

Awakened - Written by Feyreth Solair

Chapter 1: The Wolf

CONTENT WARNING: (highlight to reveal)

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Grass brushed under foot as Fey walked a damp path beneath the shade of tall trees, a winding trail deep within a mountainous forest she did not recognise. It was a place both familiar and not, the shadows of the canopy always casting it in a different light every time she visited upon it.

Spring air brushed against her angular snout, tickling her nose and passing a small chill down her spine as she wandered the narrow dirt path, etched by the foot traffic of the forest denizens and her own repeated journey. She climbed the low rise of the hill where upon a stony den rested, a narrow passage nestled into the cliff face of a much steeper mountain.

That was usually where her journey ended, just shy of entering the gloomy cavern. No matter the variance of her path, it always ended the same way.

Dark shadows had begun to creep in around her, washing the colour from the wolf's surroundings until she could only make out the hazy outlines of objects around her. A flicker of light brought panic to her heart.

Fire. All around her, eerie pink flames began to spread, igniting the forest with the bright, escalating intensity of staring at the sun. She flinched away as embers licked at her fur and burning pain seared through her veins. She tried to howl but her voice never came, just a strangled noise of fear. She could only stand and bear it as her fur was scorched, consumed by the inferno engulfing her body, still painfully conscious as her skin began to bubble.

The irritating chirp of her alarm roused her before she could be consumed by the nightmarish flames, mercifully saved from experiencing the end of it.

A cry tore from Fey's throat as she lurched back to reality, heart thumping in her chest. She lay for a moment, staring up at the ceiling and catching her breath. Another dream turned nightmare, the third in a month's time. She dug herself under the covers again with a soft whimper, covering her ears to muffle the alarm's calling.

Unfortunately for her, she couldn't stay in bed forever.

Peeling herself free from the warmth of her blankets, Fey stood and stretched, a yawn filling the silence of her sparsely decorated bedroom. It was bare necessities here in her father's New York apartment; a bed, computer desk and chair, and a wardrobe stuffed with the rest of her belongings, leaving clothes littering the space on her floor. The only real decoration she had was a framed poster of the Empire Knight, Kinnetack. She was striking a defensive pose, holding her signature, glowing barrier of energy around her.

With grit-filled eyes the grey wolf stumbled to her desk, grabbed her phone, and silenced the annoying klaxon. Before she put it back down however, she noticed a new message.

But before it could be read, the warmth of clothes was required. Pulling off her pyjamas, she made the swift decision to wear the same thing for the fifth day in a row, rugged up in the largest hoodie she owned. Concealing the flatness of her chest from the world was one of its comforts, but the warmth it provided her shivering form was its most important feature.

A moment lingered, hesitant to continue her morning rituals. The brief period of waking was the only time she felt even remotely herself, soon to be brought down by the drug she needed to keep the reality of her nightmares at bay.

Upon her desk sat the morning's sting, a plastic sheathed needle she was all too used to feeling the prick of.

I could just not take it today.

And endanger everyone around you? You just had a nightmare about this and you want to put off taking the one thing that keeps you normal?

I don't want to be normal, I want to feel the warmth, feel like myself again.

And what has being yourself ever gotten you anyway? No one cares about who you really are. You're useless with or without a power, and one you can't even control at that.

That last degrading thought was enough to resign her to the injector, clutched in a vice grip to steady her shaking paw. Tugging at the collar of her hoodie, she levelled the needle over her shoulder and took a deep breath before...

Shink! Biting metal sunk deep beneath her fur, delivering a chilling payload. Hissing at the surge of ice into her veins, Fey fell back in her chair, shivering uncontrollably. The cold crept over her body, seeping from the inside out. She curled in on herself to preserve the flicker of warmth that remained at her core, but even that froze over, leaving her weak, fragile, feeling as if the smallest bump would cause her to shatter into pieces.

Minutes passed before the suppressant's side effects started to wane, and even though the deep chill had passed, she still felt a lingering cold, clinging like morning frost to her pelt. Everything seemed duller, as though the colour of the world had seeped from its canvas, leaving her to a world of greys.

Staring at the syringe in her paw, Fey let out a whine. She had long reconciled with her inability to use her powers, but the need for this drug had left her more drained than she was capable of dealing with. It was hard enough being in a body she resented; having a power she had to suppress was even more taxing.

There was still a little of the ritual to go, however. Disposing of the used needle, Fey pulled her chair up to her desk. On it; her laptop, a few books she hadn't finished reading, and a pill organiser. Popping open today's breakfast, she tipped its contents out into her paw.

She didn't even care what they did anymore. Sometimes she wasn't sure they did anything to help. She still felt miserable, still felt tired and worn down, cold. But not taking them meant feeling even worse, she knew.

Swallowed without water, she grimaced at the chalky texture brushing against the back of her throat, swallowing again to try and wash it back.

Morning routine complete, she slumped back in her chair, waiting for her computer to turn on so she could browse social media and waste what little time she had before the day's tasks caught up to her. Before any of that, she made sure to check her phone to see who had messaged her at this, the early hour of 12 PM on a Monday.

There was a missed call and a single follow up text, sent from the only person in the world that could still bring the ghost of a smile to her muzzle. Snovira, her distant girlfriend.

[S: Morning hon, you awake yet?]

Fey's claws clacked against the hard screen cover of her phone, frowning as she wrangled with the auto-correct to spell out a coherent message.

[F: Well I'm up now, sorry I missed your call. Is something up?]

[S: No, I just wanted to wish my Stardust a good morning and to tell her how much I love her~]

[F: Oh my gods, gay. Love you too Sno <3]

[S: Do you have any plans for the day? There's something I wanted to talk to you about if you have the time, it's rather important.]

[F: Unfortunately busy. My dad's forcing me to go out and hand resumes out in person, like that's going to help me find a job in this, the year of 2027.]

There was a long pause before Sno's reply came, giving Fey enough time to pull herself up in her chair and make herself comfy, a blanket tossed over her legs to fight against the pervading chill.

[S: Of course. Well, it can wait a little longer, but I really need to talk to you about it soon.]

[F: If it's so serious then you can just tell me now, right? But yeah, I won't be able to call today, he wants me to drive too of course.]

[S: ... Wait, is he coming with you?]

[F: Yes. He doesn't think I'm trying hard enough and wants to watch me go in and talk to the manager. I'm sure if it worked he'd go in and talk them into hiring me himself.]

[S: Just... Wow. I'm so sorry Fey, I really wish I could bring you over to live with me. It's just complicated right now.]

Fey sighed. It was always complicated. Twice they had cancelled plans to meet up, and both times it had been because of Sno's job, which remained a mystery to Fey. The cougar never said what exactly she did- something in the security field that she couldn't discuss openly. Whatever it was, she hated that it put such a barrier between them.

But even then, what would her dad think if she were to leave? *'Sorry dad but I met a girl online and we've been long-distance dating for seven years, I'm leaving to move in with her'*? There was no world in which that was taken well by the grizzled old wolf.

[F: Yeah, I get it. It's fine hon, we'll figure something out.]

[S: I'm sorry Stardust, I really am. I promise though I will find a way to get you here one day.]

[F: Mmhm, one day. Love you Sno]

Dejectedly, Fey put her phone aside to turn her attention to the laptop screen before her, opening her emails to see if any of her online job searching had borne fruit.

Scrolling the list of rejected applications, corporate spam and assorted junk that the filters seemed to mysteriously ignore, she happened on an email flagged as important, sent to her a day ago. It was addressed from a doctor by the name of Leon Mills and bore the title "Patient Application". The unexpected email sent a mix of fear and curiosity through her, urging her to open it.

Greetings Reuben Ashfield,

This is Dr. Leon Mills, writing to you in regards to your recent application to the suppressant trial program here being hosted by Wake Pharmaceuticals. The results for your blood test are in, and whilst early readings aren't entirely conclusive, our team believes that your condition is within the projected parameters for use of our new line of power suppressant. With the results we have received, Wake Enterprising LLC would like to extend an invitation to you to be a participant of the testing process.

Our offer to you will include the following:

- Paid accommodation and care provided to you at no cost during your time at our Hudson facility along with fair compensation of 50,000 USD for your time at the program.
- The full release of compensation will only be paid out at the end of the trial period, dated August 15th 2027.
- Further accommodation and lodging will be free and provided to you for an extended period beyond the end of initial testing, should it be required.

I have attached a contract for you to sign along with the terms and conditions for your stay at the Hudson Medical Research facility; with your signature we can be ready to accept you to the program as soon as tomorrow. If you have any further questions, please direct them to me here and I will reply as soon as I am available.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards, Dr. Leon Mills

Fey read it twice over, disbelief growing. She'd entirely forgotten about the program she'd signed on for: a new suppressant being trialled for powered individuals who experienced severe responses to existing medication. Her doctor had pressured her into taking a blood test to apply for the trial a month ago, and here was the email all but confirming her entry.

It seemed too good to be true. A new suppressant being developed, and she of all people was accepted for the trial? And she got paid for it? She didn't consider it lucky, but it was something; a card she could finally play in the accursed game of life, one that might not burn her for a change.

Regardless of the potential risk, it was a chance. After filling the form and hastily signing it with her cursor, she opened the reply box and began typing, eager to put off going outside her room for as long as possible.

Hello Dr. Leon,

Apologies for my late reply. This is wonderful news to hear, I'd be happy to accept your offer to be a part of the trial. I can be ready tomorrow if that suits you, or as soon as you are available to meet.

I do have one question, I'm unfamiliar with the location of the facility, I can get to Hudson just fine by train but without knowing where to go from there I'll need some directions. Could you send those to me? Thanks.

Regards, Feyreth

She hit send, moments before noticing her mistake. A full four seconds passed, panic slowly setting in, before she barked in terror when she realised she had used that name instead of her given one.

No no no, fuck! Ugh, they're going to think I'm joking or something, they won't accept me signing with the wrong name... No it's fine, my email still says Reuben

Ashfield as the sender but... But what if... What if they realise what I am? They'll definitely decline me if they figure I'm trans.

And why did that have to be such a complication? But she knew better than to question the way things were.

Before she had time to start writing a follow up to correct her error and say “*Sorry, I signed off with an online tag I use a lot, it won't happen again*”, a response arrived in her inbox, addressed from the very same doctor as the first.

That was fast. Too fast. It had to be written by AI, it couldn't possibly be genuine. Despite the immediate thought to dismiss it as nothing more than an auto-generated email, curiosity drove her to open it, praying to whatever gods would listen that her mistype hadn't been noticed.

Hello, Reuben

(Is Feyreth your preferred name? I can address you as such in future if you'd like me to.)

I am pleased to hear back from you in regards to your application. We'd be glad to have you here today if that is manageable for you, I believe you're not far from the area? The paperwork will have to wait for tomorrow but accommodations and amenities have been prepared in advance for all applicants and will be ready upon your arrival.

As for your question, there's no need for directions. We can have an escort sent to collect you from the train station once you arrive, just let us know ahead of time when you will be arriving.

Attached is a list of permitted items to be brought on your person, along with what you may access while staying here at The Hudson Meta and Medical Research facility.

Wishing you safe travels, and thank you for participating with Wake Pharmaceuticals.

Kind Regards, Dr. Leon Mills

Fey leaned back in her chair, stunned by the email. Not only had they noticed, they had asked if it was okay to use that name. Had accepted it at face value. Something about the response made her uncomfortable, but she couldn't say why.

Dismissing the thought, she read through the email and its attachment again, frowning at the list of restrictions. Some made sense, like not being allowed to bring firearms or other personal defence items to the facility, but the only personal devices permitted at the facility were phones, under the rationale for potential security leaks. Wouldn't a personal phone still be considered a risk?

There wasn't time for her to mull it over any further as a knock on her door stirred her from her thoughts. Her father barged into the room without waiting for a reply, the more-silver-than-grey wolf taking up more space than he deserved to in hers. Despite his demands that Fey keep the apartment clean, cleanliness didn't appear to be something that applied to him, the elder wolf wearing clothes marked by sweat stains and grime.

There were some stains that ran deeper than any soap could scrub clean.

"Good afternoon Reuben, or I suppose I should say good morning?" He spoke with all the immature glee of a bully poking fun at a nerdy schoolkid, addressing her like the child she still was to him.

"*Good morning*, Dad," she grumbled back, avoiding his bespectacled gaze as he peered over her shoulder at the array of her emails.

"Hmm, looking for work like that will just get you a bunch of AI chatbots you know? We've got real people to talk to today, with real jobs. You haven't forgotten, have you?"

She groaned softly, before perking her ears. No, she'd barely given those job applications the time of day, but she had given the suppressant application plenty of time. "Actually, dad. Do you remember the suppressant trial program you signed me on to?"

His brow quirked, arms folding over his chest. “Uuhhh, yeah, yeah I do. What’s up?”

Nerves held her voice back for a second, but she wouldn’t let them keep her down, not this time. “They got back to me a few days ago- I’ve been offered a spot in the first trial. Full pay for the time spent, and they’re even giving me free accommodation in Hudson Valley for a few months. Maybe I could use the money to rent a place and find work there. I’ve not been finding anything around the city so maybe-”

She was cut off by a gruff sound of disapproval. “Bullshit, Reuben; you’re not going to Hudson just to get out of job searching. There’s plenty of work in New York, there’s new people at Walmart every month! You can go in a few weeks time, think about this for a few days before you decide to run off somewhere.”

Fey could feel her hackles rising, a growl in her throat threatening to grow in volume. “I’m not ‘running off’ to avoid work, dad. You said I should take whatever opportunities I get, why not this one? They’re literally paying me, and better than WalMart could in a decade.”

Her dad growled back, blue eyes glaring at her unnatural pinks. “Don’t give me that kind of attitude, young man. You’re just making excuses to avoid doing anything. You could make use of your powers, train to be a hero.”

She flinched, the masculine phrase feeling as ill-fitting as being called handsome by a total stranger.

Swallowing down the discomfort, she replied in a quieter voice. “I can’t control them. You know what happened when I tried.”

Her father sighed. “Have you considered trying *harder*? The Knights are always looking for recruits, they could help you with training.”

Ahh yes, tell me I should try harder. Because that’ll stop me from burning down another building. Because if I just try harder I could become the next Knight Commander.

“I just... I don’t know that I want to be a hero.” Her snout dipped to the floor, avoiding his gaze.

Her power may seem a gift to many, but to her it was nothing but a curse to bear. A reminder she wasn’t normal, that she could never live a normal life. From the moment they had manifested, blazing into the world and tearing a smouldering hole through a building, she’d wanted nothing more than to be rid of it. That was where she had turned to suppressants, but those had only caused her even more grief.

Taking a breath to collect herself, she’d find her father’s frustrated gaze bearing down on her. “Sorry, just lost in thought. I’ll be fine though, really. Can we talk about the trial, please?”

He gave a soft, noncommittal grunt as if to indicate for her to continue, arms folded across his chest.

“The doctor I spoke to said there’s accommodation provided, and a payout for participating in the trials. If it works, it’d make it easier for me. If it doesn’t, at least I’d be paid for my time. I could maybe look into renting somewhere too.”

The older wolf shrugged his shoulders. “That sounds good, sure, but what if it doesn’t work out? Who’s funding this, is it legitimate?”

“It’s uhh...” she turned to bring up her email again, scrolling down to double-check the name, “Wake Enterprising.”

Her father rumbled disapprovingly, moving closer to take a look at the screen and squinting as if trying to identify an invasive bug on a kitchen surface. “Mmmh... I’ve heard about them, fair enough. How much are they offering?”

“Fifty K’, and some post trial support.”

Again he made a noise, adjusting his glasses as he stepped back. “Mmmh, this all sounds too good to be true,” he muttered dismissively. “Maybe give it some more thought, do some research and get back to it next week. You’ve got job searching to do today.”

Fey shook her head impatiently. "What's the point in doing that now? I'd just be getting a job only to have to pack up and go to Hudson. I can find work while I'm there."

"So you're just going to pack up and go on a whim? What if you can't find anything?"

"What if I can't find anything here, like the last few months? At least there I'm doing something about myself that can help me." His eyes flared at her growing defiance. Both their tempers were flaring. Fey could hear it in the slight growling tone, could feel the heat in her own cheeks. Gritting her fangs, she took a breath, letting it out slowly in a false display of calm. "It's my choice to make, not yours."

"Reuben..." Her name was drawn out in a scolding tone, as if he were speaking to a misbehaving child.

It was enough to make her snap. She could feel the heat welling up, brow knotting into a deep furrow. Before she could stop herself, she yelled at him. "No! I'm going whether you like it or not! I'm twenty-seven, I can make my own fucking mind up!"

For a moment, the older wolf stood in stunned silence, eyes wide and full of disbelief. She could see the clench in his jaw as the look swelled to indignation, anger. Her ears fell at the sight, already retreating herself away from the oncoming storm.

"Fine!" Her father roared, arms thrown to the air. "If you're going to be like that then just leave, see what I care. You'd rather throw everything away then just get a damn job, then get out there and see how hard it is for yourself!"

Storming out of her room, he slammed the door behind him hard enough for it to shake the picture frame on her wall.

Fey began to sob the moment he was out of there. Dampness stained her cheeks as she flung herself onto her bed, burying her muzzle between her pillows to silence the whimpers escaping her.

Nothing ever came of their fights, but tonight felt different. She couldn't help but fear she had finally crossed the line with him, that this would be the thing to make him kick her out of home.

The remainder of her day went by in a depressive fog, nothing accomplished and nothing gained for the hours spent sobbing into her pillow until she had fallen asleep. She had skipped dinner in doing so, now paying for it as her aching stomach forced her to roll from her bed, creaking open the door to the rest of the apartment.

Her father was already asleep, the lights off in the open kitchen. She dared not to cook for fear of making too much noise, so a packet of crisps were absconded with, before returning to the safety of her den. With the salty snacks in paw she sat herself down at her computer, waking it from its slumber to see a message awaiting her.

[S: Hello love of mine, how did the job hunting go today?]

[F: Task failed successfully. We had a fight.]

[S: I'm so sorry love... What happened?]

She looked at the still open email on her screen. There was no turning back now, not if she had just burned the last of the bridge with her father.

[F: I told him I had other plans and he did everything he could to talk me out of it]

[S: Fey... There's more to it than that, spill]

Recounting the email and the conversation that followed it in every detail she could remember, Fey filled her girlfriend in. A cold born from emotional numbness tore at her chest, and by the time she was done she was left shivering, pulling her blanket in tight.

Snovira's reply helped to warm her a little. [S: Oh Fey... I hope to never meet your father. I don't know what I'd do to him but it wouldn't be pretty...]

[F: I wouldn't stop you either, but maybe I shouldn't be saying that. >w>]

[S: It's hard not to be angry with him. Well, this all sounds like a good thing, but I have to know. Who's running this program?]

[F: Oh, uhh... Wake Pharmaceuticals? It's run by that Dancing Wake guy, right?]

[S: Aaahh... Yes, Dancing Wake. Knowing him he's probably just funding someone else to make it so he can take the credit.]

[F: Huh? Is there something wrong with him?]

[S: Is him being a rich asshole with superpowers not enough?]

[F: Well, okay sure but he's paying a stupid amount of money for people to take part in this trial, asshole or not I can at least hope this new suppressant doesn't suck to take. Plus I'll be moving near to where you live, we could finally meet up!]

[S: That's true... Hon, I know you're excited but, we should still take things slow. There's always the chance we don't get along so well in person. And I... I'm worried you won't like me when you see me in person.]

That was a weird thing to say. They'd shared photos years ago, and while Snovira was a little overweight, Fey had never cared about their size. If anything, that was something she liked about the mountain lion. Sno was pretty, attractive even. She was so much more than Fey ever would be, trapped in this boring plank of a man's body.

[F: What do you mean? Sno we've been getting along for seven years, I don't think it'll be any different in person. It'll be okay, I promise you it will.]

[S: It's not so simple... But maybe now that you'll be closer I'll feel more comfortable telling you why.]

[F: So... I can come live with you?]

There wasn't an immediate reply, but after a few minutes to browse, [S: Yes, you can come live with me, Stardust.]

There was only a single word needed to express her excitement. [F: YIPPEE!!!]

[S: Calm down, you still need to get here first. Have you got a ticket for the train?]

[F: Oh shoot, thanks for reminding me. Gods, what would I do without you~]

[S: I dread to think]

Reacting to that last post with a heart, Fey closed down the messenger so she could focus. A ticket to Hudson from where she lived was surprisingly cheap- given such a short booking window it was a miracle it came in under two-hundred dollars. Maybe the stars had aligned for her today, but she still had to get to the station early. Checking the current time, it was...

5 AM?! She'd really let time get away from her tonight. At least she had a few hours to get ready before the train, and she could try to sleep on the way. Dumping the remaining crumbs from her chip packet into the back of her mouth, she hastily peeled away from her computer to begin packing.

A black backpack was filled with clothes for the trip along with some personal items she couldn't be without. A framed photo of her mother and her friends all smiling, a knitted beanie she had made for Fey, and a small quilt that had been passed on to the young wolf. The few things she couldn't leave at the whims of her father, should he decide to throw the rest into a dumpster once she was gone.

There was one more item of import left however.

Tucked in the corner of her room, shadowed by the tall wardrobe, sat a cardboard box. Unfolding the lid, Fey reached inside until her paw brushed upon something pliable, roughed by age. Pulled free from its confinement was a small plush wolf, its once pristine grey fur matted from age, worn in places, black button eyes just barely clinging on.

Seeing it brought an ache to her chest. It had been a gift from her parents on the day she was born, and it had made the long journey to America with her. This little plush meant the world to her, even if it had spent the better part of the last decade gathering dust.

With a little brush down, she gave the diminutive toy a quick hug before tucking it in amongst underwear and socks, leaving her backpack bursting at the zipper. She could carry her laptop along in her bag, and she still needed it now. As far as packing went, she was as ready as could be.

The next couple hours were spent playing games, jumping around titles and genres to keep herself awake. Too many games, too little time, the gamer's biggest pitfall. Before she knew it, it was 7 AM, signalled by the morning light filtering through the blinds of her narrow window.

Stumbling from her room, Fey made for the coffee machine on the counter, deciding that making noise at this time was worth the risk. If her father woke up to it, she'd just tell him to shove it. She was going whether he liked it or not.

To her mercy, he didn't wake up in time to see her out. She'd drained her cup and made for the door with her bag by the time she heard him stirring in the other room, slipping her open-toed shoes on as quietly as possible.

Shutting the wooden door with deliberate slowness, Fey lingered on the other side for a second longer, hand still clasping the doorknob as her chest fluttered with anticipation, fear of what was to come and the change she was about to make in her life.

It's not too late for you to go back to your room and lie down in comfortable misery.

Gritting her fangs, she pushed off from the doorstep, climbing down the stairwell to street level. Half way down, she heard the angry howl of her father slamming something against a wall, her hackles raised. That was all she needed to hear to know she couldn't go back.

Beneath her breath she muttered, turning away for the last time from her father's home. "Goodbye, dad."