would absolutely be of tearing apart the Hunter who killed her dad.

"It's almost time," he said.

"One way or another, tonight we draw the line." Reyna nodded, she glanced at the house as the back door opened and Mr. Miller stepped out.

"You asked me if I'm okay," she looked back to Cole and held his cheek. "But are you okay?"

Cole closed his eyes, sinking into her hand. He didn't have an answer for that. Even knowing what was coming, he never wanted to kill.

His phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his shorts seeing Mason's text.

"Found the Hunters at the creek. All but one."

"On the way," Tyler responded to the group text, that made sense, he was the farthest.

"I'll keep an eye on perimeter." Andy replied after a moment.

"Fire's out! I'll be back in the morning!" Mr. Miller's gruff but cheerful voice rang out over the field.

Cole looked up to see Mr. Miller walking towards them and he sighed.

"We've got about 22 minutes," Reyna said, nodding to the phone.

Cole took a deep breath and texted what he feared all afternoon.

"Start running."

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It was chaos.

Reyna and Cole had started playing in the woods, leading Mr. Miller in. They howled and shook trees and the Hunter caught on quick. Cole made sure they stayed in the shadows, only fleeing across the trails when he was sure Mr. Miller's eyes were weakest. The game was tense the deeper they went into the woods but this was the plan. With every step, every shadowed tree, Cole could hardly breathe. Even Reyna who danced through the woods with ease was tense, her eyes narrowed on the Hunter, cold and merciless.

Before he knew it, Cole felt the heat building in his chest and he knew it was only a matter of seconds before he was overcome by the wolf. He sniffed the air, sensing the change in temperature. They were close to the Gorge, only half a mile if that. He picked up a sizeable rock and lobbed it across the path. It crashed into a small tree toppling it over and causing an owl to flee. Mr. Miller ran towards the commotion and Cole pulled Reyna close.

"What are you doing?" She huffed. "We're almost there!"

"I just need this!" Cole insisted as he crashed his lips into hers.

His heart pounded in his ears and he thanked Reyna's suggestion of dumping his shorts and phone way back. Both of them were bare and he traced his claws hungrily over every inch, praying he would find it again in the morning. Reyna responded in kind, her claws scrapping along his back in a sweet satisfying way. Neither of them wanted to die, but if they did, this was the best goodbye they could have before the wolf took over. He pressed her against a tree, allowing her slim but powerful leg to wrap around his waist. It was only for the sake of oxygen that they broke apart and he held her face in his hands.

Even in the darkness, he saw her as if she was lit up like the sun. Messy brown waves framed her blushing cheeks, only the tips of her curved ears poking beyond the soft hair. Her eyes were golden and gazing with a fury and love he'd never seen an equal for. Her lips were red, swollen from their kiss.

And oh God her body! He leaned back raking in the unblemished and beautiful tanned skin, a thousand muscles perfectly sculpted underneath. He pressed a hand between her heaving breasts, knowing her heartbeat just as much as he did his own. She had no scars, no marks, nothing to betray the cruel but wonderful beast that slept underneath. It beat in a quick tempo that was inhuman but matched him in more ways than one.

She smiled, her wicked fangs flashing. as she placed a clawed hand on his own heart.

"Are you ready for it?"

He was but that wasn't what he wanted her to know. As the fire erupted in his chest, he fought the urge to bend over. Her smile, he wanted her smile to be the last thing he remembered if the worst came. He kept her gaze as he whispered through the pain of the shift.

"I love you."

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Cole snapped his eyes open.

He was alive!

He stood up quickly, his head spinning at the speed as he stumbled. He leaned down on one knee as he focused on the ground beneath him, realizing he was in mud. He blinked and checked his arms, his heart sinking as he recognized not only the dried blood but the smell that clung to his skin.

He'd definitely tore through whatever happened last night, brutally, viciously but at least he was healed, he was breathing!

Looking around him as his brain stopped spinning, he quickly realized where he was. The crystal clear, almost still as glass creek, the untouched nature of the rocks around him and the impossibly tall trees and lack of any animals only meant one place.

He was in the bottom of the Gorge.

Unfortunately there was no one else here, no Hunters and sadly none of his friends or Reyna.

He stood up completely now, taking a big whiff, satisfied that there at least seemed to be no one close by. He focused his senses, searching for any signs of well anyone as his heart raced.

He wasn't even supposed to be here! They had agreed to run down to the beach! They were supposed to wake up together! Where was everyone?

Suddenly a long echoing howl reverberated off the stone walls and he took off running. He knew that howl! It was Mason! His feet pounded the hard dirt as he quickly found a narrow split in the trees and ran towards the repeated howling.

There!

Cole turned on his heels to the left as he caught Mason's dark bushy hair between the green foliage. He slid down, crashing into Mason at full speed.

"Mason thank God!" he crowed, wrapping his own filthy arms around his best friend.

"Cole!" Mason shouted, hugging him back. "Thank God! Where is everyone?"

"No idea but we gotta go! They have to be here!"

Cole looked over Mason, he was filthy and Cole winced at the coppery scent that clung to Mason almost as well as it did to him. Mason had also drawn blood last night.

"I don't know if it's a curse or a gift not to remember," Mason crossed his arms, looking away.

"We have to find the others," Cole said, staying on point.

"Do you remember anything?" Mason asked as they pushed their way through the thick trees.

"Bits here and there," Cole said. "But you know how it is,"

"Are you okay?" Mason asked, gesturing to the blood.

"I don't think it's mine," Cole said, ignoring the question.

They both knew whatever had happened, they would never be okay.

"We should call," Mason said and Cole nodded as they came up on a fallen log.

They climbed on top of it, drinking in the fresh air above. It was clear of anything human. No hint of machines or civilization, not even of other animals. In any other instance, Cole would have believed the Gorge was a paradise. Unfortunately it wasn't. He sucked in a breath and bared himself to the sky, closing his eyes and howling loudly. Mason's echoed behind him and they cocked their ears for a response.

It was strange, but Cole thanked Reyna for insisting that they learn each other's howls as human. In the event they got lost she said. He tried not to think about how she might be lost.

"We gotta keep moving," Mason said after no response. "Maybe they aren't down here."

Cole didn't say anything but nodded as they pushed their way forward.

Eventually they came up against the stone walls that made up the Gorge.

"How the hell do we get out of here?" Mason wondered.

"We climb," Cole growled, extending his claws.

Without any further explanation he drove his claws into the wall, satisfied at how they stuck.

Mason followed and scaled the sheer wall slowly. A few minutes into climbing they heard a howl.

Mason and Cole looked at each other.

"Is that?" Cole asked, he could hear the pain in the howl as it echoed over them.

"Go!" Mason nodded and they doubled their pace, climbing up the wall with renewed speed.

They leaped up and sprinted into the woods, following the creek up stream. Another pained howl went off and Cole's heart pounded. It wasn't Reyna but Reyna hadn't called out yet.

Worse, the further they went, the more he smelled blood.

"Cole!"

Cole stopped at the yell, looking across the creek to where Tyler was.

"Tyler!" Mason cried as he and Cole raced across the creek, embracing Tyler.

"I found Andy, but he's not waking up!" Tyler explained as they jogged to a nearby tree. Andy was on his side, eyes closed but breathing.

"Andy, Andy!" Cole shook Andy's shoulders but he only moaned in response and slumped over. He was as naked as any of them and like them, he had blood clinging to his sweaty and filthy body. He looked over for any injuries as Mason and Tyler talked.

"What happened last night?" Tyler asked. "We shifted, we got the Hunters."

"I don't know! I can only remember fighting, but who? I have no idea!" Mason's voice was high pitched, panicked.

"I woke up about twenty feet that way, saw Andy here. I didn't want to leave him though," Tyler gestured up towards the creek. "What about you and Cole?"

"We were in the Gorge," Mason explained. "Cole found me and we climbed out, heard your call."

"Guys we gotta get Andy out of here," Cole said, looking back at his friends.

Thankfully there was nothing serious, or so it seemed, he wasn't actively bleeding and didn't have anything broken. Cole prayed he was just out from a concussion since his head felt tender

and dried blood matted his hair. The only comfort he had was Andy's breath, ragged but consistent.

"Where do we go?" Mason threw his hands up. "I don't recognize any of this as our territory."

"Have you seen Reyna? Who knows if it's even safe to go home?" Tyler asked. "I don't know for sure, but I think we got played."

"What makes you say that?" Mason asked as Cole lifted Andy in his arms bridal style.

"I don't know for sure, but I'm pretty sure there was more than seven Hunters," Tyler grimaced.

"Are you okay?" Cole asked, ashamed at not even checking on Tyler.

"I must have fallen while shifting," Tyler shrugged, "my arm feels broken but I can feel it healing."

Cole bit his lip as Andy's weight burned in his arms. What the hell were they doing?

"Mason, scout ahead, howl if you see anything, run back if its Hunters."

"What am I scouting for?"

"A Rangers station. There has to be one nearby. Hopefully one of the abandoned ones. If not hope its early enough that no one's checked in yet," Cole said. "Let's go!"

Mason nodded, sprinting ahead and following the river up. Tyler and Cole jogged side by side, quiet for a moment before Tyler coughed.

"What?" Cole asked, his tone harsh but he focused on trying to keep himself steady for Andy's sake.

"Reyna, where is she?" Tyler asked. "Do you think..."

"No," Cole kept his eyes forward, refusing to think of the worst case scenario. "No she couldn't."

Fifteen minutes later, they were breaking the door on a Rangers station, while it didn't seem to be in active use, it must have only recently been abandoned as it was stocked with supplies.

Once they cleaned themselves up and dressed themselves in loose khakis, Tyler cracked open smelling salts and held them under Andy's nose. Andy's arms flew up as he snapped his eyes open, backing away.

"What the- ow!" he cried, rubbing his head where he'd just slammed it against the wall.

"Andy thank God!" Tyler yelled, tossing the smelling salts out the window and hugging Andy.

"Here," Mason handed him a quickly melting ice pack as Andy gingerly pressed it against his head.

The fridge was on the fritz and whatever ice packs and small container of food that sat within had sadly melted and refrozen several times over.

"How you feeling? You remember anything?" Cole asked as they all sat on the ground with Andy.

"Not much, you know that. But I know one thing, we got tricked."

"What do you mean?" Mason asked.

"I mean before I shifted I saw a truck with at least a dozen guys in it pull off the highway just before I shifted. And let me tell ya, they weren't just out for a ride, they were packing. Long rifles, shot guns, pistols, you name it," Andy explained. "I know I fought something, but it was on all sides."

"Same," Tyler nodded. "I remember Mason and I were at the cliff overlooking the Gorge. It was perfect. Next thing I know I'm running the creek with shots going off."

"We got separated," Mason agreed. "I remember seeing other wolves but they weren't you."

They must have been the wolves in the Gorge."

"So the question is did it work?" Tyler wondered.



"Something went wrong. None of us were at the beach," Andy said. "Something changed." As they talked more about the night, only flashes of fighting, of running, of Hunters and wolves, Cole stayed quiet. His heart and his mind was spinning in circles. He knew there was a fight, he remembered a figure above him, but they weren't attacking him. It seemed familiar but the more he tried to remember the fuzzier the memory became. He wondered most of all though where Reyna was in all of this.

"I'm going to look for her," he said, standing up.

"Dude are you nuts?" Mason asked, grabbing his arm.

"She could be out there! Hell what if she's at the beach?" Cole asked, his voice cracking with fear. "We haven't heard her howl. What if she's..."

Cole stumbled over his panic, he couldn't think about it, he couldn't imagine it! Reyna, strong, beautiful, invincible and they had been outmatched overnight!

"Cole!" Mason grabbed his shoulders, shaking him. "Take a breath! We'll find her!"

"No," Cole shook his head and stepped back. "You need to stay here."

"No way!" Tyler snapped.

"Tyler, your arm is broken, Andy who knows what caused you to get knocked out. You guys need to stay and Mason you can fight!"

"And what about you?" Mason asked.

"I'll be fine! Just stay here, if Rangers come you gotta help them out, if Hunters come..." Cole trailed off and Mason frowned but nodded, understanding.

"If you're not back in an hour I'm coming to find you."

Cole nodded and looked to Andy and Tyler. He thanked whatever god was out there that they were all still in one piece.

"I'll check the healing pools first, then I'll follow the campsites back to the highway."

"Come back if you don't find her, we'll go to the beach in pairs," Mason said.

"Sounds good. I'll howl if..."

"We know," Tyler said, quickly filling in any empty air.

Before there was anymore argument, Cole ran out the door, praying to catch Reyna's scent as he turned north into the trees.

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Typically Cole would have jumped for joy at the sun brightening the day, hearing the birds singing and even smelling the moist air dry up in the rising heat. But he couldn't enjoy any of it, not while he was missing her.

Reyna. The girl he'd confessed to loving just before he shifted and a whole ass war broke out. The girl who he finally felt complete with, who's heartbeat matched his. Who's eyes glowed with passion that was equal parts beautiful and terrifying.

Cole's bare feet practically flew over the dirt as he ran into familiar territory, sensing his friends scents and Reyna's. None were fresh of course but it didn't stop him from hoping. Finding the narrow cliff edge, he followed the crumbling rock up, praying that he'd find her there lounging in the waters with her signature teasing grin.

His heart dropped as a howl echoed off the distance. It was loud but pained and he quickly ran along the cliff side. He turned west and leaped down a dip that funneled him into a deep side of

the mountain. Cole inhaled, smelling smoke and his blood ran cold as he pushed his way through larger boulders and thicker trees.

He knew that if Reyna was injured and Hunters were nearby it would end in disaster. Finally he came around a giant boulder to see a small waterfall and creek. flowing lazily towards the main river. And slumped against a tree was Reyna, worse a man with a long rifle was stepping out on the other side of the tree.

Cole snarled, leaping out, summoning his wolf traits to show clear on his face. The Hunter turned in surprise, bringing the rifle up to lock on Cole.

"I knew it," the Hunter whispered, looking between Reyna and Cole and then yelled out. "Austin! Austin you were right!"

Cole wasn't sure if he felt relief or fear as the Hunter called for Austin, sure it could be anyone but he had a sinking feeling it was Austin Miller. Their plan had failed.

He side eyed Reyna who was drenched in blood and naked, her hair was a tangled mess and Cole couldn't even count the number of bruises and cuts that littered her body. She raised her head weakly, locking bloodshot teary eyes with Cole and nodded.

She was alive! Cole could have sang as he listened to her weak but definite heartbeat.

Unfortunately he heard grunting and heavy footsteps and turned to see Mr. Miller step out next to the Hunter. Cole took quick stock of both of them, knowing how weak Reyna was, he'd have to fight them both off.

The first Hunter was about the same age as Mr. Miller, skinnier but had a thin blonde goatee and mustache. He wore a thick red flannel that had clearly seen better days and judging by the mud that was drying on his jeans, he'd been wading in at least knee high water just before this. His face was thin, exhausted and filthy but Cole knew by how softly he carried his rifle, he could shoot and shoot quick!

Mr. Miller wasn't quite as filthy but clearly exhausted as he took in heavy breaths and leaned on the other man. He didn't have any gun on him, but Cole recognized a thick looking knife hanging on his belt and the scent of gasoline clung to him.

"Good job Jonathon, told you killing the girl would force them to hide," Mr. Miller chuckled and stood up straight, "Hold up, I know this little doggie!"

Cole tensed as Mr. Miller took a step forward, his eyes narrowing at him. It was only a matter of time, Cole thought and maybe he could stall while Reyna healed for a minute. He stood up straight, forcing himself to relax and to hide his wolf traits.

"Cole," Mr. Miller breathed, his tone mixed with shock and somehow acceptance. "It all makes sense now."

"Mr. Miller, please," Cole begged. "Please you don't have to do this."

"You know, I thought you had promise," the older man cracked a smile as he looked to his friend, "Jonathon did you know this kid was a crack shot after only about a dozen tries? I thought about bringing him into the fold."

Cole said nothing as Mr. Miller's laugh cut short and he stared at Cole with a sudden burning hatred.

"Course you broke my little girl's heart. Guess I know why now."

"That wasn't it!" Cole snapped back. "She cheated on me!"

"You're an animal!" Mr Miller shot back. "You're a filthy, disgusting flea covered dog!"

Cole stepped back at the cold cruelty of the words. He'd known how Hunters felt about wolves,

he knew he'd never have the same relationship with the Millers period, but the vicious tone still shocked him.

"You could have killed her!" Mr. Miller snapped. "I knew something was wrong with you, but this? I never..."

"Does she even know?" Cole yelled. "Does Britney know that her own dad is a killer? A murderer?"

"Like your hands are clean! It all makes sense, the Main Street Massacre, Gage, quitting football, its you and your boys isn't it?"

"Your daughter-" Cole pressed.

"I'm protecting her!" Mr. Miller roared. "I'm protecting my family! From monsters like you!"

"Sir," The other Hunter said and Cole snapped his eyes to Jonathon.

The Hunter had swung his gun on Reyna who had leaned up against the tree. She seemed to be more alert but Cole knew there was no way she could run, let alone fight.

"I know, you want to finish the job," Mr. Miller's tone was cold. "But you need to learn something. The whole reason you came back is cause you didn't wipe out the pack the first time!"

"I have her!" Jonathon argued, "I take her out, it's over!"

"No it ain't! You just hear me? We got another pack right under our noses, one of them's been dating my daughter!"

"She cheated on me!" Cole screamed, causing both men to snap their attention from Reyna to him. "She cheated on me, Tyson tricked me into the woods! I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for them!"

"You blaming my Britney?" Mr. Miller growled. "You're dying either way, if you wanna make it hurt, that's a good way to do it!"

"They wanted me dead! I wasn't even a wolf!" Cole threw his arms up in frustration. "If it wasn't for that dare I wouldn't be here, alive! Yeah I'm a wolf but I'm alive!"

"Not for long you ain't!" Mr. Miller snarled as he pulled out his knife.

Cole shook, seeing the massive blade, a strong knife, meant to cleave meat from bone. He should know, he'd seen Mr. Miller clean deer meat with it in a matter of minutes.

"They tried to get me killed," Cole fought the fear in his voice. "They tried to get me killed and Reyna saved my life! I never understood why anyone would do that. Let alone to someone they loved but clearly she got it from you!"

"You little brat!" Mr. Miller hissed as he rushed forward.

Cole had luckily spotted a branch and kicked it up and into Mr. Miller while feinting to the side. He spun, crouching low as Jonathon fired at him. It only took three steps and he was across the small creek and in front of Reyna.

Mr. Miller roared as he stood up, he had fallen in his attempt to get Cole and stared him down with blazing anger in his eyes.

"My daughter will never see what a disgusting mistake you are!" he spat. "You'll never leave this mountain alive!"

"Neither will that hybrid trash!" Jonathon growled, reloading his rifle.

"Hybrid?" Cole asked, he looked behind him at Reyna who struggled to stand.

Now that he was closer, he could see that her leg was bent at a bad angle and she had been shot twice. Once in the shoulder and once in the hip, both on her left. His mind raced with how he could carry her out and avoid the rifle and Mr Miller's rage.

He quickly turned back to the Hunters who roared with laughter.

"That bitch saves you and you don't wonder why?" Mr. Miller asked. "I knew you weren't the smartest in the field but I thought you had some brains."

"Don't listen to him," Reyna growled, her voice was pained and she drew heavy breaths but Cole just thanked whatever was out there that he heard her voice for the first time that morning. "You think you can cause another round of this? You think you can make me look like an idiot?" Jonathon snarled.

"Doesn't take much," Reyna snapped and Cole understood.

Jonathon must have been the man that murdered her father!

"How dare you!" The Hunter's voice jumped, clearly insulted and angry he aimed the gun.

Cole stepped to the side, shielding Reyna even more and Jonathon shook his head.

"Move kid, you don't understand what that is! Mr. Miller can have you but I'm here for her!"

"Not on your life!" Cole bared his fangs, a low growl escaping his lips.

"You don't get it," Mr. Miller stepped forward. "She's not even supposed to be alive! You aren't either but that was just bad luck. She's the true monster, a mistake! She dies and it ends! Once I round up whatever's left of your pack of course, we can retire!"

"Retire?" Cole gasped.

"You're the last pack on this side of the mountain," Mr. Miller said. "You and your Gorge, we're wiping you out! Today!"

"The fire," Reyna hissed as she pushed off the tree and leaned on Cole. "And you think you're better than us!"

Cole sniffed the air, realizing now the growing scent of fire wasn't just a campfire set up somewhere so people could cook eggs. He looked to the right, seeing a thickening cloud forming over the trees. The Hunters had set a wildfire and judging by the way the morning breeze blew, it was headed this way.

"How could you?" he asked, praying for some humanity in Mr. Miller's cold blue eyes.

"I do have to hand it to you," he nodded. "Leading us into the Gorge, getting ambushed by twenty wolves? It would have worked. But we knew about them, we called in extras. Kept them a town over till last night."

"We wanted a surprise," Jonathon sneered. "Course we didn't get all you, but the fire will take care of any stragglers."

Cole's heart pounded in his chest now, how could they get out? How could they escape? How could Reyna run the way she was limping? He had to get to the others, hell he had to get out of the woods completely!

"I wouldn't worry about escaping," Jonathon said. "We're burning the entire mountain. There won't be anywhere for you to hide."

"It's a good thing we kept the town quiet," Mr. Miller tossed the knife from one hand to the other.

"Once the alert goes out, they'll have no choice but to evacuate. You my boy, you'll go missing in the chaos."

Cole's knees felt weak as he realized the brilliance of Mr. Miller's plan. The town bordered the woods, wildfires weren't super common but generally everyone had an idea of how to get out of town if there was one. Any wolves who had a residence in town and were killed in the woods would simply be labeled as missing in the evacuation. Reyna had been right, they knew exactly how to cover their tracks when they killed wolves and no one would suspect them.

"Sucks the house will go, just remodeled the den," Mr. Miller chuckled.

"You're not just burning the woods," Cole whispered.

"I have to admit, I was nervous, but knowing that you and your friends slaughtered innocent people in town, you dating my daughter while being this? This whole place can burn in hell."

Cole almost dropped at the callous contempt in Mr. Miller's voice. He had no idea things would go this far! How had a silly dare while drunk ended up with him being face to face with Hunters and a wildfire threatening to engulf the only home he knew?

"Burn or not, I'll have my kill. I won't leave this job unfinished, not this time," Jonathon said as he aimed the rifle again at Cole. "And I'll kill anyone who gets in my way."

A shot went off and Cole felt Reyna push him down. Snapping back to reality, he grabbed her hand. He got off the ground, scooping up Reyna and leaped into the trees.

"Filthy hybrid!" Jonathon's voice echoed, "You'll die this day if it's the last thing I do!"

Cole squeezed Reyna into his chest as he fled, not even caring what direction he went as another shot went off.

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Cole squeezed Reyna to his chest, running east, but beyond that he didn't even know! What could he do? Where could he go?

"Cole, Cole!" Reyna's pained voice broke through his panic and he slid to a stop, looking at her. She was breathing heavily, her arms locked around his neck, his skin was burning and she shook violently. Cole looked over the dirt and blood that coated her, good lord it was like a second skin there was so much. He adjusted his grip, trying to ignore how fresh blood ran down his arms.

"Are you okay?" his voice cracked, fighting tears as he saw no fire in her own.

It was a stupid question but what else could he do? What else could he say?

"I will be," she bowed her head and he heard her whimper.

He looked around, sensing that he was near the Rangers station where the guys were but in all honesty, he wasn't sure what direction the station was in. He inhaled the woods, smelling animals and the faint trail of his own. Smelling no Hunters and only a wisp of the fire, he looked back to Reyna.

"I'm gonna howl, but I'm gonna put you down."

She only nodded and he laid her on the dirt beneath a tree. As much as she tried, Reyna couldn't help but cry out, leaning back. Cole's hands hovered over her as she forced herself to stretch her leg out. Fresh tears cut paths through the grime on her face as she took deep breaths and stared at Cole.

Cole stood up straight and howled, not even caring if other Hunters or hell if Mr. Miller and Jonathon found them. Reyna was hurt, bad! There was no way she could run, let alone fight the way she was right now and he needed his friends. As his howl echoed off into the woods, he prayed they would find them as he sat down next to Reyna. As much as he wanted to hold her, he could tell any movement would only bring her more pain and he didn't want to be responsible for anything more than absolutely necessary.

He summoned his wolf eyes and looked at her leg, praying that he could see more like he'd before with Gage. He'd hated the sight of that black blood and what it meant but he knew he had to see if Reyna was as bad. If she was, well he simply prayed that she wasn't. Her aura was normal, her blood was red, healthy, but the veins were jagged and incomplete. He breathed a sigh of relief, knowing they only looked that way because she was injured and she confirmed it.

"I think my leg is broken," she gasped, "At least two places. Maybe three. I fell pretty hard."

"Oh Reyna," Cole breathed, unsure of what else he could say.

"I'm sorry," she cried, shaking her head. "I'm so sorry!"

"This isn't your fault!" he said, grabbing her hand.

"You need to go," she said, looking away. "You need to go and take your boys, run north, get over the ridge into the desert. Just keep running for the border. They'll lose you."

"I'm not leaving you!" he was amazed at her suggestion, what was she thinking?

"I'm a gimp!" she said, her voice was cracking, "I can't fight, I can't run! They want me anyway! I'll stall as long as I can!"

"Reyna no!" Cole shook his head and placed a hand on her cheek, forcing her to look at him.

"You know," she whispered. "You know now and I can't do anything about it. This is what I deserve."

"Know what?" he started to ask then stopped as he remembered Jonathon's scathing words. Reyna closed her eyes as fresh tears dripped and he took a deep breath.

"Reyna, what's a hybrid?"

She opened them and despite the grime and her red eyes, despite the surefire hell they were in and how desperate the situation was he saw the same reflection of pure outright fear in them that he did when she told him about her father.

"Me," she choked, her body vibrating with emotion. "I'm a hybrid. I'm the only one."

She took a deep breath, leaning forward as Cole rubbed her back. He let her fall into his chest as she explained.

"My father was a wolf, but my mom was human. She died when I ripped myself from her body." Before he could process that, Cole turned to the sound of running feet. His fangs jutted out as he tensed, fearing the worst.

Luckily it was Mason, Tyler and Andy quickly followed behind.

"Cole- oh God!" Mason gaped at Reyna laying against Cole, clearly tensing herself for whatever came.

"What happened?" Andy asked as he knelt next to her.

"Mr. Miller is alive and he knows who we are," Cole said, not bothering to debate anything, "He and another Hunter set a wildfire, it's only a matter of time before this entire mountain is nothing but ash. Even the town."

"Oh God," Tyler gaped. "What do we do?"

"You run," Reyna huffed, "I can't, I'll stay, they want me most of all, maybe they'll leave you alone."

"What makes you say that? We're all wolves," Tyler said.

Reyna shook her head.

"I'm a hybrid, I've been lying to you for months."

"What the hell does that mean?" Mason asked.

"Guys whatever it is, I think we need to go," Andy said. "Reyna you're clearly too hurt to run and I can smell that smoke coming closer."

"Just leave me," she insisted as Cole scooped her up again.

"Like hell, we're a pack, we protect each other." he stared down each of his friends, making it clear. "Hybrid or not."

"I'll scout ahead," Mason said, "if we run south, towards the beach, we can avoid the fire path."

"Run parallel to the highway, my house is closest to the town sign, we can stop there, set her leg and get your truck," Andy added, looking to Cole.

Cole nodded and they set off. Mason ran ahead as Cole jogged with Andy and Tyler on either side. Cole's heart finally slowed for the first time that morning, they may be on the run but at least everyone was here and alive.

"You need to tell us the truth," Cole said as he adjusted his grip on Reyna.

She looked up at him and he could see the debate in her eyes. Whatever it meant to be a hybrid was clearly painful. There was a lot more to this world than he thought before but he didn't back down. Her past didn't matter, what did was their future, for all them, her included. She nodded and spoke softly but he knew his friends listened just as well if they were next to her.

"My father fell in love with a human, they got together, I was a product of that, an abomination, my father lost his pack because of it. I slaughtered my mom being born, I killed before I even cried."

"How?" Mason's voice carried through the trees easily as they ran. "I thought wolves didn't even bother with humans!"

"They don't," Reyna agreed, "But my father was different. There's a thing, they call it a True Mate. It's the one you'll have forever, the one you'll build your pack with, the same one you would kill for. My father never found his in the pack, but he found his in a human woman. No one believed it and it's not like we can ask them what they thought."

"And what does that have to do with these Hunters?" Andy asked, his voice far off to their left.

"That Hunter, the one who found me before Cole, he's the one who killed my father. Guess he wants to finish the job."

Cole kept quiet as Reyna recounted her father's brutal murder years ago. Tyler, Andy and Mason asked the occasional question but the air was too tense for more detail. Cole hugged Reyna closer as she cried fresh tears. Good lord what had he gotten himself into?

It only took about twenty minutes before they came across empty campsites and another twenty after that before they saw the neighborhoods on the farthest edge of town.

They grouped together at the edge of the tree line looking at the empty highway and the houses across the way. No one made a move to cross the street however.

"You realize what this means," Cole said looking to his friends.

"We can't stay," Andy's voice cracked.

"We can't stay," Cole nodded, fighting his own tears.

"I'm sorry," Reyna whimpered.

"This isn't your fault," Tyler said as he scanned the houses.

"Are you sure no one will be home?" Cole asked as he adjusted Reyna in his arms.

She hadn't tried to leave and he wondered if being a hybrid prevented her from healing like they did. Unfortunately none of them had thought to clean her up before running and she was still naked with blood and dirt covering her. Not to mention he and his boys looked like hell after last

night. The khakis they'd stolen from the station were loose on them had been torn up on their run.

"They should be at a station by now. Especially with that," Andy looked behind them at the massive gray cloud that had ballooned over the woods.

The wildfire was growing fast and that only meant a matter of time before alerts went out for evacuations.

"Okay let's go," Cole said as he confidently jogged across the highway.

Thankfully no cars were on the road yet and they made it to Andy's quickly. Luckily the neighborhood wasn't active and Cole envied the subtle snores that came from each house. After a quick check, Andy confirmed that his house was devoid of parents and they quickly snuck inside with Cole laying Reyna on an old love seat that was in the corner. She whimpered in pain as Cole adjusted her. Mason brought wet towels and Andy got the first aid kit. Cole thanked whoever was listening that none of them felt embarrassed about how they cleaned up a naked and injured Reyna.

His heart twisted though every time she winced and he shoved Tyler aside, wiping a fresh towel over her neck.

"Why aren't you healing like us?" Tyler asked as they worked. "Even Andy's arm is better now."

"Being a hybrid means I'm only half wolf," she whimpered as she wiped her own face.

"You heal slower," Andy assumed. "It's why you still had bruises after the club when we didn't."

"That's not the only thing," she shook her head and pulled herself up more against the pillows.

"Clearly you're a wolf," Tyler said as he turned to grab a loose tshirt.

Andy had an older sister, she had left for college two years ago but his parents had kept a box of her things including clothes. Clothes that thankfully Reyna could wear.

She took the shirt and gingerly pulled it over her head. Cole held her upright as she fixed it and he sensed her hesitation. He took her hand and squeezed it. What more could she be hiding?

"I can't..." she bit her lip, looking away as she whispered. "I can't shift."

"What do you mean you can't shift?" Mason asked as he collected the bloody towels in a bag.

"You shift with us every month, hell you shifted last night!"

"I don't," she confessed, refusing to share eye contact. "You shift, you can't even remember entire nights but I can't. And I do. I remember everything."

"It was you," Cole breathed as the pieces fell into place.

"What was her?" Tyler asked.

"It's strange," Cole said slowly.

He remembered the human-like figure that appeared throughout his shifts. He always dismissed it but the more he thought about it, it all made sense. Reyna always vanished just before they shifted. They never got a clear answer on what she did and didn't remember. She always appeared the morning after, perfectly ready for breakfast and despite his best efforts he couldn't remember a color or shape of her wolf.

"I never thought it was you," he said, looking at Reyna.

"How can you run with wolves if you aren't one? How do you have claws or fangs?" Tyler asked.

"It's all I can do," she said as she finally turned to Cole. "I can't become a full wolf. I never could. I never can."

Cole said nothing as the others cleaned up. Mason walked into the kitchen with the trash and Andy walked into the hallway, shouting that he'd find clothes. Tyler cleaned up the first aid kit as



Cole simply sat on the floor. He placed a hand on Reyna's cheek, clean now and soft as she sighed. Her heartbeat was stronger now, and he sensed that she was willing herself to heal as quickly as possible. Of course she would try to run, he knew that, but he knew he couldn't let her.

"You should have told us," he said as she closed her eyes. "You should have told me."

"Would you have stayed?" she whispered.

"Yes." Cole's answer was automatic, without hesitation and she opened her eyes.

There, her beautiful brown eyes, they flared with joy as she looked at him, no longer red and puffy as she smiled. Cole smiled back, thankful she was here, that she was whole.

"Guys," Mason spoke, breaking the moment as he came in from the kitchen. "First alerts just went out, Evacuation from the look out to Main Street."

"What do we do?" Andy asked as he tossed fresh clothes to each of the guys. "We don't have phones or anything. Hunters know us, they could be breaking down doors any minute. Town sign is only ten minutes down the street if that but I'm sure the Hunters will cover the highway."

"Even if we get out, not like we have much on us," Mason said. "This is insane, we should have just ran, look at what's happened!"

"Our parents won't even know!" Andy added. "We just made everything worse with last night."

"Last night or not, they were burning the mountain, they knew about the Gorge, they brought back up," Cole said. "Regardless we can't stay here."

"Looks like we are gonna be runaways," Andy frowned. "How the hell are we gonna survive?"

"We can make it," Reyna grunted as she leaned up on the couch.

"Whoa hey, watch it!" Cole said as he held onto her.

She shrugged him off, standing up, she leaned heavily on her right side but at least she stood up. Cole stood up, quickly offering an arm for support.

"What's the plan?" Mason asked. "How long will it take you to heal?"

"I should be fine in an hour or two," Reyna gritted her teeth. "Go home, grab what you can carry. We get the hell outta here. Where? I don't know, but we can't stay here. Not anymore."

Cole bit his lip as he looked at Reyna, she definitely was healing, color had come back to her cheeks and her wounds had stopped bleeding. He grabbed a tshirt from Tyler and carefully stepped back to change but stayed close to catch Reyna in case she fell.

"We should leave something," Tyler said after a moment. "Our parents won't know but they should know something."

"We can't tell them what we are," Cole said as he slipped on a pair of Andy's jeans.

"No, but he's right," Andy said as he paced. "They need something to help them. If we disappear, they'll just go looking for us."

"They could run into Hunters, they could catch us before we even reach the bottom of the mountain," Tyler added. "But what can we even say?"

"Reyna, you've done this before," Mason said hesitantly. "You must have a back up."

Reyna closed her eyes, taking a breath and Cole stepped forward, gripping her hand. She opened her eyes, locking with Cole.

"I can't tell you what to say," she said softly and gazed at the others. "You have to decide this yourself. But I did make a back up. You boys, you weren't raised like me. And with my fosters, I have money put aside. It's been kept somewhere safe. Somewhere no one would ever find it."

"Where? Andy asked. "The woods? Cause I'm pretty sure all our hidey holes are gonna be toast."

"No," she shook her head and looked back to Cole. "It's at Cole's."

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They didn't argue much following Reyna's confession. The only debate was how long they could stay since Andy's parents were out. Between his arm, Reyna's injuries and the general mess of the rest of them, Cole put his foot down, declaring they at least needed an hour to sleep off the night.

Cole blinked slowly as he took a deep breath, waking up. He had snuggled with Reyna on the loveseat and he tightened his arms around her as she moaned, waking up at his embrace.

"Guys!" Tyler's voice snapped Cole to attention as he looked up to see Tyler running into the room.

He was holding a desk clock and shook it in panic as Andy and Mason came in behind him.

"We've been asleep for three hours! It's already 10!"

"Worse, there's another fire reported! On the west side of town by the orchards," Mason added.

"We're screwed!"

Cole and Reyna got up quickly and Cole rubbed his eyes as he tried to process the rising panic in his chest.

"What do we do?" Tyler asked. "I know we made that story to be at the beach but we gotta get home! If there's even a home left!"

"My parents aren't back, they've got to be running point on this fire," Andy said.

"Which one is a better question," Mason said. "They don't get it under control both fires will take the whole town before tonight!"

"We don't even have a phone to check!" Tyler said.

"Guys chill!" Cole snapped. "We overslept but no one found us. That's a win!"

"For now," Reyna added as she stretched her legs out.

"What's the play?" Mason asked.

Cole looked at his friends and sighed. He hated being responsible, but he was the Alpha and technically it was on him that they'd stayed to sleep. He glanced at Reyna who held two silver bullets in her hand. While she looked better, he could tell there was still pain as she shifted her weight.

"We do what we said," Cole looked to the guys. "We get the hell out of town. Together."

"Everyone's evacuating, maybe we can use it as cover," Andy suggested.

"Yeah, hopefully our parents are already out," Tyler bit his lip and Cole nodded as they split off.

He knew that no one wanted to leave, but he knew there was no other choice now.

They agreed that a simple note saying they were already evacuating would be easy enough and would stall long enough to get out of town, hell out of the county if they were lucky. Despite the fear that clouded them, the boys split off, quickly running home to grab what they could carry. Cole thanked their plan of throwing camping gear in his truck as it would help them for the next few days.

While Reyna had healed significantly, Cole insisted on carrying her as they ran to his house. Before they left Andy's, he took the two bullets that had forced their way out of her skin and

thrown them with absolute disgust in the trash. The silver smashed projectiles were small, but his hatred for them was insurmountable.

If he never saw another bullet, it would still be too soon, he thought to himself as they came up to his house.

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"Well this certainly wasn't the way I expected to find myself in your bedroom," Reyna quipped in a whisper, sitting on the bed.

Luckily his parents still slept soundly. It was strange but not unheard of on a weekend. It was only a matter of time before they woke up anyway, Cole thought, the radios and TVs he'd heard from surrounding houses only heralded the incoming flames. The two of them had snuck in through the garage and upstairs with neither of his parents aware. Cole blushed, his room was a mess, he hadn't exactly planned on company but it didn't matter now.

"Sorry it's not the Ritz," he said, leaning out his window.

Reyna had explained on the run over, she had hidden a lock box with a couple thousand dollars under his window. Why there he wondered but she insisted it was the one spot no one would think of let alone access.

He reached under and felt the cool metal of the box and pulled it back in. He sat next to Reyna on the bed as she grew a singular claw and broke the lock. Cole gaped at the hundreds of bills that were messily thrown in, crumpled, bent and folded in varying ways.

"I never wanted you to think you had no future," she said softly.

"Wow," Cole breathed, taking the bills out and smoothing them into a neat pile.

"I'm so sorry," she continued, her voice cracking as she leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Don't," he said, willing himself to be confident. "You've saved us a thousand times and you're doing it again. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I don't just mean this," she said and stood up, groaning at the effort as she pivoted in circles.

Cole put the money aside as he grabbed her wrists, stopping her mid turn and brushed back her hair.

"I lied about who I was, I lied about being a true werewolf. I pretty much forced you guys to fight a battle that wasn't yours. Now you have to run because I couldn't end the threat."

"This is not on you," Cole insisted as Reyna's eyes began to tear. "I'm the one who took a stupid dare. I'm the one who didn't listen and kept a relationship that I knew wasn't going anywhere. I'm the one who stayed. Hell we all stayed, you didn't force that. And you are not the sole protector here."

"If I'd been able to get them last night," Reyna turned away, ashamed to look at Cole. "They wouldn't have set the mountain on fire, they wouldn't have known your identities. You may have taken a dare, you may have become wolves, but I'm the one who knew the truth and the danger of Hunters. I brought them here!"

"I brought them here," Cole said. "I'm the one who's responsible for the Main Street Massacre. Not you, not the guys, me. They knew a wolf was here as soon as that happened."

Reyna said nothing as she walked to Cole's desk. She picked up a small silver metal ball and played with it. Cole recognized it as a trinket he'd picked up months ago. It wasn't anything special, it was the size of a small golf ball and had curling patterns engraved all over it. The way

the lines cut and shaped though reminded him of the wild and untamed nature of being a wolf. Reyna turned around to face Cole, her eyes were red with tears and her lips quivered.

"Why don't you hate me?"

"I can't," he said as he crossed the room to her. "I don't know why but I can't hate you. You've saved my life and that's a lot but there's more than that you know?"

"Even knowing what I am?" she held up the ball with her fingers, not her claws.

"Hybrid or not, I mean what I said last night," he plucked the ball from her and twirled it with his own claws. "I love you."

Without warning, she crashed her lips into his. He welcomed the attack and responded in kind, dropping his arms. The ball slipped out of his hand and landed with a heavy thud on the wood floor.

The defining sound echoed and they paused mid kiss, only realizing now that there had been the sounds of his parents downstairs.

"Cole?" his mom called out, "Cole?"

"Go!" Reyna whispered as he turned around for the money on the bed.

Before they could do anything else, the door opened and Cole's stomach froze, locking eyes with his dad.

"Cole?" his dad gaped. "You came back early?"

"I uh..." Cole stammered as his dad walked in, pointing at Reyna who hadn't been able to hide in time and now leaned against his desk.

"Who's this?"

"She's uh..." Cole bit his lip, thanking whoever was out there that both of them were fairly cleaned up and fully clothed.

"I'm Reyna," she held a hand out and shook his dad's hand. "I'm just helping him pack."

"Pack?" his dad asked just as his mom came in.

"Cole? Oh good you're here! There's evacuations happening! Some fire in the woods!" she said.

"Oh hello? Who are you? What are you doing in Cole's room?"

Reyna smiled as Cole's parents turned on him. He quickly shoved the money in his back pocket and grabbed a backpack, filling it with whatever he could find as he avoided their stare. He loved his parents but with everything that had happened since being bit, especially last night and Reyna's final secret he couldn't bear to look at them directly. Knowing he was packing to disappear forever made his heart twist but he knew it was for the best.

"Cole? What exactly are you doing?" His mom asked.

"We didn't even hear the truck?" His dad added.

"Um I uh let Andy take it," Cole lied. "You know him. He's got a bunch of crap he'll want to take."

"Do you have a car?" his mom asked, pointing the question to Reyna.

"No," she said as she moved to let Cole grab a journal off his desk.

"So how exactly are you getting around?" his mom asked.

"I'd like to know what this is about?" his dad asked, reaching into Cole's pocket to pull out the wad of cash that had been sticking out.

It was so thick and messy, the money had been working its way up while Cole had packed. He hadn't even noticed, too concerned with how he could get his parents to leave. A decision he was regretting more with every passing second.

"It's not what you think!" Cole said quickly, turning around to face his parents.

"Young man if this came out of the trailer, we are going to have a long conversation!" his dad's voice hardened as he crossed his arms.

"It didn't!" Cole argued.

"Young lady I think you should head home," his mom said as she crossed the room. "Your parents are probably worried. You'll need to meet up with them. Stay safe and all."

"She can't!" Cole shot back.

By the way she leaned on the desk, he knew there was no way she could walk out let alone leave. She was healing but it was slower than usual and he wondered if those bullets had anything special in them or if it was just her hybrid nature.

"I don't think your new girlfriend wants to hear what we're going to talk about," his dad growled.

"It's not your money!" Cole insisted, reaching for it.

While he didn't deny the girlfriend claim, his heart did flutter at it. He pushed down his feelings though as he tried to get the money back. His dad though was many things and when he made up his mind about something, he was hard to dissuade. His dad stepped back, frowning at Cole as he gripped the money tighter.

"We know you don't work and we've been very lenient with that," his dad said. "But you know how we feel about stealing."

"It's my money actually," Reyna spoke up.

Cole blinked, wincing at the incoming storm he was sure to hear. As wonderful as Reyna was for taking responsibility, this would only make things worse as his parents exchanged looks with each other.

"What was your name? I think we need to call your parents," his mom said sweetly, clearly trying to diffuse the situation.

"I think we need to discuss your behavior these last few months. And who you've been hanging around with," his dad said.

"Paul, let's not do this in front of company," his mom said.

"Ever since he left football, he's been sneaking around," his dad said. "I know Britney hasn't been here and I'm not liking this attitude."

"Can I have that back please?" Reyna pointed sheepishly to the cash and his dad cocked an eyebrow.

"Do you work?" he asked.

"Dad!" Cole groaned.

"Where does someone so young get so much money?" he questioned.

"Maybe she has a job," his mom said, taking the cash from her husband. "Maybe she's inspiring him!"

"Oh mom cmon!" Cole whined as his dad snorted.

"I'm sure she's inspiring something!" his dad eyed the two of them.

"Here honey, I'm sure Cole can call you later!" his mom said, handing the cash back to Reyna.

"Thank you," Reyna smiled. "But I really need Cole with me."

Cole grimaced at how that would sound and his parents took a pause as they looked at each other and back to them. His dad grumbled and his mom wrung her hands.

"I know how you kids are," his mom shook her head. "But I'm afraid we really need to have a family conversation."

"Mom!"

"Your mother's right, you can call her later," his dad's voice was firm, final, there would be no arguing.

"Let's give them a minute but Cole I want you downstairs," his mom insisted as she pushed her husband out the door. "One minute."

Cole groaned as he pushed the door shut behind them and heard Reyna chuckle.

"What?" he asked.

"They're adorable," she said. "I can see why you don't want to leave. Why you don't want to tell them."

"Yeah," Cole sighed, more annoyed than anything by his parents.

He loved his parents, he did! But with everything happening, he knew they'd never understand.

He looked at Reyna and smiled as she stuffed the money in his backpack, zipping it closed.

"What will you tell your fosters?"

"I won't," she said. "They'd never understand, hell they don't even care. You've seen my room."

She picked up the metal ball, playing with it and Cole seethed. Stupid trinket, it had revealed them. She cocked an eyebrow at him.

"It's different for you," she said softly. "You have people who care about you."

"So do you," he said as he grabbed her wrist. "I'm ready for it."

He took the ball and tossed it on his bed, thankfully the blankets muffled the hit and he kissed her.

"Are you?" she asked as they broke apart. "They know I'm here, they know I have money, they'll think the worst."

"What else can I do?" he asked, pressing his head against hers. "I would tell them but I know what you think of that."

She cupped her hand around his cheek, tilting Cole so he locked eyes with her. He sighed, thankful that color flushed her cheeks and she wasn't crying anymore. The way he'd found her only a few short hours ago terrified him, but seeing her here with a spark in her eyes made him hope for the future.

"You are an Alpha," she whispered. "I had no right to tell you what to say or do. If you feel telling them will ease them, than do it."

Cole froze, shocked at Reyna's change of heart.

"Tell them?" he questioned. "Tell them everything?"

"I can't judge you," Reyna's voice was sincere, she truly believed in every word she spoke. "I won't judge you. You are leaving. Forever. It's different for me. But for you, all this, it'll be gone. Tell them."

Cole stayed quiet as he looked around his room. There was so much here, he thought. Pictures of him and the guys playing football, camping, messing around. Flags from his favorite sports teams, books, action figures, his messy closet full of old football gear and bags. His desk was littered in homework and his laptop sat cockeyed on the corner. His bed was unmade with blankets on one side and filthy laundry on the other. It was so opposite from Reyna's room he thought. So full of random stuff and memories. His eyes fell on a shelf by his door with only a picture of him and his smiling parents in front of their trailer with a shell necklace.

He grinned softly at the memory, they had gone camping at the beach for a week when he was thirteen, only about two months before school and meeting Britney. It had been their last full family only vacation. He'd found a bunch of shells and wanted to collect them. His mom had

laughed at him carrying them all in his arms and his dad had cut a piece of fishing line and the three of them had made necklaces. He knew his parents still had theirs and despite growing up and moving on from spending time with them, he still treasured the necklaces. If Cole remembered right the necklaces for his parents still hung on a hook in the trailer.

The same trailer they would take to evacuate.

He broke free from Reyna and walked to the shelf, picking up the necklace. His past, he fingered the shells, the last shred of innocence before he'd gone on to date, to drink, to dares and wolves and fighting. He turned to Reyna who held his backpack, his future, uncertain and dangerous but somehow he knew this is what he needed. He swallowed as Reyna nodded, already agreeing.

"I'm telling them."

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They wasted no time. Cole knew time was running short as he smelled the smoke through the windows and they made their way to the living room.

"Mom, Dad, I gotta tell you something," he said.

"What is it?" his mom asked.

"Do you need a ride home?" his dad asked Reyna who shook her head.

"No, Cole is..." she shared a look with Cole who took a deep breath.

"Can you sit down?" he asked.

His parents looked at each other and shrugged, seating themselves on the couch.

"Cole, is she..." his mom asked, miming a pregnant belly.

"What? No! This is about me!" Cole said as he paced.

Reyna took a seat on the arm of another chair and cocked her head watching Cole amusingly.

He ran his fingers through his hair as he struggled to come up with a logical explanation. It was so easy to think about saying the truth but actually doing it?

"Are you well you know..." his dad pursed his lips. "Gay?"

"No!" Cole shook his head. "I'm well um..."

He bit his lip, looking at his parents. How could he tell them he was a werewolf? How could explain that Mr. Miller had tried to kill him? How could he say he was responsible for everything going nuts?

"Well a few months ago..." he started as he clenched his hands. "A few months ago I did something really stupid..."

"Are you in trouble?" his mom asked. "Paul, I think I know what that money is for?"

"Now kid we can help you but you need to be honest with what you did," his dad said.

"No, no I'm not in trouble, well like you think," Cole said quickly and growled in frustration. "It's complicated!"

"It's actually fun," Reyna teased and Cole glared at her.

"Seriously?" he begged.

"It's already past eleven," she reminded him.

He nodded, knowing that they had to meet the guys at his truck by noon.

"What is going on?" his mom asked. "Just tell us. We won't be mad."

"Listen it's complicated!" he repeated and knelt down to be face to face level with them.

"Cole," his dad's voice was strong, confident and Cole nodded, taking a deep breath.

"I'm different," he confessed, looking to the side. "I'm different and I have to leave. I just..."

"Different how?" his dad's voice was cautious now, he was questioning his son now.

"Just trust me," Cole's voice shook. "You don't want the details but trust me that I'm different and me leaving is the best thing."

"You are not leaving!" his mom's voice was firm, fear colored it but she grabbed Cole in a hug, "Whatever happened you are staying here!"

"I can't mom!" Cole broke away, standing up again. "I can't stay cause it's too dangerous!"

"What is so dangerous?" his dad demanded. "Look at me!"

Cole took another breath and closed his eyes. Saying the words may be difficult but maybe he could do something to show he was serious. He opened his eyes, willing them to glow gold.

"Oh my God!" his mom gasped, leaning back in surprise.

"What the hell?" his dad stood up, stumbling over his feet.

"I'm different," Cole said, blinking to make his eyes normal again, he didn't show anything else.

The fear on his parents faces were more than enough. They'd never see him the same way again and claws and fangs would just make it worse. He took a deep breath as his dad walked around the couch and his mom continued to lean back.

"Who are you? What have you done with my son?" his mom's voice cracked just as Cole's did.

"Mom-" he reached out but his dad snapped.

"Don't you go near her!"

"Dad!" Cole looked at his dad who pointed at him.

Cole could sense the change in the air, his parents were terrified and rightfully so. He stepped back slowly as Reyna stood up.

"Are you a part of this?" his mom asked, her voice shook as she swept her eyes from Reyna to Cole.

"I am," Reyna said calmly, she flashed her own wolf eyes and held Cole's hand.

"I want an explanation," his dad growled. "Now!"

Cole said nothing as he stared at his dad. The same venomous tone filled the air between them as when he'd confronted Mr. Miller. Cole's heart twisted as his stomach dropped and he wondered if this was why the Gorge had so many wolves. If this was the way his own parents reacted, he couldn't imagine complete strangers discovering the truth.

"We're werewolves," Reyna said. "Both of us, for months now. But it's just us."

Cole glanced at Reyna as she lied yet again for him and the guys. His heart pounded so loudly he was surprised no one remarked on it. He looked back to his parents as his mom shook with fear.

"Whatever you think," she stammered. "Whatever you think has happened to you, we, we will get you help. Both of you!"

"Mom," Cole shook his head. "This isn't something I can change. This is me."

"This is not you!" his dad thundered. "I want to know who did this to you! Who?"

"Me," Reyna said and she stepped forward, only Cole could tell the effort it took her to stand confidently in front of him. "It was all me."

"Get out of my house!" his dad snarled. "I don't know who the hell you think you are poisoning my son with this crap but it ends today!"

"Dad," Cole protested. "It's not her fault! I'm the one who fell in the Gorge!"



"You can't be serious!" his dad snorted.

"Cole, we can help you. You're just... you're just sick!" his mom insisted as she stood up.

"I knew we should have done something," his dad muttered. "Quitting football, leaving Britney, sneaking out?"

"After the fire we will find someone to help you," his mom said. "I think we just need a little family time to work this all out."

"You're not getting it," Reyna said. "We're not coming back."

"You certainly aren't!" his dad snapped.

"Dad!" Cole shot back. "She's right! I'm not coming back! I can't!"

"We can help you with this," His mom repeated. "We can help you and your friend here if she needs it we will be discreet with it."

"Mom, we don't need a doctor! This is who we are!" Cole begged as he brought up his hand and flexed.

Claws erupted from his fingers and all hell broke loose. All he wanted to do was convince them he was leaving for safety, for everyone's safety! But as soon as his claws became visible, his mom shrieked and his dad ran around the couch, putting himself in between.

"Get out!" his dad roared, "Get out before I get my gun!"

"Dad!" Cole's voice cracked as his dad pushed himself and his wife out the living room.

"Let's go!" Reyna snapped as she pulled on Cole.

He let himself be pulled back as his mom wailed and his dad continued yelling. He didn't want to end things like this! He kept his eyes on his parents despite Reyna's tug and felt tears running down his cheeks. How had he done this so wrong?

Eventually Reyna dragged him through the front door and Cole was forced to turn away as he heard the lock on his dad's safe crack open.

His dad was a good shot, not a professional but decent and he knew it was only a matter of time before he came out the door ready to shoot.

Feeling his heart break, he scooped up Reyna and ran down the street, fighting the urge to scream.

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"Do I want to know what happened?" Mason asked as he approached the truck.

Cole and Reyna sat on the edge of the bed, a sizable new dent had crushed the fender and Cole rubbed his fist in annoyance.

"That is the question," Reyna said, raising an eyebrow to Cole.

"What did you say?" Cole asked. "What did you write?"

"I left them my journal," Mason sighed as he leaned against the truck. "I've been trying to write out about the club for weeks and..."

"You trust them?" Cole asked, feeling his heart break.

"So I'm not the only one who's leaving the truth?" Andy said as he and Tyler walked up carrying a massive cooler.

"I can't explain it but something told me that I had to," Tyler added. "It didn't feel right, leaving with no answers."

"We all said something," Cole nodded as he helped Andy secure the cooler. "At least you won't

see your parents reaction.”

“You told them?” Andy stepped back in surprise.

Cole didn't respond as he heard the guys exhale in surprise. He wondered out of all of them who had decided first and if that somehow influenced the others. He shook his head, it didn't matter now. They had bigger things to worry about. He pulled the straps down tight on the rest of the gear and sighed.

“I couldn't leave them feeling like they were losing me. But now I think it would have been better.”

“What do they know? About us?” Mason asked.

“Nothing, we only told them about us,” Reyna said as she stood up on top of the cooler, looking towards the woods. “Smoke is coming this way, I can see the flames.”

“I didn't want anyone else involved so no one knows about you, any of you.” Tyler said.

“Same,” Mason nodded, “I couldn't bring you down with me.”

“Doesn't matter any more. What's done is done,” Cole said as he double checked the nearly packed bed.

“I grabbed a Ranger walkie,” Andy said, holding up the handheld radio. “My parents have ordered evacuations from look out to Main Street, the neighborhoods east of the highway and the high school. The fire by the orchards? It's headed straight for the Grand on the backside. They have no containment.”

“It's only a matter of time before they order the rest of the town down to the Grand to evacuate,” Tyler nodded. “We need to go.”

“What are we even doing? There's only one way out and you know the Hunters will cover the highway. We're screwed!” Mason threw his hands up.

“What did you think it would be easy?” Reyna smirked.

“We're getting out of here,” Cole said, his voice was firm. “Whatever it takes, we're all getting out of here, alive.”

“Alright mighty Alpha? What's the play?” Mason asked.

Reyna leaped down from the truck and held Cole's hand. He felt slightly calmer seeing her grow stronger but hated the plan he'd thought up while waiting on the others. He took a deep breath and tossed the keys to Andy.

“You, Mason and Tyler will take the truck. You'll go down the highway. I don't know if Mr. Miller and that Jonathon guy can get pictures out on us and I don't know how many Hunters survived last night. But Reyna and I are known. We'll run the highway, if we get caught, they'll chase us.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Andy gaped. “No way!”

“This isn't a debate!” Cole argued. “You guys can sneak through with the other cars evacuating. Someone has to move the truck. Hell we can't even all fit!”

“You trying to kill yourself?” Tyler asked. “I thought we agreed we go together!”

“Guys he's right,” Mason said. “Even squeezing, the truck only fits three, the bed is packed. What else can we do?”

“Thank you!” Cole clapped his hands, appreciating his friend for always siding with him.

“What about you? How are you feeling?” Tyler asked Reyna who shrugged.

“I'm healed, I told you I'd be fine.”

“So after last night you want to separate again?” Andy asked. “Just to clarify things?”

"Not like last night," Cole shook his head. "We're running the highway, we'll keep each other in view."

"Ideally we'll all make it down to the beach together," Reyna said.

"Ideally," Andy snorted.

"Cmon guys," Mason walked around to the passenger door. "We got no time to argue, those flames are coming closer and the more we argue, the more chance we give the Hunters to catch us."

Andy glared at Cole silently as he walked by to the driver door. When the guys were in the truck, Cole stepped up to the window. He sighed as he took in his friends faces. Andy was annoyed, Mason understood and Tyler just seemed to be exhausted by the whole mess.

"Listen, you're just going to join in the traffic, but if shit hits the fan, just bail. I don't care about the truck. We can always grab more shit. Just run."

"If you have to fight," Reyna's voice was cold as she stood next to Cole. "Fight, but the plan is to run first."

She flashed her claws, twirling her hand confidently. Cole didn't doubt her intent to fight and he looked at his friends. Each of them had summoned their own claws, subconsciously or not, they were all prepared to draw blood.

"I know..." Andy started and then he froze, seeing something beyond Cole. "Cole, turn around."

"I guess the rumors are true," a new voice rose, mocking and confident as Cole turned around to see the last person, no people, he expected to see.

"I never thought you were this. When I heard my parents talking, I knew I had to see for myself. I just..."

There, getting out of his pristine and brand new designer Jeep was Tyson, with Brittney joining him.

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"Brittney..." Cole breathed.

He wasn't sure how to feel seeing her stand there open mouthed and silent. He closed his eyes, turning away, realizing he may have been using his wolf eyes.

"You boys need to get out of here," Reyna growled under her breath. "Cole and I will hold them off."

"Are you nuts?" Andy hissed.

"Go!" Cole snapped and walked forward.

"You know when I got brought on last night, I didn't believe it. But then I saw the Gorge," Tyson chuckled. "I saw all your pathetic bitchy boys rolling around in the mud!"

"You were there?" Cole paused, he couldn't remember much of last night and he shuddered thinking of what could have happened.

"Oh yeah, me and Vance. Mr. Miller told us what really killed Gage! You!"

"I can't believe you let yourself become some sort of freak!" Brittney gaped. "I mean I know there's trash but a freaking monster? Standards Cole!"

"Like you'd know anything about standards you two timing cheating bitch!" Cole shot back.

"As much fun as I'm having watching you two," Reyna stepped forward. "I think we need to set the rules first."

She smiled, bringing up her claws, Cole noticed her ears poking up through her hair and fire in her golden eyes. Reyna showed off her fangs by licking her tongue over them and gestured to the truck behind her.

"How about you give the pack a head start. They may not be willing to kill, but I am!"

"I don't even get you," Tyson snorted. "Too pathetic to have your own friends so you turn people into monsters? Why don't you go roll in the mud with the rest of the dogs you little freak!"

"Oh honey I've been called worse by better."

"Guys, get out of here!" Cole shouted as he heard the truck start up.

As much as they didn't want to, he trusted they would listen and leave. But he needed to know more about last night.

"Where's Vance?" he asked.

"Vance? You don't remember?" Tyson stepped back, leaning into his Jeep. "One your buddies in the Gorge killed him!"

Cole's stomach turned to ice as Reyna shook her head.

"Not one of ours, we don't run with the Gorge."

"You looked pretty chummy last night!"

"You tried to kill us! Kill me? Wolves or not!" Cole snapped. "You tricked me into going into the Gorge!"

"I didn't know there were freaking werewolves in the Gorge!" Tyson argued as he brought out a shotgun. "I just wanted Brittney!"

"So you tried to kill me?" Cole thundered.

"It wasn't his idea!" Brittney stepped forward. "I was bored, you were boring! At least whatever happened would be exciting!"

Cole bit his lip, shocked at her callous words. He'd always known Brittney to be a pretty face and after whatever was fun and hot but he'd never imagined she would resort to something so cruel for entertainment! He hadn't felt much towards her in months and he thought that maybe it was his secret weighing him down but as he stared at her, he realized it was just the wolf inside him telling him that she wasn't worth his time anymore.

"Wow," Reyna leaned back as she swung her eyes between the three of them. "Cole was boring so you planned a murder with a new boy toy? Who after your attempted murder failed, you still fucked? And you didn't think to break things off with Cole even though you knew everything changed? And you did this cause you were bored?"

Reyna's laughter rang through the air and Cole turned to stare at her. She thought this was funny? What the hell was going on? Reyna leaned forward, a savage grin splayed across her face. She locked eyes on Brittney who backed up against the Jeep.

"Wow," she repeated, "Did not see that one coming. I know you're a cold hearted empty shell but damn."

"You should have died," Brittney said, fear coloring her words as she gripped Tyson's shoulder.

"I am sorry you got turned into this, it's not what I wanted to happen. But at least we can end it all now."

"Dating a football star?" Tyson sneered. "Try dating a werewolf hunter. Major upgrade!"

Cole watched the shotgun come up to aim but before Tyson could fire, he heard the familiar squeal of tires on rocks. His boys hadn't left and the truck was coming straight at them! He dived

towards Reyna knocking her over just as the truck rushed past them. He looked up just as Tyson and Brittney screamed, fleeing as the truck crashed into the Jeep.

The hit was hard! Cole's truck slammed into the front fender of the Jeep, crumpling but still standing while the Jeep tipped on its side, slamming onto the dirt with an echoing thud.

"You dirty mutts!" Tyson screamed. "You wrecked my Jeep!"

"Get out of here!" Cole yelled to his boys and shifted his attention to Tyson. "Hey Tyson, you think you're such a good shot? Let's find out!"

Knowing that Reyna and the guys could handle themselves, he ran towards the woods. Before he made the treeline though, he leaped up on the Jeep and cut a long and satisfying scratch on its door. Tyson screamed, firing at Cole who ducked and fled into the woods.

"You're dead!" Tyson roared, chasing Cole. "You and your bitch girlfriend and your bitch friends!"

Cole ducked his head as he heard another shot echo as they both ran into the woods. Taking quick stock of the smoke that was filling the air, Cole turned south. All he had to do was lead Tyson away so Reyna and the guys could get free. Thankfully he knew Brittney wouldn't be much of a threat and he'd see her running down the highway after the crash. She may have wanted excitement but almost being pancaked between his truck and Tyson's Jeep may have been too much for her.

He stopped by a tree, taking in deep breaths as he debated what way to go. He could hear Tyson trampling through the woods. The guy definitely wasn't subtle as he shouted cuss words and fired randomly.

"Hey you," Reyna's voice was gleeful as she wrapped her arms around Cole.

"Whoa hey! What are you doing?" he asked as he turned to face her.

"Cmon," she rolled her eyes. "You didn't think I'd let you do this by yourself did you?"

"This isn't your fight," Cole said.

"Maybe not, but I like my boyfriends breathing," Reyna smiled.

Cole rolled his eyes and peered around the tree to see Tyson step through.

He was breathing hard and swinging his gun. Cole heard him cock it but the gun was empty.

Tyson fumbled in his pocket but seeing he was out of ammo, Cole stepped out.

"You're out man, give it up."

"Out or not, I can still take you," Tyson growled, adjusting his grip on the gun.

Reyna snorted, leaning up against the tree.

"What are you gonna do? Beat us to death? We're werewolves. We can take it."

"Reyna stop," Cole said and looked to Tyson. "Look man, you wanna win? You've won. You got Brittney. I'm leaving town. Walk away."

"You're still a monster," Tyson said as he rocked on his feet. "You still killed Gage!"

"And I have to live with that. For the rest of my life," Cole argued. "Trust me, no one regrets what happened more than me."

"You don't get it. I'm killing you. One way or another. For Gage, for the Main Street Massacre, for last night! You don't deserve to live!"

"I'm giving you one shot," Cole said slowly as he retracted his claws. "Walk away."

"Over my dead body!" Tyson hissed.

He charged at Cole, swinging the gun like a bat. Cole side stepped and punched Tyson in the face. Tyson fell, still conscious and screamed. Cole bounced on his feet as Tyson lunged at him

a second time. Cole saw it coming and grabbed the gun, yanking it out of his hand. He followed it up by kneeling Tyson in the stomach and letting the other kid fall to the ground.

"Good shot," Reyna's tone of approval was satisfying but Cole wasn't done as he tossed the gun away.

"You don't want to do this," Cole said. "I don't know what happened last night but trust me. You don't want blood. Knowing what happens, you don't want that. Walk away."

"You expect me to just walk away while you murder people?" Tyson sneered, looking up.

"I expect you to be somewhat smart. Think about Brittney!" Cole insisted. "Think about what all this is doing to her? Her own dad has been killing werewolves for God knows how long! He tried to kill me!"

"You're a werewolf!"

"I'm also a friend! I dated his daughter! I spent time with him at his house! I grew up here! None of that matters to him! All he cares about is killing me now! Killing people I care about!" Cole argued, throwing his hands up.

"You caused this!" Tyson shot back, charging at Cole again.

"I'm a werewolf cause of you!" Cole snapped, grabbing and throwing Tyson into a bush.

Tyson rolled to the side, coughing as he shook leaves out of his hair. Cole walked forward, sighing in annoyance. What was it going to take to get this shit through his head? Tyson was never one for brilliance but to think he had no part in what was happening was stupid!

"Cole, the fire!" Reyna called out from behind him.

He ignored her as he stood over Tyson, shaking his head.

"You and Brittney cheated. You dared me to go to the Gorge. I got bit, I shifted, I killed. I have to live with that forever now. But let's be real, if you hadn't messed with Brittney and tried to get me killed, than I wouldn't be here!"

"She didn't love you anymore! That's not my fault!" Tyson yelled, standing up.

"No," Cole shook his head. "But you broke the rules, you tried to get me killed. It may have been her idea but you didn't have to go along with it! Now look at what's happening!"

Tyson looked behind him as he heard flames explode, Cole looked beyond them to see thick smoke pouring through the trees. Sparks must have landed, starting another blaze and it would only be a matter of minutes before they were overrun by the fire.

"Walk away man, you have her and if you're lucky she'll stay with you. But honestly I don't know."

"She'll stay with me, especially when she sees I can protect her. When I've killed you!"

"You're not gonna kill me. I've moved on. I don't care anymore." Cole stepped back as Tyson rushed him.

"Oh this is pathetic now," Reyna's voice was dripping with contempt as she stepped forward and grabbed Tyson by the shirt.

She hauled him up to his feet and pushed him back, rolling her eyes. She wrapped a hand around Cole's hand and shook her head.

"You just don't get it. He's over the drama. He's leaving. You and the rest of the Hunters can have this town and the whole mountain. We'll find our own. But whatever happens, you'll never match him. Brittney cheated on him. What makes you think she won't cheat on you? She even knows the truth now. Who's to say she won't disappear? Her dad is a murderer who will only face justice at the hands of the wolf he misses!"

Tyson said nothing as he glared at Cole and Reyna. Cole felt a twinge of pity as he looked at the spoiled rich kid. Knowing how he felt with his own life being turned upside down he could only imagine how crazy it felt for Tyson. Especially if he truly saw the Gorge last night and escaped whatever bloody battle had happened. He looked to Reyna and felt his chest rise with pride as she stood confident amid the chaos. Somehow she always knew how to cut through the crap to the heart of the matter. She was right, whatever sense of normalcy was long gone. He'd been heartbroken leaving his parents the way he did but understood there was no turning back. He'd drawn Tyson in to convince him to walk away but maybe that wasn't the answer. Maybe it was never up to the other side to accept the craziness.

"I'm done Tyson," he said. "I'm done hiding. I'm not going to act like this didn't hurt but you gave me an opportunity to find someone better. You gave me an opportunity to see that Brittney and this town was never going to be where I wanted to stay. You helped me see that people are who they are. And honestly you all deserve each other. So if you won't walk away, I will."

Without another word, he gripped Reyna's hand and turned around, speeding into the woods away from the encroaching smoke with her.

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"I'm impressed," Reyna said as they raced through the trees.

"I have to let go," he said. "I can't stay. You were right."

Cole jerked as Reyna stopped and forced him to look at her.

"What was I right about?" she asked, her tone was softer, serious now.

"All of this," he gestured. "I'm a wolf and I can't keep two lives. It was dangerous to try and stay, it was dangerous not to run that first night."

"You mean after the club?"

Cole bit his lip and nodded then sighed in annoyance.

"I should have listened to you way before that. I stayed with Brittney thinking that we had love, that maybe one day she'd understand what happened. But even before finding out she cheated, you warned me to stay inside, to not go out and I didn't listen, I didn't trust you and I murdered those people on Main Street, I murdered Gage and turned my friends into wolves."

"Was it all bad?" Reyna asked as she stepped closer to him.

"No," Cole said as he brushed her hair back. "I met you. I know you now almost as well as myself. And that is something I wouldn't trade for the world."

He kissed her gently, unsure of what she was thinking. Thankfully she responded to him with equal passion and sighed.

"Before you were bit," she whispered. "I tried to escape this town but was always found. It frustrated me. I couldn't explain why I kept being drawn back. But I think I know now. I was kept here for you. I believe I can leave now. And I can leave without doing the one thing I've been wanting to do for weeks now. Because I have something more than avenging my father."

Cole took advantage of her reflection to kiss her again, he'd been wondering for a while why she wanted to help them. Sure she said it was to protect her own identity but was it? She'd tried running away countless times before they were all wolves and had always been caught. She'd been forced to stay with her fosters for years even though she proved she could outrun any

followers. Even when she did manage to escape she'd return. She'd saved him from the Gorge, she'd saved them all in the club, she'd taken countless risks for them.

She'd always been alone and now she had a pack. More than that she had him. and he had her.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, closing her eyes.

"Sorry for what?" he asked, tipping her chin up.

"I never said it back," she opened her eyes, they were wet again with tears but Cole couldn't tell if they were happy or not. "But I do."

Cole was about to confirm what he wondered all morning when he heard something and turned. Smoke had been creeping in around their ankles but now trees were catching fire from the north and racing towards them. He looked at Reyna who nodded and they sprinted away without another word.

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Despite their best efforts, neither Cole nor Reyna could make it back to the highway. The fire was out of control and burning fast, embers flying ahead of the blaze and starting smaller fires almost everywhere the two stepped.

Cole trusted his friends to make it to the beach and they quickly headed south, fleeing the thickening smoke as the sun ahead turned red behind the haze. As they raced over the increasing heat of the dirt and leaves, Cole decided to leave his question unanswered and ask another one. After all, discovering that Reyna could never shift and would have clear memories of not just every shift but last night's was important. What had they done? What did happen in the Gorge?

"It was a mess," Reyna said. "Tyler and Andy came in from the north, Mason from the west, you and I came in south west. We thought we had the six Hunters and Miller. But like Tyler said, trucks came in by the lookout, we got outnumbered. at least a dozen other Hunters."

"A dozen?" Cole repeated.

"You guys were good," she said. "You lead them straight down the Gorge. The other wolves got mad, we were invading their territory. They attacked. Hunters attacked. It was a mess."

"Was Vance..." Cole trailed off as he climbed up a series of boulders.

"He was there, so was Tyson," Reyna nodded, following Cole. "Both of them part of a second wave. We had no idea. After we made it to the bottom, Hunters were just trying to kill anything. So were the Gorge wolves."

"But we made it out?" Cole assumed as they took off across a clearing.

"Barely," Reyna rolled her eyes. "I knew I had to help you so I led you guys up the other end but we got separated. I had to try and keep myself hidden for as much as I could but in the chaos, Mason got pinned down. Andy and Tyler chased me. You fought a Gorge wolf. It was insane."

"How?" Cole wondered, realizing that explained how they all ended up separated.

"It was honestly impressive," Reyna smiled. "I don't know how but you just went after him. One of them had tried coming after me but you jumped in, you were tearing him apart!"

Cole felt pride rise in his gut as he side stepped glowing embers. He vaguely remembered leaping after another wolf, he felt a strange sense of possession as he bit and clawed at them. As if they had taken something. Of course it now made sense. He was protecting his pack.



"I made it to the top of the Gorge, Andy and Tyler were hot on my heels but we hit that second wave, Tyson, Vance, two other Hunters. I thought we were done but Gorge wolves were being flushed out. I should have stayed, I should have fought but I saw that bastard running east," Reyna continued, her tone growing dark. "I wanted my father's murderer. I left you guys and I never should have done that."

"It wasn't your fault," Cole said. "Knowing what happened, I don't blame you for wanting revenge."

"Andy almost died, you all almost died!" Reyna argued. "I was the only one who could keep control and I let myself loose."

"You almost died," Cole insisted. "I saw you this morning. You have any idea what that felt like? Seeing you shot up, broken? I thought you were dead!"

Reyna said nothing and pushed herself to run faster. Cole growled, chasing after her. Both of them were breathing hard now, not just from running but from the thick cloud that hovered over their heads. The sun had arced and while he didn't have a watch, Cole knew it was getting later in the afternoon. He wondered how much further it was to the beach as they ran.

Cole coughed hard as a series of trees began to topple, spreading flames and smoke blinding him. Even using his wolf eyes, he could hardly see two feet in front of him but he could hear just fine.

Screaming, he heard screaming.

Without even thinking, he ran towards the scream, Reyna hot on his trail as they both half slipped down a small hill.

"You?" Cole breathed as he came across a scene he'd never expected to see.

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A gust of wind blew through the small space, freeing it off most of the smoke and Cole stood in shock at the sight.

Pinned beneath a burning tree was a Hunter with both Jonathon and Mr. Miller trying to help him out. The Hunter was young, another kid Cole realized. He didn't know him well enough, but recognized him as one of Tyson's fans. The tree had crushed him all the way up to his chest and his right arm. What was his name, as Cole held a hand out to hold Reyna back, Evan, that was it! His name was Evan, and he was only a freshman, just a kid, another kid that Mr. Miller had manipulated into getting involved!

"Wolves!" Jonathon sneered as he picked up his rifle.

"Jonathon!" Mr. Miller ordered. "We gotta get him out!"

"After I kill them!" Jonathon countered.

"Like you'll have a chance!" Reyna shot back, she shoved Cole aside, stepping forward with her claws and fangs on full display.

"Hold up," Cole stepped between the Hunters and Reyna.

He had no idea if it would work but judging by Evan's agonizing screams, the thickening smoke and building heat it was only a matter of time before this small space would be engulfed in fire. But he had to try something. Smoke was quickly blowing back into view, making it harder to breathe and harder to see every second.

"How about a truce?" Cole asked. "We can get the tree off him-"

"Absolutely not!" Reyna hissed.

"Reyna, chill. We get the tree off, we lead you out, you leave us be."

"For once I agree with the hybrid trash!" Jonathon growled.

"I don't," Mr. Miller shook his head and coughed. "I'm still President while I'm breathing. Our first rule is to protect humans."

Cole watched the older Hunter's eyes soften at the sight of Evan and looked directly at him. For once, since he'd discovered Mr. Miller's true identity he saw the old Mr. Miller. The man who let kids play football on his property and cook burgers all summer long.

"We can talk about hunting later."

Cole nodded in silent agreement and looked at Reyna.

"Are you really going to prove them right? We're wolves, not monsters."

Reyna's stare was cold but she retracted her fangs and walked to the far side of the tree. As she stood ready at the end, he could hardly see her shape through the smoke and dancing embers.

Cole sighed in relief as he moved towards Mr. Miller and Jonathon.

Jonathon said nothing as he stepped back, shaking his head. Cole growled as he saw the other Hunter's figure morph into the thickness of the smoke. He'd been hoping to keep an eye on everyone but as it was he could barely hear Mr. Miller's voice yell over the growing crackle of the flames.

"You two lift, I'll pull Evan out," Mr. Miller instructed and knew he was comforting the panicked Evan as best he could. "You're gonna be alright kid."

Evan whimpered, his eyes darting around in fear. Cole had no idea how far they were from the highway and the smoke was like soup as he gripped the tree, bracing against the heat.

"1, 2, lift!" he yelled.

Cole grunted, pouring all the strength he had into his muscles as he heaved the heavy burning tree off the ground. Even with his unnatural strength, the tree was like cement, an ungodly amount of weight and heat straining against him and he gasped. He cocked his ears around, listening as Evan was pulled across the dirt.

"He's out!" Mr. Miller yelled.

Cole let out a breath as he dropped the tree to the ground with relief. He stepped around the tree, reaching his hands out to guide him. He couldn't tell what shapes and shadows in the smoke were people or the surrounding trees. He coughed, leaning over as his eyes watered, unable to take in clean air.

Then he heard the click. and worse, a gunshot.

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Cole's heart dropped as he leaped forward, the shot didn't hit him but he heard the agonizing howl from Reyna as the bullet found its mark.

Somehow in the murk, his hand grabbed Reyna's and he pulled her close. He ran his hands along her skin, feeling the river of blood and eventually the entry point on her hip. She cried as he pressed on it and he yelled.

"Show yourself you coward!"

How could he have been so stupid? What was he thinking? Jonathon wanted nothing more than to kill Reyna and with the fire creeping in and the smoke making visibility almost impossible it was too easy for the Hunter to get a shot off.

He tried to take a step but Reyna's weight pulled him to the ground and he hugged her close. Whatever happened, he decided, if they were going to die, they would do it together. He sat in the dirt, cocking his ears up as much as he could, between his own watery eyes and the smoke, he could hardly see but at least he could hear.

Unfortunately he didn't need to as he felt the cold steel of the rifle press against the back of his skull.

"Dogs," Jonathon's voice dripped with contempt and disgust.

Cole closed his eyes, knowing that he at least would feel Reyna in his arms. His heart beat loudly in his ears, almost drowning out the rushing flames around them. He gripped Reyna tight, memorizing every beat as her muscles tensed.

Then he was on his back, he snapped his eyes open as he felt another gust of air blow over him. Cole rolled on his side and gaped at the sight, thankful for the breeze because he wasn't sure he'd believe it if it wasn't standing in front of him clear as day!

A massive, dark brown, almost black wolf had tackled Jonathan to the ground and was ripping him apart! And it was the striking red river of blood that poured relentlessly from her hip that made Cole realize who had saved him.

Reyna had shifted!

With a fierce sense of strength and power, Reyna's jaws locked around Jonathon's arm and tore it free from him! With such speed, she reared up, falling back as Jonathon scrambled away, howling in pain as he held onto the tattered remains of his shoulder.

Cole swung his eyes from the Hunter to Reyna who righted herself and stalked forward. Her ears were flat back against her head, her fangs bared and bloody and her eyes.

Cole knew he would never forget the cold unbridled and focused rage that burned in those golden irises.

Before Cole could shout, to do anything, Reyna snapped her feet and pinned Jonathan down. Good lord, she was fast! The way she shook and the growls that erupted from her throat, Cole knew wolves were fast and brutal but this was something else! No wonder no one ever survived, he realized, knowing that Reyna was about to get her justice she so longingly ached for.

Reyna's head struck, clamping thick, powerful bloody fangs around Jonathon's throat. Cole closed his eyes but he could hear the wet sickening snap as Reyna claimed her victory.

Jonathon's screams went silent like a TV losing power, instantly and without effort.

"Oh my God," Mr. Miller's voice drifted in as Cole opened his eyes.

Stupid, he thought, he'd been so amazed at Reyna's shift that he hadn't registered Mr. Miller was standing just beyond them with his own gun out. Cole coughed as Reyna stumbled over Jonathon's corpse, the blood loss clearly getting to her now as she fell to the dirt.

"I'm sorry kid," Mr. Miller said as he walked almost casually to Reyna. "But if she can do that, than humanity really has no chance."

Despite the building heat and the increasing smoke, Cole felt cold. They had just saved Evan's life, they had agreed to a truce! Jonathon broke it and Reyna defended herself! Reyna was clearly unable to fight anymore, how could Mr. Miller possibly justify this? Hell none of them could even get out of here!

Cole searched the increasing haze for Evan, maybe he could convince him? Maybe he could still salvage this? Where did that stupid freshman go? Maybe he'd run off once the fight started, if he did he was at least smart! The poor kid didn't deserve any of this!

Cole's eyes landed on Mr. Miller again though as the Hunter leaned down, pressing the gun against Reyna. She whimpered but was clearly too weak to let alone fight back.

So Cole did.

He launched himself at Mr. Miller. With everything that had happened since getting bit, hell in the last 24 hours, he was done! He roared, pushing Mr. Miller back and for once as he saw the older man, he didn't think about the past as he struck.

It was almost as if he'd shifted, he couldn't even tell what he was doing as he let his rage loose, his anger and frustration over everything that had happened fell in every blow. Every bit of panic and fear he felt drove every hit. For once, since getting bit he let the wolf within him loose.

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Cole coughed, blinking as he took in the sight around him.

He wasn't in the woods, at least the part that was a raging inferno. He looked around, seeing he was in a cave, smelling the air he could tell the fire still raged but it was far away now.

How the hell did he get away? More importantly, where the hell was Reyna?

Cole scrambled to his feet, taking in heavy breaths. Banging his head on the low ceiling he winced in pain and looked around, his eyes finally falling on a human-like figure walking in.

"Good, you're awake," Reyna's voice was hoarse and weak but alive!

Without saying anything, Cole ran to her, hugging her and kissing her all over. She was alive!

She was here! She was human and okay and in one piece!

"Whoa easy there," she said, peeling herself away and chuckling. "I'm okay, I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't," he begged. "Don't go anywhere."

He placed his head on top of hers, wrapping his arms around her body. He needed to know this was real, that she was here, closing his eyes and listening to the steady drum of her heart. It beat in tune, matching his own and he couldn't be happier. He had no idea where they were or how they even made it but for the moment all he wanted was to stay in this moment.

"We have to go," she said.

"Not right now," he whispered, shaking with relief. "Not right now."

"Cole," she said, forcing them to separate.

He looked at her, drinking in her disheveled hair and scratched up body as if she was the most beautiful thing on earth. Despite the dried blood and purple bruising, against all convention, the way her golden eyes flared, he knew there was something here more than just physical beauty.

"We got out, I don't know how, but we got out, both of us. You saved me, and I know what it meant for you to do that. To take that step. And I have to say thank you."

"I told you," Cole said. "You're part of my pack. And I protect my pack. I said we were all getting out. And we are. Together."

"I know. I just, I saw what you did. I know you didn't want to do that again. I understand that it took a lot so thank you. Thank you so much. Nothing I do will ever equal what you did for me."

Cole nodded, understanding what she said. He'd never wanted to let the wolf loose, to kill, doing that the first time had been out of control and it terrified him. Knowing what he knew now, he only feared how much worse it would be.

He had killed Mr. Miller, he'd torn him to shreds and left his body to be burned by the very fire he started.

Cole brushed a knotted piece of Reyna's hair back and stared into her eyes. He spoke softly but firmly, making his stance clear.

"What I did was to protect you. Seeing you there, at the mercy of him, dying. I realized I can do a lot but I can't live in a world without you. I'm not Cole, the football star anymore, I'm not Cole, the perfect son anymore. I'm a werewolf. I have to live with that. I have to live on the run and under the full moon. I have to hide my true abilities and watch out for Hunters for the rest of my life. I know I can do that now, I was afraid but I'm not anymore. But whether I live for another hour or another hundred years, there's one thing I can't do. I can't live without you."

Reyna's eyes welled up as she smiled at the sincerity of his words. She cupped his cheek and kissed him passionately. They broke apart and she nodded, looking up at Cole.

"Growing up, I was always different. It didn't matter to me what world I lived in, I would be an outsider to both. But my father told me there was someone out there for everyone. That I'd just have to find it and when I did I'd have to fight for it. Because of my hybrid nature, I never believed him but for some reason I do now. Because I did find it and I did fight and there is nothing in this world or the next I would rather fight for than this. Because I found something that he did too. And maybe it's not a one off. maybe it is real."

"And what is it?" Cole asked.

"A True Mate."

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"A True Mate?" Cole asked as they sat down against the cave wall.

"Your wolf, it seeks someone," Reyna explained.

He didn't say anything but he could feel that primal part of him agree.

"There's an instinct," she continued. "An instinct to continue the bloodline. Your new bloodline. Your wolf will want many children to do this. But there is something more that he will want."

"And what is that?" he asked, threading his fingers within hers.

She refused to meet his gaze, hesitating before she spoke. He furrowed his brow, wondering what more could he possibly not know after everything that had happened.

"A True Mate, it's incredibly rare. Someone who shares more than just instinct, more than just a desire to continue the bloodline. It's someone your wolf will recognize as their other half. Make them, make you feel whole."

Cole said nothing, contemplating what she explained. Within himself, he could feel a connection with her. Before he believed it was just her knowing what he was, understanding what he was, after all they were both wolves. Both of them hiding from the world and once she had kissed him that first time in the cafeteria, it was as if a light had turned on. Being around her now wasn't just a matter of comfort but almost as if she was a life raft and he was drowning, no, more than that. He needed her in so many ways that he just couldn't express. He pulled her closer as she sighed, leaning against his chest.

"I'm just a hybrid," Reyna whispered. "I'm a freak and an outsider to both worlds. Growing up I never believed in it. I mean how could I? I couldn't shift and as much as I pretended I was never comfortable being human. It's why I never told you guys about me being a hybrid."

"I told you, hybrid or not, you're one of us, you're as much of this pack as anyone," Cole said.

"I was scared," she admitted. "I thought you wouldn't accept me. That you'd tell me to leave. And even now, I'm terrified of losing you. You say you can't live without me but I can't either. Not without you."

She looked up at him, her eyes glossy as she blinked rapidly. Tears, she was holding them back. For him or for her, he realized it didn't even matter. They had been through so much for her to even question this relationship was absurd. A True Mate sounded serious, and her hybrid nature had a ton of unanswered questions but he was sure this was something he was absolute in.

"You're not alone," Cole whispered as he cupped her cheek.

"I know," she blinked softly, her voice trembling.

"You're not a freak you know."

"I do."

"You're one of us."

"I am."

He was slow, leaning in as she nodded just the tiniest bit.

As easily as diving into the woods, he pressed his lips against hers. The texture was soft and cool as the waterfall. She pushed deeper and he let her, allowing her heat to melt into him, as warm as the many campfires they burned.

His hands traveled up, twisting in her hair as hers mirrored in his own. They broke apart briefly, and he smiled, feeling the tip of his fangs curve as her eyes glowed a beautiful golden aura.

In this moment he understood.

The wolf agreed and somehow without even speaking he knew she felt it too.

They kissed again, softly and yet at the same time fiercely. Here there was an understanding, not just a desire to have sex or continue some bloodline, but a passionate meeting of two souls becoming one.

Against all odds, against nature itself, they had each found their True Mate.

He pressed her down, against the dirt, taking in satisfaction as he felt her skin smooth underneath his. They were still in danger but for this moment he had to show her he'd never leave her, that he'd never make her feel lost and disconnected. Hybrid or not, wolf or not, they were one.

It felt like hours but he eventually broke free looking towards the cave entrance, seeing the darkening sky wasn't due to the fires now but actual sunset.

Remembering how they had even gotten to this point and how they could still be in danger, he stood up, helping Reyna to her feet. He smiled at the fact that while she was battered, the bullet had forced itself out at some point and she was healing. No fresh blood covered either of them.

While he ignored the red tips of his fingers from Mr. Miller he focused on what was ahead.

"So you don't know how we got here? Where is here?" Cole asked.

"You got me," Reyna shrugged. "I honestly was going in and out of it since I shifted. But I can tell you we aren't far from the beach."

She led him to the opening of the cave and Cole sighed with relief. The glistening water was maybe a mile away and the fire seemed to be behind the cave towards the top of the mountain. The cave was perched on the edge of a cliff looking out and the trail leading out of it seemed narrow but still climbable. Bears, he thought, this was probably where they slept but had left in case the fire made it this far down.

"Tracks," Reyna said, leaning down to examine prints in the dirt. "Not ours."

"Someone carried us?" Cole assumed as he looked over the prints.

They were small prints, regular shoes not boots or climbing shoes. Judging by the imprint whoever it was had more weight on the left side, which made sense if whoever it was had been carrying one of them.

"Not your boys," Reyna glanced out towards the beach and then behind the cave. "I'd say Hunters but they wouldn't have saved us."

Cole opened his mouth to speak but then held a finger to his lips. Noise was coming from the right and he growled, feeling his fangs pierce his lips. Reyna stood up, taking a stance and extending her claws.

"I guess it's no good to sneak up on you huh?" A familiar voice asked as a figure stepped through with firewood in his arms.

"You're alive?" Cole asked, shocked at his fellow classmate.

Vance stood sheepishly in front of them in filthy torn up clothes and leaning on his left side. His face was covered in dirt and thankfully Cole saw no gun on him. He still stayed back as Vance dropped the wood and lifted his shirt, turning around.

"You gotta tell Andy he's got one hell of a bite."

Bleeding freely was a deep bite mark just above his right ass cheek. There was no mistaking what had happened.

Vance was a wolf now too.

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"You're kidding me?" Cole stumbled back.

"Should I build a fire?" Vance asked.

"You seriously think you can just build a fire and we'll sing kumbaya?" Reyna raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"I can't go back," Vance shook his head. "They told us last night that if we got bit we had to kill ourselves. To end the bloodline, to not become monsters."

"Okay I need you to back up," Cole said. "How the hell did you even get involved? How did you know it was us? Did anyone else get bit? Where's the rest of the Hunters? Did you carry us out?"

Vance bit his lip and paced. Taking a deep breath, he explained.

"Last night, Tyson called me. He asked if I wanted to kill the thing that killed Gage so I said yes. I mean why wouldn't I right? So I met him and Mr. Miller at the Post Office. He told us about werewolves. I thought it was a joke! But he showed us pictures, proof of it! But we had no idea it was you. I swear!"

Cole said nothing as Vance gave him pleading eyes. He looked like he'd been crying and by the

state of his clothes running like hell through the woods. Reyna was silent, taking a seat on a rock and gesturing for Vance to continue.

"So we jump in this truck with a couple other guys and we went out to the lookout. We saw someone, one of you I guess, running into the woods so we followed. Just past the campsites I saw Andy. I was gonna warn him ya know but then I saw it! With my own eyes! I couldn't believe it!"

"You saw him shift," Reyna assumed, crossing her arms. "And you idiots still followed. Even seeing that, straight to the Gorge. You knew the truth and you still went."

Cole shook his head, he knew that Reyna was already judging Vance like she'd done to him. Hearing stories of the Gorge, knowing the truth behind them didn't matter. Vance was already involved. Vance nodded and threw his arms up in frustration.

"I mean hearing shit and seeing it? Totally different! I had no idea, but Tyson just thought it was hilarious. He figured out you and the rest pretty fast but one of the Hunters, Jonathon didn't want us in the Gorge. We were on perimeter. I thought it was fine, I didn't want to do this anymore. It was too insane. But Tyson didn't want to leave. And then..."

"That's when you led the guys out?" Cole turned to Reyna. "Andy and Tyler saw them, you saw Jonathon..."

"I should have stayed," Reyna's voice dripped with guilt and Cole's heart broke. He walked behind her and rubbed her shoulders as Vance stopped and tilted his head in a quizzical manner.

"I don't know how much you guys know when you're like..." Vance trailed off but Cole understood his question.

"Nothing, we don't remember anything, we barely hang on."

Vance closed his eyes, hating the answer and sighed.

"Well Andy came after us, so did Tyler. Me and some other Hunters tried leading them to the river, they figured if we crossed, you couldn't track us but Andy caught me. I tried to get him off but I couldn't. I felt like he was tearing me apart, I thought I was gonna die. It was just too much. People were yelling, shooting, I had no idea what was happening. Someone shot him, he fell in the river, I never saw who. I ran like hell!"

Cole nodded as he recounted the night, easily seeing how Andy had been hurt so bad. The shot, the fall, it would have been too much for him.

"How'd you figure it was Andy?" Reyna asked.

"I didn't at first. I was just running for my life but I ran into the Hunters camp. They had like a medical base set up. As they checked me out I told them what happened and we put together it was the kid at the look out, the kid we saw shift and that's when I knew it was all the same person. They checked with the Rangers who said Andy was on a camping trip at the beach. Knowing that, they said we could kill him tonight. That they'd take care of the story."

"And you went along with that?" Cole gaped, stepping back. "How could you? We aren't friends but cmon!"

"You don't get it!" Vance argued. "There was no choice!"

"Bullshit," Reyna snorted.

Vance rushed them then, fresh tears pooling in his eyes, shaking as he screamed, falling to his knees.



"I wasn't the only one! Three other people got bit! Other Hunters. I was terrified, I stayed at the camp till I heard them say they were starting the fire and we had to kill ourselves! One of them handed me a knife saying that my heart was the best hit cause if the blade stayed in I wouldn't heal! I watched those guys stab themselves and another start a fire when dawn broke!"

Cole said nothing, watching Vance break. He knew firsthand how terrifying this all was but he never expected this. He felt disgusted that Vance was even involved and seeing Evan under the tree he wondered how many others had been dragged into this crazy world without knowing all the facts. Asking Hunters to kill themselves if they were bit? That was a level he never thought anyone would reach. He shuddered, realizing the rules would have had to come from Mr. Miller.

"You saw the other three die?" Reyna asked, calm as ever.

"Yes! You think I'm lying?" Vance asked.

"We have to be sure," she shot back, standing up and walking in a line. "Do you know how many survived? Did you see any survivors? Like it or not, you are a target now. So knowing the enemy's numbers is the only good news we have."

Vance ran his hands through his hair, thinking and turning in circles. Finally he sighed and nodded.

"I grabbed a walkie before I left the camp. It sounded like Mr. Miller, Jonathon and two other Hunters were still out in the woods. The reserve line, that's the group Tyson and I were a part of, I could only hear Tyson and two others. They were from school. A guy named Sam and uh Eric, Ethan or something?"

"Evan," Cole said. "We saw him, we got him out from under a tree. We saved him but we have no idea where he's at now."

"Well we can at least count out Mr. Miller and Jonathon," Reyna preened. "They definitely won't be around."

"I saw," Vance nodded, his voice dropping. "I called Tyson who said he was with Brittney, looking for you. I'm guessing you..."

"I didn't," Cole shook his head. "I wanted to but I realized I'm not a monster. I'm not going to be what you say I am."

"So four Hunters out there," Reyna mused, tapping her chin. "Not bad considering our odds. Plus Brittney but I'm not exactly counting that ditz as a threat."

"Reyna..." Cole frowned as she rolled her eyes.

"Look, the point is I left. I was running, completely lost when I came up on you guys. It looked like you'd been running but passed out. I tried carrying you Cole but she snapped at me. It freaked me out. I didn't even know you could be a werewolf during the day!" Vance explained. "I tried talking to you but the fire was pretty much on us. I picked you up and she chased me here."

"That makes sense," Cole nodded.

"Really? How?"

"It's complicated," Cole said, unsure how to explain Reyna's situation but she cut him off.

"And not your business. The important thing is we get out of here."

"We?" Vance's tone picked up.

"We," Reyna nodded, looking at Cole. "Like it or not, there are survivors. He was bit by Andy. Makes him a part of your pack."

"Our pack," Cole corrected her.

She smiled, gripping his hand. Cole felt a sense of calm pass over him as he took stock of everything. With only two professional Hunters out there and the fire raging he knew they had time to escape. Tyson was an issue but he knew neither him nor Brittney would chase after him immediately. And while he didn't know the Evan kid or Sam that well, he had the sense that both were very much running the other way after last night.

There was still danger but for now at least they had a reprieve.

"You know anything about the fire?" Cole asked, looking to Vance.

"Before I lost the walkie, maybe an hour ago, they said it was 35% contained and they stopped it at the edge here. About twenty thousand acres are burned, the town, who the hell knows,"

Vannce shrugged. "It was being evacuated, everybody. No choice."

"Sounds like they'll be occupied for a while," Reyna said. "You wanna go find your pack? They're probably freaking out?"

"Yeah," Cole smiled and nodded. "Let's find them and get the hell out of here."

"Where?" Vance asked. "I mean I don't even have anything."

"Don't worry, we'll handle it." Cole said as he put a hand on Vance's shoulder. "Welcome to the pack I guess."

Cole tried to smile but the enthusiasm wasn't quite there. He knew how impossible this all was but at least they had all survived. Even without seeing them, Cole knew his friends would be alive and waiting. He looked beyond the cliff just as a series of howls went off. His smile was real this time as he recognized all three howls echoing into the night.

They were alive, and they would survive.

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It was only a matter of minutes before Cole, Reyna and Vance ran into the others. After checking each other out and thrilled that no one seemed to be in any immediate danger of dying, Vance explained his story again. The whole time, the pack making their way to the beach. After crashing into Tyson's Jeep, the truck thankfully still worked and Mason had parked it behind a sand dune on the far side of the beach. Thankfully it was away from where the evacuation center had been set up. The boys had made it down the mountain in one piece with everything they needed.

Of course they never planned on having an extra body, let alone Vance who up until this morning had firmly been against them. Knowing the truth now, he simply sat in silence as Mason started a campfire and Tyler pulled out smores fixings.

"I'm sorry," Andy mumbled, taking a seat across from Vance.

"Isn't it your nature?" Vance said bitterly.

"Control is something that you have to learn," Reyna said as she leaned against Cole, gretfully pulling a blanket close around her shoulders. "Like it or not, you are one of us."

"You're sure there's no cure?" Vance asked.

"Trust me, if there was, we would have done it," Tyler said, handing out sticks.

"Maybe at first, but now..." Cole trailed off, smiling fondly at Reyna.

"What's important is that we use the fire as cover," Andy said. "We can talk about you and your issue later. With the fire, all the attention is there. Not on us."

"So what direction?" Mason asked. "The border? Double back over the mountain?"

"We could head south, I know it's risky but with the Hunters practically dissolved I don't think south is such a bad option now," Cole suggested.

"Just because we cut this branch doesn't mean there aren't others," Reyna said.

"Hold up, hold up. How the hell are you talking about this?" Vance asked, waving his arms around. "Our town is on fire, Mr. Miller is dead, and you guys are running away because you're werewolves. And this is normal?"

Silence filled the air as he stared at each of them. Cole smiled at his confusion, four months ago he was in this same exact situation. The unbelievable had happened and Reyna had guided him, guided all of them to accept it. And not just accept it but thrive in it. Vance was right, this was normal, at least it was their normal. Now it was his too.

"Vance, I know last night freaked you out, but this is it now. Whatever life you think you had, it's over now," Mason said softly.

"Next month you'll be like us. And try as you might," Andy grimaced, shutting his eyes tight, "this isn't something you can walk away from."

Andy's eyes opened, golden and fierce looking as the campfire reflected in them sharply. Vance leaned back, clearly still uncomfortable with everything that had happened. He looked at the others who on instinct also flared their wolf eyes at him. It was almost like breathing, Cole realized to show them off. It was as if they were inviting Vance to their own private club. No, not a club, a pack.

"Vance, you never should have been involved," Cole said, adjusting himself to face Vance directly. "This all started because I took Tyson's dare. Because I was stupid and got bit. And that's on me. Now we can teach you, show you control, but I'm not going to force you to stay." He stood up, bolstered by a sense of confidence and looked at the others. Werewolves or not, he didn't want to abuse any sort of Alpha mojo over them.

"I'm not going to force anyone to stay. We agreed last night that we would do this together, we agreed to escape together. I'm going ahead. Whether you come or not, is your choice. We can't go back, we can't undo what happened. All we can do is move forward."

Reyna stood up, threading her hand with his and he let loose a tight breath he didn't realize he'd been holding as she spoke.

"You already know that I have no attachments. I'm game. I'll follow you anywhere."

"Please, like you're going off to have all the fun," Mason grinned, taking a bite out of his smores.

"But I'm driving."

"Like hell, I got the keys," Andy smirked, tossing them up in the air. "Cole, you know we got your back."

"Course he knows that," Tyler rolled his eyes. "But why should we let you drive? You crushed his bumper!"

"Saving his life!" Andy countered. "No thanks to Tyson and Brittney."

"Guys," Cole admonished them with hardly any effort.

Seeing them joke and banter was relieving after all the stress of the last 24 hours. And he shook his head as Mason tackled Andy for the keys. Vance still hadn't said anything though and he glanced at his former bully. He knew how confused he must be and how much more stress he'd be putting himself through. Being a werewolf was hard enough but being one on the run? Could he do it? Vance didn't exactly have a life worth leaving. He was rich, privileged and adored, if he left, he would be missed.

"So man, what do you say?" he asked, sticking a hand out to Vance.

Thankfully he'd been able to wash the blood clean off his nails. Vance looked at it, to the guys now wrestling in the sand and back up to Cole. He sighed and shook Cole's hand firmly with half a grin.

"Guess if I want to keep breathing, I should stick with the wolves who know how to do that."

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Thanks to the commotion over the fire, the guys had decided that they could catch a few Zs and laid out their sleeping bags in the sand. Although with danger on every corner, they had agreed to stand watch throughout the night, Cole elected to take first watch and he lounged in the bed of his truck, watching the haze of the fire in the distance up in the mountain. Despite his strength as a wolf, he was exhausted and even knowing the worst of the danger was far behind them, he still needed to take in this little moment of peace.

"Feeling hiraeth?" Reyna's voice was quiet, contemplative as she leaped into the bed.

"What?" Cole asked as she snuggled into his arms.

"Hiraeth. You're feeling homesick, nostalgic. You want to go back? Even though you know, even if you did by some miracle, it would never be the same."

Cole leaned his head on top of hers, sighing in agreement.

"I don't have a home anymore."

"You have one, you always did."

Cole leaned back as she turned to face him. She grinned her all knowing smile and pointed to him.

"It's so cute to know I can still teach you."

"My home is burned to the ground," he gestured to the mountain. "It's nothing but ash. My parents hate me, I killed Britnney's dad. Tyson wants to kill me. I don't have a home anymore. I just gotta accept it."

"Cole," Reyna's voice was soft. "You can't think like that. The town, the people, yes even your parents and your house, that's not what makes a home."

Cole said nothing but tilted back to better see Reyna's eyes as she continued. She pressed a hand against his bare chest.

"A home isn't a roof and four walls. Home isn't well your house, school or the field. It's not even the woods. Home is where your family is. And family isn't just blood, it's people who are there for you, it's people who love and protect you, that stand by you."

Cole mused on her words, wrapping his own hand in hers. He guided them over her chest and rested on it. Even through the thick sports bra, he still felt her heartbeat, sure and strong.

"Then I guess home is with you," he whispered.

"And mine is yours," she replied with a small smile.

He pressed his lips against her head, inhaling the wonderful scent of pine that she had. Right here, he decided, whatever happened at least he had this moment.

Reyna was right, home wasn't the town. It was the people and the people who mattered. She adjusted herself to rest in his arms and he sighed looking to his left where his friends, his pack slept soundly.

That was what mattered, his friends were here, they were alive. Reyna was in his arms, uninjured and breathing, happy to fight as well as laugh. Even without a real plan or direction he knew somehow everything would turn out okay.

He was on the road and home.