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I've never considered myself a "people person". It isn't that I don't like people; I just never find the right thing to say, or end up doing something I later look back on with cringe-inducing horror. I mention this only to give you a notion of how deep in over my head I was from the moment I heard the faint knocking at my door.

It was a Friday, right around 8pm, and the last rays of dusk were filtering out of the sky. It started almost as a scratching, then escalated to a weak yet persistent tapping by the time I had navigated from the kitchenette, through the tight space of my apartment, to the front door.

I wasn't expecting visitors, and the door's peephole was non-functional (I had never worked up the courage to call a repair service), so I wrenched the door open knowing in the back of my mind that there was a roughly 30% chance that whatever stood on the other side wanted to kill me. But instead of a combatant, the body of a young woman, bloodied and weak, slumped through the doorway onto my carpet.

So four things quickly filtered through my mind in this moment. First I thought "oh shit." That was quickly followed by the sinking realization that I was going to miss the TNG marathon later tonight. The last two came as I appraised the situation: it was no mere coincidence that this girl had chosen to rap on my door, and that literally the last thing I should do at this moment was phone the police.

I kicked into action. Although my interpersonal skills may be lacking, I do know a good amount of first-aid. I dragged her body into the cramped interior of my apartment and laid her on my couch. As I fetched my first-aid kit, I winced at the blood trail soaking into my carpet and upholstery.

Claw marks raked across her arms and back, and a gash on her scalp hinted at a treacherous fall. Fortunately for me (and her), it didn't look like there was much internal damage besides maybe some fractured ribs. It would hurt to move and breathe for a few weeks, but she would recover. Judging by the head wound, she might also have suffered a light-to-moderate concussion. At least on this count, I thought as I started tending to the wounds, things could have gone a lot worse. I didn't relish the idea of driving a half-dead girl with no relation to me to the hospital.

Of course, that was the least of my concerns at the moment. I mulled over several pieces of information that pointed to a whole lot of strife for me in the near future. First, she was a werewolf. I could smell it on her as clear as day. Second, she had been attacked by other werewolves – lingering scents pointed to a single pack. Third, after somehow escaping, she had – bleeding, in shock, and near-death -- decided to head straight for my doorstep. If this didn't already sound bad enough, it was made 10 times worse by the fact that *I* was a werewolf.

I'm not a very good werewolf. Wolves run in packs; they hunt together, they sleep together, they live together. Usually a werewolf pack controls their territory with a hundred-mile radius. If any rogue 'wolves wander in, the local pack will pick up the scent sooner or later, and confront the intruder. The hapless lone 'wolf must either flee, join the pack, or die.

I don't have a pack.

In fact, I'm the only werewolf in Seattle. Oddly enough, Seattle lacks any real supernatural presence besides the usual handful of ghosts and little folk that live around any urban area. No local werewolf pack, no vampires or warlocks, no significant wizarding presence or other signs of the occult. Sometimes a werewolf will pass by in the Cascades, but they never enter the metropolitan areas. It's rare, but I've heard of a couple other "dry" spots like Seattle, places where things never go bump in the night. Which isn't to say Seattle doesn't have any weird things going on in its midnight underbelly – it just doesn't have any of your typical paranormal activities.

But whatever drives everything else away, I'm apparently immune. I've never felt the urge to get out of the city. Sometimes a Hunter tracks me down and tries to take me out, but that's never really bothered me either. Most of them come out of Portland and aren't very skilled Hunters.

Tonight I *was* feeling bothered. I was troubled, perturbed, unnerved, and every other fearful emotion all at the same time. On top of it all, my wolf-side had suddenly kicked in, and I was definitely feeling the "flight" part of "fight or flight". My tiny apartment morphed from cozy to claustrophobic, and every city-sound in the night had me peeking from between the window blinds to check the street below.

A lone werewolf had wandered into Seattle. She had been mauled by a pack of other werewolves. Glossing over the questions of *why* the pack had come to Seattle, there was the very real question of what it meant for my future as a lone wolf. If they decided to set up shop, there would be nothing I could do. They'd quickly seek me out by scent and compel me to leave or join their pack.

I'd tried the whole pack thing once before, and it didn't really work out. I doubted this pack would be better, judging by the girl on my couch. And as much as kowtowing to the pack alpha was unpalatable, I sure as hell wasn't going to leave Seattle. I liked it here, liked the fact that I could stay in touch with my human side and avoid the inexorable pull towards the wolf side I had felt when I was in a pack.

I mentally inventoried my options and came up empty-handed: *I won't leave, I can't fight, and I won't join the pack.* I was sure making this difficult for myself. I looked at the girl on my couch and thought about how easy it would be to send her back out to the streets, to hole up and hope that the pack left the city on their own accord, and go back to my relatively uneventful life as quickly as possible.

But I soon came to the uncomfortable realization that no matter how much I wanted to kick this girl, that was pretty much untenable. I didn't want to be responsible for the girl's death if the werewolves came after her again, and regardless I would still need to do something about the pack's presence. I knew deep down that they weren't going to go away. The fact that a werewolf pack had made it this far into the Seattle metropolitan area meant that *something* had changed, even if I hadn't the faintest clue *what* (being part of the supernatural doesn't make you an automatic expert on it).

My eyes settled on my new tenant, and I appraised her in a new light. She was short, her legs disproportionately small for her body. While her thin frame might have been called "slender" on another person, it only served to make her seem *small*. This feeling continued to the proportions of her face, with small close-set eyes and thin lips. Her skin color was unique; vaguely multi-ethnic, perhaps best described as olive-

colored. It contrasted with her hair, a dark auburn. It swept to about shoulder-blade length, and the ends were rough-shorn. All-in-all, she didn't really *look* like your average 'wolf.

After doing my best to clean her blood from the carpet, I sat down and leaned against the coffee table by the couch, waiting for her to wake up. In the morning, I would need to seek out some outside help with this whole situation; there was no way I would be able to handle the pack on my own. Presently the fear chemicals wore off and the tension was replaced by overwhelming fatigue. As plans for the morning continued to bounce around my head, I nodded off.

When I awoke, she was awake and cooking breakfast. I watched through half-closed eyes as she moved around the kitchenette. Looking at her now, you wouldn't have thought she had nearly bled to death the night before. That's werewolf physiology for you. Sure, she winced and stepped gingerly as she moved around, but she was back from the brink of death. From personal experience, I knew this stage of recovery would take longer. She would be in pain for more than a week, but at least she wouldn't be incapacitated.

I tried to get up slowly, as to not startle her, but she jumped a little anyways when she noticed me. I approached her obliquely and – without looking straight at her – reached out my hand. It was all non-threatening wolf body language, but she still shrank away a little as my hand approached. “Hi. I'm Parker.” She took my hand hesitantly, but didn't reply. The silence stretched. I tried again. “What's your name?” The girl just looked down and gently shook her head. Great. “So, you can't talk?” She gestured weakly to the counter, where she had laid her wallet. I picked it up and fished out her driver's license.

Tina Marks, age 23, apparently from Oregon. “Ok, Tina.” I pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down. She took that as a cue and finished putting the breakfast onto plates. A rare steak for each of us, and a heap of juicy bacon – being a werewolf gives one an unusual affinity for meat, especially very rare steaks. She set the plates on the table and sat in the other chair. I looked at her. “I decided last night that I'm going to let you stay here as long as you need. I also decided I'm going to go on the offense and deal with the pack that attacked you.” She only gazed down at a slight angle, and hugged herself a little tighter. I sighed. I could barely deal with a normal conversation; how was I supposed to deal with a mute werewolf girl sharing my apartment?

“Tina, I don't really know what to say, but if you need anything, let me know.” She ducked her head in a vague approximation of a nod. I left it at that and dug into the steak in front of me. She apparently took that as permission to start eating, and began to snap up the bacon with an un-self-conscious ferocity. The sureness of the motions seemed dissonant with the rest of her behavior. I guess food was as good an outlet for psychological trauma as any other.

After breakfast I pulled out my phone and selected one of the four numbers from my contacts list. After two rings, the man on the other end picked up. I sang out as genial a greeting as possible: “Hey Josh, it's Parker Watt.”

“Ah.” Although there were many words that could be used to describe his response, ‘excited’ or ‘friendly’ were not among them.

“Listen, I know we don't have the *best* working relationship, but—”

“Indeed, I would hesitate to call it a relationship at all. I very much hope for both our sakes that you have a good reason for calling. I am very busy as it is.”

I bit back a glib response, remembering back to how our last encounter ended, and reminded myself that he had good reason to be hostile and bitter. I decided to cut to the chase. “There's a werewolf pack in town.”

There was a pause on the other end. “How sure are you?”

“Pretty damn sure. Smelled it last night.” I could have told him about Tina, but I didn't want to complicate this any more than it already was. “We need to meet.”

I never relished the idea of interacting with Seattle's *weirder* half. I mean, if you thought being a werewolf was strange, you haven't met the Defenders. I only met them a couple of times, but the superhero team was far from normal, even by my standards. Seriously, when you work with a guy who refuses to go by anything other than "Wichet" and who can regrow limbs, turning into a wolf once a month becomes pretty par for the course.

To be fair, I haven't really talked with any of them except for Josh – or Conduit, when he was in costume – but they seemed like a bunch of pricks. They were illegal vigilantes, upholding justice by breaking the law. Seemed pretty hypocritical to me. Our relationship was uneasy at best; when I had first moved to Seattle, there had been a slight... *misunderstanding*, which resulted in more than a few broken bones. Since then, we had come to a mutual tolerance, and I had agreed to be the local liaison for the Supernatural Network, a burgeoning support network for rogue elements like solo runaway werewolves. The Network had been started by the American Superhero League, and it had yet to gain much traction among supernatural beings. Since nothing supernatural came near Seattle, it was no skin off my back to be part of it if it meant the local superhero team wouldn't give me trouble.

Looks like that had come around and bit me, though. They had asked me to mark a set of business cards with my werewolf scent, and had distributed those cards to SuNet centers in surrounding states. In the morning I had checked Tina's wallet, and sure enough one of my cards was nested in there. Explained why she had come to my door, anyways. Unfortunately, the whole Tina thing made working with the Defenders a little trickier. I couldn't in good conscience tell them about Tina. My role as liaison was to gather up rogue elements in Seattle and hand them off to the local hero team, after which they would be matched with a new pack and shipped off. Tina wasn't anywhere ready for a new pack. Everything about her body language meant she would quickly slip to the bottom of the pack hierarchy – become the butt of every cruel joke, or maybe the plaything of the pack alpha. Werewolves tended to be assholes.

Right, so here I was seated across from Josh, and he was staring intently at me. "Alright Parker, give me the rundown," he said.

"Well, I was out last night when I noticed the pack scent on the wind. It smelled like about 10 or 12 wolves, and it smelled mean."

"Mean?"

"Yeah, like they'd be capable of really tearing someone up and not thinking twice about it." Oops, that was a little specific. Josh cocked his head. Apparently the guy could read chi, or some bullshit like that. I hoped that didn't mean he could tell that I was lying.

"I sense foreign supernatural energies around you; it appears that the pack's aura is unusually strong." Oh shit, he was seeing Tina's energies still hanging around me.

"Maybe I crossed over a path they had taken and picked it up from there."

"That is a plausible scenario." I relaxed a fraction. "So, it is your opinion as a werewolf that we need to deal with these newcomers?"

"It's my opinion as a *person*," I said irritably, "that if we don't do something about them then they are going to start causing trouble."

Josh held up his hands. "Apologies. I did not mean to suggest that you *weren't* a person, but merely that *as a werewolf*, you have access to instincts beyond that of a normal person."

I narrowed my eyes. "Beyond that of a *normal* person, eh?" See what I meant about these guys being pricks?

Josh looked distinctly uncomfortable. He hurried to climb out the hole he was digging for himself. "In any case, it is our prerogative as supporters of the Supernatural Network to acquaint ourselves with new supernatural arrivals. To do that, we need to find them first."

"Agreed."

"So let us sweep the city, starting tonight. I would ask that you come on patrol with the team – we need your sense of smell."

As much as I disliked the idea of hanging out with the Defenders, I really needed to find and deal with the pack before they did the same to me. "Alright, I'm in."

I walked beside Conduit (Josh insisted I call him by his hero name when on patrol) as we swept Bellevue looking for the pack. Shadow walked ahead of us while Wichet lagged behind. He was supposed to be covering our backs, but as far as I could tell he was off in his own little world. Wichet always seemed disconnected from reality.

We had struck out the entire night. Not even a whiff of werewolf on the air. I was getting ready to call it quits when Shadow looked sharply to her right and pulled up short. Her voice came over the commset, "I've got some sort of gang activity on the other side of this alley."

Conduit radioed back, "Go ahead. We will follow behind and support." Shadow took off running, and she was *fast*. I wasn't sure if it was her armor (she had called it "agility armor") or if it was a natural part of her abilities. Conduit and I had started running as well, but she quickly vanished into the alley. By the time we got to the mouth of the alley, she was on the other side, confronting the band of thugs. I counted eight of them.

Werewolves have pretty good hearing when we concentrate, and I could make out some of the exchange as we ran towards it. It looked like the gang had been hassling a passerby, and it felt like it could turn ugly at any moment.

"Hey." Shadow stood neutral in pose, not poised for battle or anything.

The gang turned to look at her. They were mostly Asian, with a few white boys in the mix. An apparent leader stepped out with a stereotypical swagger. He looked Shadow up and down. "What the fuck are you supposed to be?"

"I get asked that question a lot, and I've never found a good answer. I'll let you come to your own conclusions. Meanwhile, let's leave this guy alone." She gestured to the pedestrian the gang had encircled.

The gang leader grinned. "Trying to be a hero, huh?" He advanced a few steps and put a hand on the obvious bulge of a gun under his shirt.

"Well duh," Shadow replied. She stepped forward and smacked him across the face, backhanded. He recoiled and pulled the gun from his waistband. She knocked it from his hand and punched him straight in the sternum; the gang leader was knocked onto his ass with a huff, and the gun went skittering across the pavement. Two gang members on the right pulled knives from their pockets and flicked them open, charging towards Shadow. She dropped low and swept her leg out in an arc, tripping up both of them. They fell face-first to the pavement from their momentum, although one of them still managed to lash out with his knife. It bounced harmlessly off the armor on Shadow's upper arm.

By this time Conduit and I were in-range, and other gang members sent up calls of alarm as they spotted us sprinting towards the group. I wasn't that experienced in terms of combat, so I figured I'd go for the old pick-one-and-engage tactic. Conduit, on the other hand, had his eyes set on two gang members on the far side of the group who had started to draw and check their own weapons. He rolled to the right as a gang member took a swipe at him with a knife, catching the arm and using the guy's own momentum to swing him head-over-heels into another thug. Conduit hadn't lost any speed during the maneuver, and it only took him a few steps to reach the gun-wielder. One of the guys had a semi-automatic pistol, the other had some sort of compact sub-machinegun (an Uzi maybe?). Conduit struck out straight with a two-finger jab and caught the guy with the Uzi in the elbow. The gunman cried out and contorted his hand, dropping the gun in the process. Conduit stuck his foot out and pivoted, driving his body into the other gunman and forcing the pistol towards an unoccupied space. A gunshot rang out, the bullet going harmlessly into the ground.

Meanwhile, I had picked a gang-member, and we were circling each other. He had a knife, and I had bare hands. Shit. I decided to try a less direct tactic. "You know, I'm not a hero."

My opponent narrowed his eyes. "No?"

"No. I'm a *werewolf*."

He seemed pretty confused by this apparent non-sequitur. I took the opportunity to strike out for his groin with my foot. I missed, landing a glancing kick on his shin. Pain shot through my toes. Whoops. My adversary also reacted, pulling his leg up and cursing in pain. Ok, one to one. I tried to tip the balance in my favor by lunging for his knife. Not the smartest idea in retrospect, as it slid over part of my arm and drew a bit of blood. However, I did manage to get a handhold on his knife hand. I tried to bring my other hand down in some sort of karate chop on his elbow, but I hit it in the "correct" direction and it just caused the joint to fold, forcing the knife up towards my face. I decided to end it while I still had a nose, and brought my body close and my knee up. I figured the groin would be the best target, but barring that I could still land a good hit in the solar plexus or there about. My adversary grunted a little as I struck him, and I followed up by shoving him away and hooking my foot around his ankle. He fell backwards.

I pushed the offensive and jumped on top of him, straddling his body. I aimed a punch at his face, and his skull cracked against the road. Ok, maybe that was too much. He *had* threatened me with a knife, though. I rolled off of him and looked up. Conduit and Shadow were taking down the last gang member with ease, and Wichet was just arriving, pulling up short from an easy jog. Conduit and Shadow straightened and walked towards me.

Shadow looked down at the gang member in a heap at my feet and at the cut on my arm. "Aww, you didn't have to try to help," she said in a honeyed voice.

"Hey," I said, "I *did* help."

"One is better than none. Good work, team," Conduit said, shooting a reproachful glance at Shadow.

"I know, I know," Shadow said. She punched me on the arm. "I'm just messing with you."

Conduit turned to her. "Call it in Shadow. The cops can take it from here."

"Aw man, you know I hate phoning it in."

"We *all* dislike it. You have to do your fair share."

"Yeah, but I dislike it the most," she grumbled as she turned away and pulled a cell phone from a holster on her utility belt.

I thought about Conduit's words. *One is better than none*. I looked at Wichet; he hadn't helped at all. As I was looking at him, I saw movement from behind. One of the gang member was staggering to his feet, apparently not out for the count. Before I could open my mouth and say anything, the thug lunged forward with a knife and sank it into the small of Wichet's back.

My mouth uselessly said "Wichet, look out."

Wichet only grunted. He stepped forward, off of the knife, then turned around and swung a single punch across the bewildered thug's jaw. The gang member fell to the ground like a sack of rocks. Wichet bent down and checked the guy's breathing. "Yeah he's definitely out this time." As he did it, I was presented with a spectacular view of Wichet's back, which was now ornamented by a gaping, ragged, bloody hole.

"Yo Wichet, you got stabbed," I pointed out, lamely.

He grunted again. "Yeah, it'll heal by the morning, as long as I don't bleed out." He pulled some gauze from his pocket and reached around, packing it on and around the wound. "Nothing that needs to be worried about now."

I shook my head in wonder. Then something occurred to me. I turned to the gang's almost-victim. He hadn't fled the scene, he was just standing there, watching the proceedings with a slightly befuddled look. "Hey man," I said to him. "You ok?" That seemed to shake him out of his stupor a little. He looked at me, then around at the surroundings. "Yeah..." He turned around and walked away from us, hurrying a little.

"He's not going to remember this, right?" I asked the team.

"Nah," Shadow said.

"Ok, just checking." That was the fundamental mystery of the Underground. The existence of werewolves, vampires, Hunters, faeries, and superheroes wasn't as strange as the fact that *normal people never remembered they existed*. Witnesses of supernatural events never remembered them after the fact, criminals never remembered when superheroes took them down, and the cops never caught on to the fact that there were bands of vigilantes running around American cities. A small portion of the population was made up of these so-called "invisible" people who could see and remember the extraordinary things happening around them, and who were never clearly remembered by normal civilians. Most of the Invisibles had supernatural affiliations or were superheroes or supervillains. These people formed the Underground. The small remainder of otherwise-normal Invisibles tended to join the staunch group of crazies that populate the sad corners of society, telling anyone and everyone about the things they see and never being believed.

In a way, the existence of superheroes and supervillains was a natural consequence of this phenomenon. There were always people who would use their relative immunity to gain power, wealth, and earthly pleasures. These made up the villains and supervillains. Others, inspired by the American ideal of the superhero, styled themselves as heroes and took up the good fight against the immoral and depraved villains. Some of these heroes had abilities you could truly consider a superpower. Maybe not a good superpower, but still at the limit of human ability. Others lacked any truly special abilities, and simply honed their mundane skills for the invisible war against evil.

We celebrated a successful patrol back at the Defender's HQ. The building was little more than a rented out warehouse, with a corner adorned with sofas and lockers, but it served its purpose. Honestly, it was more than initially met the eye. Each member had an alcove – not a full separate room, but a space shielded from the main area – with a bed and personal effects. There was an array of monitors on a large desk, which acted as a dispatch and central control area for the team; they usually left one member behind when going on patrols, who could watch the news and other alert sources, and radio out updates to the team.

Behind the control center was a topography of broken-down couches and beanbag chairs, with a rickety coffee table and a massive television set with a huge array of entertainment devices hooked up below. Outwards from that spread a collection of what first appeared to be junk. At second glance, it seemed part of it was Shadow's workshop, part of it was a first-aid station, and part of it *was* actually junk. They had an old yet (I assumed) functional van, and a couple of other obviously broken boats and cars. Perhaps some of it was left over from the previous tenant.

Despite the ramshackle décor, it seemed it was a home-away-from-home for the Defenders, and it did feel kind of cozy when I sank down into one of the couches. Shadow (now Rachel), Conduit (now Josh), and Wichet (still Wichet – he never used a civilian name) adopted positions on beanbags and armchairs. Josh tossed out beers from a grungy fridge.

"Good work, team." Josh looked around at everyone. "We canvassed a fair amount of Bellevue, and stopped a crime in progress. I'd say that's a good night's work." We raised our drinks to that.

"Well," Rachel cut in, "some of us stopped a crime." She looked at me, an edge of humor in her voice. "Some of us only managed to show how bad they are at fighting."

"I took out a guy!"

"Barely," she replied.

"Well I'm sorry I don't have the

"Not much of a werewolf, are you?" Wichet remarked. The comment was delivered flatly, and I couldn't tell if he was trying to be funny.

"Come on man," I said. "Werewolves are more than claws and teeth."

"Hmm. I'll believe it when I see it."

Josh stepped in. "Hey, hey, lay off. We're lucky that Parker caught on to the fact that this pack is in town. He didn't have to come along tonight, either. He hasn't trained like we have, so cut him some slack."

"Yeah," I said in a vye to break the tension, "I'm not a badass like Rachel over here, taking out like four dudes in as many seconds."

"There's a joke to be made there," Wichet said, off-hand.

Rachel looked at him. "Don't be crass, you big lizard."

"I don't 'preciate you insulting my biology like that," he mumbled.

“It’s ok, I’m sure your pride will grow back.” Everyone chuckled. “All things considered, you had some good moments yourself, Parker. I heard that whole ‘I’m not a hero, I’m a werewolf’ bit.”

I laughed.

The rest of the night went smoothly as we continued to unwind from the stresses of patrol. It had been a long time since I had felt as included as I did right then, surrounded by smiling faces. Being a werewolf without a pack is lonely; it’s hard to keep any relationships with normal people. That night, though, as we sat around making jokes and telling stories, I didn’t feel lonely at all.

As I walked back to the apartment, I couldn't help but notice a skip in my step. The night wind was cold against my cheek, but my mouth curved into a grin anyways. My body was happy, and the chemicals in turn made my brain happy. A sincere joy coursed through my body even as I pondered at the strangeness of neurochemistry. Tonight had been good. The Defenders and I had worked well together. We hadn't made any discernable progress, but it felt like a good start anyways.

As my apartment came into view, the wind changed direction and slapped against my face again. I froze, endorphins draining from my body. The unmistakable scent of *otherness* wafted past me. I looked up at the face of my building – it couldn't be a coincidence. The pack had found me. Then another thought: *Tina*.

I looked around, but I couldn't see the pack. Options weighed in my head, even as I ran towards the building entrance. If they had already gained entrance and found my apartment, there was no use in continuing forwards. But I had to hope that they were still combing the neighborhood, having caught my scent but not having honed in yet.

I took the two flights of stairs in 5 seconds flat and skidded to a stop in front of my door. I stopped to listen: were they in there now? I couldn't hear sounds of violence, and the scent wasn't any stronger – if anything, it had weakened once I had gotten in the building. I breathed a small sigh of relief. I entered my apartment. "Tina? We have to go, right now." No response, obviously. When she failed to apparate at my call, I poked my head into the bedroom. No sight of her. Had she fled at the first scent of the pack?

But I saw it when I re-entered the living room: claw marks on the inside of the front door. It all clicked in my head. I stopped and turned my head, listening. There, in the kitchenette. I stepped forwards and saw a wolf curled up against the cabinets, whimpering softly. I approached it, knelt down, and wrapped the wolf in a comforting embrace. "Tina, Tina, it's alright, the pack hasn't found you yet. I'm here. I'm going to help you out." The words streamed from my mouth, mostly meaningless. It was the embrace, one wolf to another, that communicated it all.

Werewolves don't only Change on full moons. Most people don't know that. In truth, the Wolf is always lurking beneath the surface, waiting for a chance to claw its way out – like some nasty temper that ends with blood and fur, not bitter words. Some people are better adjusted than others (I'd like to think I'm good at keeping it under control), but it lurks in everyone, ready to transform you into a beast if you let your guard down. Stress, fear, surprise, anger; like a temper, these bring the Wolf to the surface. Hell, *I* was close to losing it, and I hadn't even met the pack that was looking for us. Tina had been mauled by them, and I didn't fault her reaction. Poor girl probably caught a single whiff of it and couldn't stop the Change if she wanted to. In her wolf form, she would have been unable to get out of the apartment, only fueling the fear and sense of being trapped.

But right now we had to get out of the area before the pack closed in on our position. I had no doubt that they eventually would, so I coaxed Tina out of the corner and opened the front door. We could try our luck on the roof, maybe going out the back on the fire escape. That would still leave us in or around the building for a while. We could leave quickly if we exited at ground level, but then we'd be exposed in the street.

I decided to go out the front. It would be faster to get to my car, and if there were any 'wolves in the street, there was no guarantee we could slip by them even if we went out the back of the building. Tina kept close behind me as I went down the stairwell. I stopped at the front entrance and slowly checked the street. It was clear, as far as I could see.

My car was in a lot down the street. The moonlight cast treacherous shadows across the street, and a couple of times I thought I saw movement, but nothing presented itself. Tina and I snuck between splotches of darkness, moving down the street. We made it to the car, and I coaxed Tina into the back seat.

I had gotten into the driver's seat when I noticed a 'wolf. He had seen us, and was stalking up towards the car from the back. He was still maybe 30 feet away, and didn't know I had seen him in the rearview mirror. I started the engine, and he charged, trying to take me out while I was distracted with turning on the lights and backing out. I anticipated the move, though, and immediately slammed into reverse and peeled out. The 'wolf didn't move in time and went tumbling onto the roof of the car. I kept backing up, shaking the wheel back and forth in an effort to stop the 'wolf from securing a handhold on the roof. It worked, and he went rolling forwards, off the hood and onto the ground.

I shifted to drive and floored it. The car was too slow, though. The 'wolf knew what I was trying to do and was already on his feet. He jumped onto the hood and dug his fingers into the crevice at the bottom of the windshield. He swung his other hand, attempting to go straight through the windshield, and left a nice spiderweb crack in the middle. A second punch would probably succeed in breaking through, so I swung the wheel and skidded out of the parking lot. It worked. The 'wolf didn't have any lateral purchase on the hood and, being already off-balance from the punch, slid straight off onto the ground. I drove away as fast as I could. Nobody pursued; I suspected the pack didn't own any motor vehicles -- like most werewolf packs, they probably traveled through the wilderness on foot and had no money.

By the time we reached the motel, Tina was fast asleep in the back of the car. The fear chemicals had run their course, and now fatigue overtook her as she began the slow process of slipping back into human form. Just looking at her, every memory of my own Changes came rushing back. It wasn't fun or glamorous, the Change. Ok, sometimes it was a little fun. Running at full speed, wind in your fur, blood running hot in your mouth from a fresh kill. It's repulsive when you aren't a wolf, but at the time nothing feels better than chasing down a rabbit and tearing it apart. Being a wolf is like being drunk: you know in the back of your head that you aren't thinking straight, that you shouldn't be doing the things that you are doing. Yet you still do them, because they're fun in the moment.

If Changing was like being drunk, then the morning after was definitely a hangover. If you weren't careful, it was easy to slip back into the predator-prey mindset. Body language was wolfish. Muscles ached where they shouldn't, your body feeling like it's the wrong shape. Human concepts and high-level thinking came slowly and painfully. A simple math problem could make a migraine explode through your head. I didn't envy Tina; she was going to be scared and confused and in pain when she woke up in a motel room in the morning.

I parked and checked in. The room was on the first floor, so it was relatively easy to carry Tina's wolf form from the car to the room. It still wasn't *that* easy – imagine carrying a limp dog that weighs as much as a human.

I set Tina down on the bed. Her wolf body sprawled across the white sheets. On the outside, it seemed as though not much had changed, but inside she was being rearranged, shaping into a human anatomy. Her smell was changing. Sometime during the night her body would push the transformed biology to the surface, rendering her human again. In the meantime, I could rest. I glanced around and found an armchair in the corner. I slouched down into it and tried my best to catch some sleep.

The pack had found me very quickly, and now I knew what lengths they would go to in order to get Tina back. I couldn't let that happen. My best bet now was convincing the Defenders that the pack was a danger to the civilians in the area, and get their help driving the pack off or, should it come it, killing them.

These thoughts and worries rolled over in my head until I slipped into an exhausted slumber.

We found the pack during our second night patrol. I was surprised that Conduit was the first of us to notice their presence. He stopped abruptly in the street, head turned to the side, and called for us to stop. It was then that I noticed the scent. "It's the pack," I said. Conduit nodded. I looked around, but didn't see them anywhere.

We were standing on a side street, one edge lined by the outer fence of a self-storage facility, the other side stretching out into a rundown strip mall, the windows of the shops all dark and locked at this time of night. Streetlights left pools of illumination every twenty feet, but the rest of the area was plunged into near blackness. We struggled to see anything past the lights, but I could feel the pack getting closer nonetheless. I motioned at the others. "Everyone stay together. They can smell me, and they don't know we're just here to talk. It's quite possible they'll just attack us."

Then four 'wolves emerged into the light on the opposite side of the strip mall's parking lot. They moved towards us slowly, in a half-stalking, half-striding motion that only a werewolf can manage. Shadow and Wichet instinctively backed away a few steps as the commanding, feral movement of the 'wolves struck fear into their animal hindbrains. I reminded them, "Hold your ground. There are more wolves around; don't let them catch you off-guard."

I examined the four werewolves as they neared us. There were three men and one woman. I guessed the largest male was the pack alpha, the female was his mate, and the two flanking males were the betas, the alpha's lieutenants. They all wore a mix of casual and athletic clothing that found the balance between comfort, utility, and displaying their sculpted bodies. The alpha was tall, probably 6'6", and broad-chested. A mountain-man beard completed the look – a man turned wild. Slightly unhinged, driven by animal instinct, yet brimming with raw sexual appeal. The other two males weren't much better. If anything, they seemed to be simmering with a constant, subdued anger. They would be the most dangerous, because they were spoiling for a fight. I looked at the alpha's mate. She stood four inches shorter than the alpha – of course, she still towered over the three of us. Her brown hair flowed long and un-styled. Looking at her eyes, I saw the same feral gleam the others had. "Great," I muttered under my breath. These weren't people you could reason with.

Shadow leaned over. "Why haven't they attacked yet?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. It certainly looks like they're spoiling for a fight."

The wolves stopped when they were 20 feet away from us; close enough to speak, but outside of combat range. The alpha looked at me. I had to brace myself to avoid flinching. I kept my gaze focused on him, but didn't meet his eyes. Staring him in the eyes would signal a challenge. I only wanted to show that I wouldn't submit to his status as pack alpha.

He spoke: "So you're the lone wolf."

I waited for him to continue, but he said nothing more. "Uhh, yep," I replied.

Conduit stepped forward. "We don't want trouble. We just wanted to meet--"

"Sss!" The alpha's mate hissed at Conduit. He stopped talking. Attention returned to me and the alpha.

"The girl is part of my pack. I don't appreciate your meddling," the alpha growled. *Ah, shit.* The Defenders all turned their heads and looked at me sharply. Conduit narrowed his eyes and looked sideways at the alpha. "Parker," he said in a warning voice, "what is he talking about? What girl?"

"Erm, listen," I replied. "I may have not been entirely forthcoming."

“Hey man, I thought you were cool,” Shadow said accusingly.

“He’s a ‘wolf,” Wichet said to her. “What do you expect?”

“Look, I just didn’t want to complicate the situation,” I pleaded. “She came to my doorstep, half-dead. If I had told you guys, I couldn’t have guaranteed you would send her back to the pack in pursuit of good relations with them. Or you would have had her sent out of the city to one of the safehouses in San Fran. She can’t make that journey. She needs to be with a ‘wolf right now.”

“Well you did a piss-poor job of not complicating things, didn’t you?” Shadow looked at me angrily.

“Parker, the Supernatural Network exists for a reason,” Conduit said. “It is not your prerogative to supercede it. If you have an issue with how the Network operates, there are official channels you can go through to help us take corrective steps.”

“What, and meanwhile a werewolf gets tossed back to her abusers and they finish her off?”

“It isn’t your place to assume that her own pack attacked her. There is no point in *having* a system if you don’t *use* it, Parker.”

“Man, fuck the system,” Shadow cut in. “Parker’s right; it isn’t perfect. I’m just pissed that he lied to us.” She glared at me again.

The pack alpha seemed to be enjoying this. “So,” he said, “this is what the famous Supernatural Network looks like up-close. I’m glad to see it lives up to its reputation.”

Conduit looked genuinely angry at that comment; he was a big proponent of the Supernatural Network. “It works best when *both* parties are invested in its success.”

“I would be invested,” the alpha replied, “if it meant we would get our pack member back safely. She ran off and was injured. She needs her pack right now, most of all.” He stepped forward with his hands open in a conciliatory gesture. Crap, this guy was smarter than he looked.

I couldn’t risk the Defenders being convinced by that bald-faced lie. The worst case scenario here would be the Defenders and the pack coming to an agreement. “First off, that’s bullshit,” I cut in. “*You* attacked Tina. I could smell it all over her the night she showed up at my apartment, and since then Tina hasn’t said anything that makes me think otherwise.”

The alpha chuckled, his voice so deep it sounded like a growl. “How could she?” *Oh, interesting.* Did that mean Tina had been mute even before the attack? I had simply assumed it was the trauma of being mauled half to death by her adoptive family.

“Second, even if you snuggled up with the Defenders and acted like you supported the Network, I wouldn’t hand Tina over.”

“Parker!” Conduit barked at me. The alpha’s lieutenants tensed subtly, and I smelled four more ‘wolves -- and these were actually in wolf form -- approaching us from our rear. Shadow and Wichet dropped into combat stances. Okay, I had successfully stopped the Defenders from siding with the pack. Now I just had to survive being attacked by a pack of werewolves.

The alpha shrugged. “It was worth a try. But in the end, this only means we get to kill a lone wolf before taking Tina back.” He eyed the Defenders. I suddenly became aware of the fact that both he and Conduit had moved forwards since starting the conversation. Conduit wanted diplomacy so bad that he hadn’t noticed a fight was about to break out until too late. I kicked out towards Conduit at the same time that the alpha ducked low and

closed the gap with incredible speed. My foot connected with Conduit's side and pushed him out of the way of an upwards claw swipe.

Shadow and Wichet had engaged with the two lieutenants, grappling with them at close range. Shadow's armor would probably deflect most claw attacks, and Wichet could survive everything short of a gutting. Still, there was no way they could fight an entire pack of werewolves. I yelled at the defenders, "Come on, let's scram!" Shadow triggered something in her armor and two 'wolves fell away, convulsing from electric shocks. We hauled Conduit to his feet and took off running. Wichet remained and occupied the alpha while we escaped.

"You fucking asshole," Conduit coughed. "I should hand you over to the pack."

I glared at him. "What, for saving your ass back there?"

"You went ahead and incited the pack, first of all, and then you didn't even let us know there might be trouble."

"They aren't reasonable people! They mauled one of their pack-mates!"

"I only have your word on that, which right now is not exactly worth much. I am giving you the benefit of the doubt right now only because the girl is not in mortal danger."

"Well screw you too. I guess I'll have to take out this pack on my own." I changed direction and took leave of Shadow and Conduit.

"Parker." It was Conduit.

I turned. "What?"

"Don't make me fight you. I need to keep the peace."

Before I could reply, Shadow grabbed Conduit by the shoulder and shouted, "Wolves!" Two werewolves in wolf form charged out of the darkness and pounced on the pair. I wanted to help, but I needed to get away from the area. The pack wanted me the most, and my best chance at escape would be while the Defenders fought them back. I took off running.

I headed for the self-storage facility's fence. The four 'wolves in wolf form would be able to outpace me on foot unless I put something in between me and them. One of the wolves caught up to me after a dozen feet and leapt at me. I ducked and struck upwards, Changing one of my hands into claws. My strike only grazed the wolf's belly, but it did knock him off-balance and sent him tumbling over my head. I kept running. I looked over my shoulder and saw the alpha was no longer fighting Wichet -- he was making a beeline for the fence. I had a solid lead on him, and if I could get over the fence before he reached me, I could probably lose the pack long enough to find a faster mode of transportation.

It only occurred to me about halfway to the fence that I had only counted 3 of the 4 wolf-forms I had sensed earlier. Just as I realized this, I was knocked over and spilled onto the pavement. The fourth wolf skidded to a stop and turned back to take another pass at me. "Fuck you," I cursed, and tossed a handful of gravel from the side of the road at the wolf's face as he started his charge. I clawed with my Changed hand and struck the wolf right in the eye. He turned away with a yelp. I got up and sprinted the rest of the way towards the fence. It was too late. I had scrambled halfway up the chain-link fence when the alpha grabbed my ankle.

My heart sank. The alpha wrenched me from the fence and slammed me against the ground. My head swam. He crouched over me -- would he rip out my throat with his teeth? Or maybe show me my still-beating heart

before smashing in my head? His hand swung back for a swipe. Oh goody, he was just going to gut me and let me bleed out on the ground. My inner Wolf pushed to get out, to take control, to Change. I had already turned my hand into a claw, and doing that left my Wolf dangerously close to the surface. What would I lose by letting go right now, anyways? I was going to die either way.

Then the alpha arched his back, shivered, and collapsed on top of me. To my right, I heard a wolf yelp and collapse. I breathed out slowly and pulled myself back from the brink of Changing, reigning in my Wolf. Shakily, I rolled the alpha off of me and struggled to my feet. I looked across 30 feet of pavement to see Shadow holding two tasers. "You sure you waited long enough?" I shouted. "My life hadn't even started flashing before my eyes." Shadow just shook her head, her eyes filled with disgust. I considered taking out the alpha right then and there with a good swipe to the throat, but I was sure Shadow had another taser hidden away somewhere, and would not hesitate to take me down and bring me into custody.

I scaled the fence, unhindered this time. I thanked my lucky stars I had nothing more to show for that engagement than a couple of shallow claw marks. In terms of physical damage, at least. Adrenaline from my brush with death began to disappear, leaving me exhausted. Stopping myself from Changing had taken a monumental amount of willpower, and yet overall tonight didn't feel like a win. The pack was just as ruthless and vicious as I had imagined they would be, and they would probably be walking away from tonight without a single casualty. Worst of all, I had torched my bridge with the Defenders, at a time when I really needed an ally.