

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 that night. The last two came as I appraised the situation: that 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 out, 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. Her hair 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. With my body at rest, the fear chemicals soon wore off and the tension in my muscles 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 sat still and 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 numbers from my exceedingly short 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 had only crossed paths with 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 hadn'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.

It looked 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. That 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 for "handling". For werewolves, this meant being matched with a new pack and being 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.

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's scent on the wind. It smelled like 12 or 13 '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; I hated this. When people know you're a werewolf, they look at you like you're a bundle of claws and teeth held back by the thinnest veil of civility. The way I see it, I'm just a regular, normal person. Sure, I have a condition that affects my lifestyle, but doesn't everyone have some sort of issue they have to work past in life?

Josh looked distinctly uncomfortable. "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. Two other members of the Defenders were present. Shadow, her steps soft and her strides long, paced ahead of us. Wichet lagged behind us. He was supposed to be covering our backs, but as far as I could tell he was off in his own little world. Every time I had seen him, Wichet had been aloof and somewhat 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 comm-set, "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 confrontation as we ran towards the 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 in a neutral pose, seemingly unprepared for sudden combat.

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, taking in the molded armor and angular warpaint. "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 some ugly-looking guns. 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-wielders. One of the guys had a semi-automatic pistol, the other had some sort of compact submachine gun. I'm not an expert on guns, but I guess it was an Uzi of some sort. 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 my 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 stopped and took a moment to collect myself. My skin tingled, and I noticed a presence buzzing in the back of my skull: my Wolf. If I didn't keep it in check, it would get stronger—and I didn't want to lose control in a moment of stress.

I rolled off the unconscious thug and looked up. Conduit and Shadow were taking down the last gang member with ease, and Wicket 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 members 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. Nothing that needs to be worried about now." He pulled some gauze from his pocket and reached around, packing it on and around the wound. "Should have brought my sword..." he mumbled.

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'm not some sort of warrior prince. I do what I can in a fight, but it's not my life.”

“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, thoughtfully.

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. I thought of something and looked around. "Hey, aren't there more than just the three of you? Where's everyone else?"

"Yes," Josh said, "two of our members are on vacation right now."

"Although knowing them, they're probably busy getting into trouble," Rachel said. "Who knows when they're gonna get back."

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 was crouching, dressed in dark clothes, but he was 6 feet tall and it hindered his stealthiness. 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 spotted 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 front of the car 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—part of it, at least—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 her 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 the 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.

Cold wind bit into me as I trekked back to the motel. The bone-chilling cold sapped most thoughts from my brain, but one line of thinking continued to bounce around inside my head: at this point, there wasn't much point in staying. My hold on human life was tenuous already. I had no real friends, I had an uninspiring, low-paying job. A pack had moved into town and was intent on moving me out, and now the other part of the Underground in Seattle probably shared that sentiment. There wasn't much stopping me from turning wolf and running off into the Washington wilderness. I still had to do something about Tina, but... she was a werewolf like me. We could run off together, leave behind the troubles of civilized life. A pack of two.

The wind shifted and a noxious scent wafted across my nose. It wasn't a "bad" smell in the normal human sense. A normal person probably wouldn't have noticed anything at all. It pricked my sensitive werewolf nose all the same. It smelled like anger and fear and hate and bloodlust and... predator. It wasn't wolf, though. It was human emotion, human pheromones. The wind shift, the smell—I put two and two together: I was being stalked by a Hunter. He had been following me downwind, to avoid alerting me. How long had he been there? Was I in his sights right now? I threw myself down to the ground, and in response a gunshot rang out in the night. I heard the silver bullet zip over me and bury itself in a building across the street. A grunted curse drifted across the night air.

I rolled over to a parked car and crouched on the lee side. Who was this guy? There were no Hunters in Seattle that I knew of. The nearest population of Hunters was in Portland; since the Hunting tradition was passed down as family legacy, they tended to not move around. It wasn't unheard of for Hunters to go on missions to surrounding areas, but usually only when they were contracted to hunt a particular target. I couldn't think of anybody who knew I was in Seattle, much less anybody who would want to put a price on my head.

I slapped my forehead. Of course: the pack was from Oregon, judging by Tina's driver's license. The Hunter had no doubt come up in pursuit of the pack. I peeked out from behind the car. I heard the report of the gun again, and the side of the car pinged with a ricochet.

"Stop shooting at me!"

No reply, except for the faint clack of a new round being chambered. I briefly considered arguing that I wasn't a werewolf, but then I remembered I had Changed my hand into a claw. I decided to appeal to reason.

"I'm not in the pack you're hunting!"

A pause, then: "Silence, beast. Come out so I can put you down."

I tried again. "I'm under the protection of the Seattle Defenders and the Supernatural Network."

“I don’t care which group of spandex-wearing pansies think it’s ok to let you roam the streets, demon. You’re all servants of Satan, and I’m going to destroy you.”

I wasn’t sure what I could say in response to that. “Ok, but look. Killing me isn’t going to get you closer to your goal, right? I can give you information on the pack, and in return you can save your bullets.”

“I already spent two bullets on you. I’m not going to let you get away.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s some Sunk Cost Fallacy bullshit right there.”

No response. This guy clearly wasn’t going to listen to reason. Something above me glinted as it caught the light of a streetlamp, and I tracked it as it sailed over my head and bounced onto the pavement in front of me. It was followed by a hail of similarly glinting objects, which landed all around me. I reached forwards and was about to pick one up before I realized what they were. Silver caltrops. What kind of psychopath carries silver caltrops? What kind of psychopath *makes* silver caltrops? What’s next, silver-laced tear gas?

“Talk your way out of that, devil.”

Great. I was pinned down against a car by a Hunter with silver bullets, and I couldn’t sneak away without stepping on silver caltrops and having the metal leach into my bloodstream. All the Hunter had to do now was circle around to a better position and take me out from extreme range.

Wait, I was pinned down against *a car*. I reached up and smashed the driver-side window above me, and gingerly unlocked the car door. I crawled into the car and sprawled across the front seats, making sure to keep out of sight. Now I only had to get the car started and I could get out of here. I searched the middle console and glove compartment for keys, but of course they were empty. I hung my head. Back to square one. It had been a long shot anyways.

An idea occurred to me. There was more than one way to get a car started and the car *did* look pretty old... I fished out my phone and searched for tutorials. Outside, I could hear the Hunter creeping around. I pulled the driver’s door shut and prayed this would work. I clawed at the plastic beneath the steering wheel and grappled with the wiring inside.

What felt like five minutes passed as I fumbled with plastic connectors and my heart thumped inside my chest. Where was the Hunter? Why hadn’t he shot me yet? My normal human hand was getting damp with sweat, making it nearly impossible to strip the wire I was holding. Was the Hunter being slowed by his own caltrops? Did he not know I had entered the car? Then I touched two wires, and the car sprung to life. Hah! Yes! Turns out hotwiring a car *is* as easy as they make it look in the movies.

I heard the Hunter curse as the engine roared to life. It sounded like he was about 15 feet from the car. He fired at the car and the window above me exploded, the shower of glass covering me. I flattened myself even tighter against the seats and slapped at the gear shifter. It slid into

1st gear. Fine. I punched the gas pedal with my hand, and the car shot forwards. A second gunshot blew out the rear window of the car. I took the opportunity to sit up and steer the car while the Hunter chambered another round.

I whipped the steering wheel hard, pouring my wolf-enhanced strength into breaking the steering lock. It gave way and the car slid sharply around a corner, putting a building between me and the Hunter. He fired one last time, but I was already gone, speeding off before he could find a way to tail me back to the motel.

I opened the door to the motel room softly to avoid waking Tina, but she wasn't sleeping. She was perched on the bed, looking intently at the door, and now at me. Her gaze was almost expectant. "Met the pack," I said wearily. "Fought with them." She looked away.

I walked over and sat down heavily on the couch in the room. Tina rose and stalked over towards me. The body language was still wolfish. She could read my body language like an open book -- she knew I was tired, and close to going into shock. She curled up on the couch next to me, wrapping her arms around me in a gesture that subdued the exhaustion in my bones. Tension leaked out of my muscles, and I relaxed into the embrace. Tina couldn't talk, but she still communicated her feelings better than most people -- among all the craziness she had been through in the past few days, and even the time before that, I was the one person she trusted. I didn't think I *could* be trusted to beat the pack, but Tina didn't care. I envied that ability to wordlessly embody a single thought like that.

"We should just... let's run away. This life is too much. We can slip away into the Cascades, surround ourselves with evergreens and never worry about anyone else ever again." I looked at her, and she stared back. In reply, she crawled up me, planted a hand on my chest, and kissed me. It was a slow kiss, and the whole motion was primal, the message clear. Her body pressed against mine, and I leaned back into it. We slid down until we were laying on the couch. Her actions came from instinct, and they beckoned my Wolf forwards. I returned her animalistic movements in kind and gladly handed the reins over to instinctual urge.

I awoke early in the morning, and I could suddenly feel every ache and wound on my body. Two days of stress, patrol, and combat hadn't been kind to me. I wanted to do nothing more than lie in bed all day, trying to drift away from the pain. I could use another hour of sleep, or maybe ten.

No, I sighed to myself, there was too much happening right now. There were three players in town, and they all wanted a piece of me. The pack would redouble their hunt after the humiliation suffered last night, a Portland Hunter was gunning for me, and the Defenders wouldn't be happy that I ran away in the middle of the fight—hell, I wasn't happy about it either. Thinking back on last night, we hadn't encountered the entire pack; not even half of it. The Defenders had been able to subdue those 'wolves, but only barely. Conduit had nearly been eviscerated, and Shadow had been using tasers to take down 'wolves. I doubted she carried enough for the entire pack.

If we had faced even one or two more 'wolves, I could have been torn limb from limb. We hadn't, though, and it made me look like a coward. Maybe I was a coward. Had I run because I miscalculated my chances, or had I run because I was embarrassed of my lie and afraid of the consequences? Did it matter? The Defenders hated me now, and I couldn't blame them.

I looked over at Tina. She looked so peaceful, like the trauma and terror she had experienced in the past week hadn't touched her at all. I wished I could act the same way. What I would give to be able to shed my troubles like a dirty coat, to walk away from this mess. I thought about Tina's response to my suggestion. I smiled. *Let's run away.*

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. I groaned and rolled over to examine the number, wincing as my body complained loudly. When I saw the number, I stopped. My finger hovered over the answer button. It was Shadow. I took the call.

"What do you want?"

"Parker, we need to meet."

I rolled out of bed. "Can't."

"Parker, I don't think you understand the current situation. We have to meet."

"No, *you* don't understand. I'm gone! I'm out of here! I'm taking Tina and I'm leaving town."

"You can't leave town, Parker. What about the pack?"

“What about them? Look, Rachel, I took your call because you saved my life last night. But you’re not convincing me to stay. So take this chance to tell me how much of an asshole I am, and then let me move on with my life.”

“I’m on your side! The other Defenders might be fooled, but I know the people in the pack are bad. Maybe not evil, but they’re a bunch of jerks, and I’ve seen their kind before. They aren’t going stay in Seattle if you leave. They’ll follow you across the country if they have to, because you faced them and lived. Think about it, you know I’m right.”

I rubbed my eyes. *Dammit*. She was right, I knew. I just didn’t want to face the reality. “Alright fine, let’s meet.”

I had picked a small cafe about a mile from the motel as the meeting point; I wanted to make sure that Shadow didn't show up with the rest of the Defenders and storm the motel. As much as I believed her, I also knew I wasn't good when it came to reading people's intentions. I approached from downwind, and saw that Shadow was already seated, alone, nursing a small coffee—or was she Rachel? She wasn't costumed, but she was here in a work capacity. I could never keep the work-life split clear when talking to superheroes. I decided to keep it professional. "Shadow, good morning," I said, walking up.

Shadow blinked. "Err, good morning. Where's the girl, Tina?"

"She was sleeping."

"If I'm going to bring the other Defenders around to my way of thinking, I'm going to need to her to say that the pack attacked her, and that she wants to stay in Seattle as part of your pack. Ideally in-person."

"She's, uh- she can't talk."

"*What?*"

"She literally can't speak. She hasn't uttered any sounds at all since she showed up. I got the feeling that she was mute even before the attack, judging by something the alpha said last night."

"Well, I'm going to need to talk to her anyways, even if it's just nods and head-shaking."

"That's fine, we can go see her now. We aren't far from here."

"Ah, just making sure I came alone?"

"Uhh, yeah." I felt slightly uncomfortable that she had so easily read my intentions. "Listen, what do you think we can do about the pack? I can't run, you guys can't beat them, and we can't give them what they want."

"We'll think of something. We always do."

"*Great.*" I bought a coffee and we walked back to the motel together. "Hey, I'm sorry about ditching you guys last night. I misread the situation, I didn't want to be forced to Change. I should have trusted in you guys."

Shadow waved her hand. "It's our job to protect the citizens of Seattle, even the werewolf citizens." She winked at me. "I thought about it more, and I don't blame you for keeping Tina a secret from us. Conduit's dedication to regulation can be obnoxious. I don't like that you did

what you did, but in the end I believe you were justified, and I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I chucked you under the bus right now."

"Now, if I can hear that coming out of Wichet's mouth, I'll finally feel like I have a chance."

Shadow looked at me. "He's not that bad. I don't know why he has something against werewolves, but honestly he's a good guy most of the time."

I sighed. "Why do I get the feeling that it's going to be extremely difficult to get those guys over to my side?"

"I'm sure they'll listen to reason," Shadow said.

"When has anyone ever said that, and it's turned out to be true?"

"Don't be a... what is it?" Shadow was looking at me. I had frozen in place, nose wrinkled.

"Pack," I whispered. "Come on!" I took off sprinting down the street towards the motel, and Shadow followed hot on my heels.

We reached the motel and the door to our room was open. I burst in, ready for combat. It was empty. I stood and looked at the chaos in front of me as Shadow ran up behind me. When she saw what I was looking at, she cursed. The room was trashed, torn up in what appeared to be an epic struggle. The room was rank with the scent of the pack, which came as close to being malevolent as an odor can. Tina was gone—they had taken her.

I slumped back. "I guess that's that."

Shadow shoved me. "What the hell, man? Don't you give a shit?"

I rounded angrily on her. "What do you want me to do? They took her! They got what they want! You think they're going to hang around and let us track them down? We lost."

"Wow." Shadow stood, looking at me. "You're a real piece of shit, you know that? They were only here, what, half an hour ago? We can still track them down."

"How? They're stronger and faster. Like you said, they have a half-hour lead."

"Use your damn nose! You have the best sense of smell in the city, at least when it comes to supernatural baddies."

I shook my head. "We won't be able to follow their trail back before the scent gets too weak."

"Who said we were following their trail?" I looked up and saw a twinkle in Shadow's eye. She was holding up her car keys. Ram horns glittered on the keychain. "Let's follow the fuckers themselves, straight back to the source."

“Left!”

“Fuck!” Shadow cranked the wheel and the car screeched across the intersection. I drew back my head to avoid getting decapitated as we nearly collided with oncoming traffic, then stuck my head back out the window. With the wind slapping against my face, I felt like a big dog. I tried to channel that feeling and focused in on my olfactory senses.

“It’s getting stronger! Take a right here!”

Shadow pulled the car around another corner. We couldn’t be far behind the ‘wolves that raided the motel; the thick scent of their aggression was flooding my wolf senses. I had picked a rough direction starting at the motel, and then we had zig-zagged across town in Shadow’s beat-up Dodge Charger, cutting back and forth across the path the ‘wolves had cut across the terrain.

Shadow slammed on the brakes, and my neck whipped into the edge of the window. I managed a strangled gurgle and drew inside, massaging my throat. “What?” She pointed at a set of specs down the road. Three tiny figures carried a fourth, limp silhouette. We were in an industrial district, and the three figures slipped through the doors of an abandoned warehouse. I breathed out. Shadow looked at me. “That’s them, right?” I nodded. “I didn’t want them to see us and get spooked. Sorry about your neck.”

“It’s fine,” I managed. “So we found them. What now?”

“I was thinking we snoop around a little, check out the lay of the land.”

I thought about it. “We’ll need to keep our distance. You’re right: if they catch a whiff of us, they’ll book in an instant. As it is right now, I suspect they’ll move out at night. It would probably be safer to head back right now.”

“Maybe,” Shadow said, stepping out of the car. “But the Defenders haven’t made it this far on luck and martial arts.” She looked at me over the top of the car. “Despite appearances, we plan our movements quite thoroughly. We scope out locations, research crime groups, and keep tabs on key underworld figures.”

“Jesus, you guys have day jobs, right? How do you have time for all of that?”

“We split up the work, and we don’t have a lot of hobbies.” I looked at Shadow. She had the look of someone dedicated to her craft. A gleam of duty and dedication flashed in her eyes. I understood then why she had put her feelings aside and called me. I also knew that she had meant every word earlier about protecting the citizens of the city.

Then Shadow slapped the top of the car and spoke in a lighter tone. “Come on, let’s walk around the property.”

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“No way.”

“Wichet, come on.”

“I’m telling you, this is a setup. I’m not putting my life on the line for a werewolf, no matter how much pathos he can muster.”

I stood outside the Defender’s headquarters. I was sure Wichet knew I could hear him with my enhanced senses, and he didn’t care. Shadow had been able to win Conduit’s support fairly quickly, but Wichet was proving stubborn. Without his support, the extraction mission was going to be extremely dangerous.

“Conduit, let’s just go. We’re not going to convince him,” Shadow said.

“Wichet, you may not care about Parker or this other werewolf, but it’s not just their lives on the line here. I can’t force you to come on the mission, but we’re going whether or not you agree. If you don’t back us up, you’re putting our lives in further danger. I’ve made peace with that, but have you?” A pregnant pause followed Conduit’s words.

Wichet said, “I’ll ride along, but I’m not going in with you. I’ll be there to pull you guys out when things inevitably go south because of Parker.”

“Fine. Let’s ride.” There were three sets of footsteps, and the door to the warehouse was hauled open. Shadow stood, framed by the light from inside. She took a look at my face and said, “So you heard that? Sorry.”

The Defenders filed out of the headquarters and piled into Shadow’s car. As Wichet passed me, he gave me an indecipherable look. It was a cross between a stare, a smirk, and an impassive aloofness.

As we drove to the pack’s hideout, Shadow gave a rundown of the property’s layout and Conduit outlined a strategy.

“The warehouse is surrounded by a good amount of pavement, and a chain-link fence surrounds that. There are some large storage tanks on the west side of the compound, but I don’t think the potential vantage point will be useful right now. The warehouse itself looks like it’s split into two halves. The first half is a big open space, and the second is split into two levels and might have a lot of interior walls. There are exits on two sides of the back half, and one big entrance on the front half.”

“Do we have any idea where the girl is being held?”

“Not really.”

“So we’re going to have to do a full sweep of the building, and we can’t avoid alerting the pack?”

“I agree, it’s not optimal.”

“Parker, is it likely that the pack will try to escape when they detect us?”

“No,” I replied, “if the pack is together their instinct will be to stand and fight. If the alpha is there to spur them on, it’s likely every member will fight to the death.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about watching the exits from the outside.” Shadow nodded. I, on the other hand, was quickly realizing how completely impossible this mission was going to be. How did the Defenders face these kinds of crazy odds without batting an eye?

“We’ll approach from the front,” Conduit said. “We want to avoid going into close quarters if we can help it. However, if the girl isn’t in the front of the warehouse, we’ll need a strategy for searching the back. I think the best approach is to search as a group, and move front to back, bottom to top.” Nobody disagreed.

We stopped a block away from the pack’s hideout, downwind and in the lee of another industrial building. The Defenders stepped out of the car. Wichet leaned back on the side of the car and started chewing gum loudly. Shadow and Conduit popped the trunk and suited up.

Shadow strapped her armor plating over the shock-absorbant fabric she was already wearing. The armor had lots of little spots for equipment. She slotted in mace, tasers, lock-picking equipment, small blades, tranquilizer darts, compact medical supplies, and a couple of other things you might find on a swiss-army knife. She also strapped a thin utility belt to her waist, which had a smartphone, a durable flip-phone as a backup, batteries, a transmitter for the Defender’s comm system, and some redundancies for the equipment on her armor. Lastly, she slid her helmet on, and activated its imagery enhancer. The HUD colored her face green.

Conduit had considerably less equipment. He had some steel batons that went into a sheath on his back. He had pads on his knees and elbows and a utility belt that matched Shadow’s in capability. He was also wearing a jacket that had intricate designs on it, which he claimed enhanced his powers. The patterns seemed almost tribal or shamanistic, with clear alchemical and modern mystic influences.

My nose twitched with a gust of wind. “I don’t like this,” I said. “There’s something weird on the wind.”

“More than the pack?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, maybe. I’ve never smelled the pack so strongly, all in one place. I don’t know if I can trust my nose tonight, I’m a little jumpy.”

“It’s your call,” Conduit said. “If you want to call off the mission just say the word.”

“No,” I replied. “We have to rescue Tina tonight. It’s just... we should just stay vigilant, that’s all.”

“Alright, then. Let’s go.”

Conduit, Shadow, and I snuck to the edge of the compound. Light poured from gaps in the abandoned warehouse’s walls. “I’ll go ahead first and take a peek inside,” Conduit said. “I should be able to mask my presence from the pack long enough to get a good read on the situation.”

“Hey Conduit,” I said. He stopped and turned around to look at me. “What actually is your power? You never told me.” He didn’t say anything, but I saw a humored glint in his eyes. He turned and slipped through a gap in the fence. Shadow handed me an earpiece and I fitted it into my ear. Conduit crossed the open expanse of asphalt crouching low, and paused at the edge of the entrance to the warehouse. The sliding door to the building was open six feet or so, and Conduit peered around the edge.

“There are four ‘wolves inside,” Conduit said, his voice coming through roughly in the earpiece. “They’re distracted playing cards. Come on.” He motioned to us, and we crossed the asphalt. “Parker, stay at the entrance and watch the far side of the warehouse. Shadow, you take the two on the left.” Shadow and I nodded. “Go!”

Shadow slipped inside, and Conduit followed. With a flick of her hand, Shadow sent a tranquilizer dart spinning into the back of one of the ‘wolves. She crossed the warehouse floor in an instant and sent the other ‘wolf to the floor with a jump kick. Conduit was already behind the ‘wolves on the right. He dazed one with a blow across the head, but the other ‘wolf dodged his strike and jumped back across the card table with a yelp. Conduit pursued the ‘wolf across the open space of the building. He caught him halfway to the back wall and swept the ‘wolf’s legs, throwing him to the floor.

It was too late. Two ‘wolves appeared on the mezzanine at the far end of the room, looking ready for a fight. “It’s that damn lone ‘wolf and his hero friends,” one howled. A few more ‘wolves poured onto the mezzanine from the back half of the building. There were already too many to handle, but Shadow and Conduit were too far inside to escape combat. I steeled myself and charged forwards to meet the pack members with swinging fists. One ‘wolf jumped down to the first floor and I clobbered him, but a second body collided with me and sent me sprawling to the floor. A grizzled man stood above me and sprouted claws, readying a fatal strike.

A gunshot rang out, its sound harsh and echoing as the noise entered the metal warehouse. Action seemed to freeze for a second, except for the man in front of me; he crumpled to the floor, muscle spasms shaking his prone corpse. I became dimly aware of Shadow and Conduit on either side of me, locked in brawls of their own. They too had stopped, surprise and confusion interrupting the violence.

That momentary pause seemed to stretch out as my mind raced—even from this distance, I could feel the bullet inside of the man in front of me. *Silver*. I did some quick mental arithmetic: I

didn't have a gun, the Defenders didn't have guns, and the werewolves *certainly* didn't have silver bullets. Which left... the Hunter. Had he managed to track me down since last night? Had he been following me all this time, trying to root out the pack's location? I shook away my shock. The most important thing right now was taking cover. Time seemed to resume as my mind screamed at my body to scramble towards the nearest piece of debris on the warehouse floor. Everyone else in the warehouse seemed to come to the same conclusion and made a mad dash for cover. A second later a second gunshot boomed, and one 'wolf who was slow on his feet collapsed to the floor. "Fucking silver bullets!" someone hissed. The pack members started crawling away and slipped through doorways, retreating to the back half of the building. The Defenders and I were left crouching behind crates, piles of garbage, and old pieces of machinery.

As I watched the doorway through a crack in the stack of wooden crates shielding me, a figure appeared in the entrance of the warehouse.

"Where'd those furry freaks go?" boomed a loud voice. I rolled my eyes. Yup, it was this guy. Of all the luck...

"Sir, may I presume you are a werewolf hunter?" spoke Conduit from behind a pile of trash.

"Damn right I am. Now prepare to have your unholy soul removed from this Earth!"

"Well, as it happens, my accomplice and I are not werewolves," Conduit offered, "so can I presume that you will allow us to walk away unscathed?" I caught his drift and shot him a death glare, silently mouthing a particularly vulgar interrogative.

"You may NOT presume as much!" the Hunter roared. "This one right here," he said, taking a few steps forward and pointing at my pile of crates, "said you afforded him protection. That makes you as valid quarry as any werewolf, in my eyes."

"Listen, if you oppose us, we'll be forced to fight back, making your job a lot harder. Why not let us walk away for now?"

"Naw. You might think that werewolves have a monopoly on the unholy biology here, but you spandex-wearing fairies are also freaks of nature. You deserve to be put down."

"I don't think you should go around insulting people's biologies like that," Wichet said. I swiveled my head in surprise; Wichet stood in the entrance to the warehouse, ten feet behind the Hunter. He was holding an honest-to-god broadsword, and its alloy was so heavy in silver that I could sense the blade from across the room.

The Hunter whirled around and started to bring his gun to bear, but Wichet took three quick strides and smashed the Hunter across the bridge of the nose with the hilt of his sword. The Hunter fell in a heap to the floor. Wichet readied a finishing blow with the blade of the sword. "Wichet!" cried Conduit. "We talked about this!"

Wichet sighed and lowered the sword. "He's a righteous asshole, Conduit."

"I know, but that doesn't mean you can split him open."

"Alright then," Wichet said, looking at me, "let's go get this werewolf girl." I gaped at him, and he patted my shoulder as he walked by.

"What just happened?" I asked Shadow.

"Dwell on it later; we're pushing the offensive." She rose and unholstered a pair of tasers. She stalked to a doorway and took up a position opposite of Wichet. Wichet held his sword at the ready. "Intimidation *only*," Conduit said to Wichet, gesturing to the sword. Wichet nodded. I grabbed the Hunter's gun off the floor, my hands tingling from the silver bullets inside, and took up a position by Shadow. Then Conduit kicked open the door, and we stormed the room.

Fighting a large group of enemies is difficult. Even a skilled fighter can be brought down by a throng of untrained assailants. The Defenders had taken on difficult odds before and won, but they had done so by quickly eliminating as many opponents as possible while they had the element of surprise. We, needless to say, did not have the element of surprise. If the odds had seemed grim when we first went into the warehouse, now they were dire. Yet by some unspoken agreement, we all charged forth anyways. Maybe it was just that we had come so far that it was unacceptable to turn back now.

There were five 'wolves in the first room. They were waiting for us, ready to pounce. They weren't ready for Wichet's silver sword, though, and it gave them pause long enough for Shadow bring two down with tasers and for Conduit to put another one down with some sort of pressure point attack. I roared and smashed the butt of the gun across the fourth 'wolf's head. The last 'wolf looked at his fallen comrades and made a break for a door across the room.

The werewolf slammed through the door and I caught a glimpse of a cage in the next room. I moved to get a better look, but four more 'wolves came through the doorway. Two men and two women, they were bigger than the four on the ground in front of me and the entire length of their forearms were thick with fur, their fingers decorated with razor-sharp claws.

"Hey!" I shouted. The 'wolves looked at me with feral eyes. I pointed to the gun I was holding. "Silver bullets! Back off!" They halted their advance, glancing between me and the gun, unsure. Then a silhouette darkened the doorway, larger than any of the other 'wolves. The pack alpha stepped forward, malice twisting his face into the snarl. I swung the gun to point at him. The alpha smacked one of the males on the shoulder and barked, "Go!"

The man didn't even hesitate to obey the command. He charged forward, canines bared in a grimace and claws ready to swipe. I pointed the gun back towards him, but he didn't stop. Instead of becoming fear, the feral rage in his eyes only deepened. I pulled the trigger.

I blacked out. I didn't fall down, I didn't pass out, but the next thing I knew, the scene had changed. The alpha was nowhere in sight. Three of the four 'wolves were on the floor. To my

left, Shadow held an expended taser pointed at the other male's unconscious body, and to my right Wichet stood over one of the female 'wolves, holding his silver broadsword to her neck. In front of me lay the corpse of the man I had shot. I don't think he had even screamed as the silver had spread from the chest wound into his bloodstream, and poisoned him from the inside out. My hands burned; whether from the recoil, the silver ammunition inside the weapon, or the shock of killing another human being, I couldn't tell.

Conduit shook me. "Parker! They have Tina in the next room! Let's go!"

That shook me from my reverie. "What?"

"She's through there! Come on!"

I started striding towards the doorway. Did I have any remorse about killing that man? I didn't think so. Was that weird? It was him or me. Us or them. No one could be faulted for feeling like that. I looked at the gun in my hands. I shouldn't have felt it, but there was a bit of fratricidal regret in the back of my mind. He was a werewolf, I'm a werewolf. It was dumb; I didn't even subscribe to that sort of tribalism. But the thought was still there.

"Parker!" I looked up in time to see the second female 'wolf lunging through the doorway. She crashed into me and we went tumbling to the floor. I shoved at her, but she straddled me and her weight flattened me against the floor. One of her claws dug deep into my shoulder. Conduit rushed forwards to tear her off me before she could rip out my throat, but she swiped with her other hand at his face. Conduit tumbled to the floor.

Wichet shouted and swung his sword in a glittering upward arc, cleanly cutting across the 'wolf's chest. Arterial blood sprayed onto my chest and face. Her grip on my arm slackened, and I jerked my arm upwards to wipe blood from my suddenly-burning eyes. Her blood stung my skin from the trace silver content. The 'wolf jerked and fell backwards, screaming and clutching her chest. Wichet shouted again as he plunged the sword into the her heart. Her corpse went limp. The smell of her blood was nearly enough to send me over the edge and Change then and there. Slowly, I hauled myself away from the edge of that mental abyss and pushed my inner Wolf deep down inside me.

I struggled to my feet and swore. My eyes burned, and I prayed that the silver contact wasn't enough to kill me. My shoulder ached and when I held it with my other hand it was slick to the touch; slick with my own blood.

Conduit lay on the ground, bloody tracks marking the claw's progress over his face. One eye looked useless. His hands fumbled for the first-aid equipment on his utility belt.

"We gotta get out of here," Wichet said.

"We still need Tina!" I edged towards the doorway to the room that held her.

“Go,” Wichet said to Shadow. He took up position over Conduit, settling into a defensive stance with his sword at the ready. Shadow nodded. She drew her last taser from her belt and pushed forwards into the next room, taser at the ready.

The room was empty except for a large metal cage in one corner and another doorway to the left. The cage was tall enough for a human to crouch. Inside it, Tina was pressing herself against the bars, eyes wide. When she saw me, she relaxed a fraction. I rushed to her and grasped at her hands. “Don’t worry, we’re getting you out of here!” I said to her. I fumbled with and examined the lock on the cage.

“Shoot it off,” Shadow said.

“What if it hits Tina? Don’t you have lockpicking equipment?”

“There’s no time! Shoot it off, Parker!”

I didn’t have many other options. I aimed the Hunter’s gun at the lock and, with a momentary hesitation, pulled the trigger for the second time. This time I heard the roar of the gun, and saw the lock as it split away from the cage. I kicked at the fragments left in the cage door’s mechanism, and the door swung open. Tina crawled out. I hugged her with one arm. I held the gun in the other hand, and she kept well away from it, sensing the silver inside.

I felt Tina tense against me, and I looked over my shoulder to see another pack member at the other doorway in the room. I spun around and pointed the gun at him. “Go with Tina,” I shouted to Shadow, “get out of here!”

Without hesitation, Shadow turned and left the room, trailing Tina in tow. I heard Wichet grunt as he picked up Conduit and followed the pair out into the front of the warehouse.

The werewolf still stood in the doorway, looking at me with rage and hunger. The gun seemed to keep him at bay. I thanked every power in the sky that he didn’t attack. I wasn’t sure I could pull the trigger on another person tonight. Self-doubt and unbidden shame crushed at me. The ‘wolf took one last look at me and then slipped back out of the doorway and vanished from my sight.

A thought struck me, and I cursed my short-sightedness. Werewolves, as a rule, aren’t dumb. We have an animalistic side that can overwhelm us with emotions, but we can also tap into that instinct for our benefit. Wolves were pack hunters by nature. They excelled at pursuing and encircling wounded prey. If enough wolves were pursuing you, you wouldn’t be able to escape them. Werewolves had access to the same tactical instinct. The pack wouldn’t try to push through me—I wasn’t the target.

I rushed from the room and ran after Tina and the Defenders. It was too late. I emerged onto a chaotic scene. Wichet had been hamstrung by a good claw swipe as he carried Conduit. Conduit had tumbled onto the ground, already incapacitated, and the ‘wolves had taken a good chunk out of Wichet’s back as he lay immobile on the ground. Blood poured profusely from the wound. Shadow was fighting off three ‘wolves. She struck back as they rushed at her, but they

were baring teeth and claws. It was all Shadow could do to keep them from tearing her limb from limb. As I watched, all three 'wolves jumped her at the same time and Shadow fell under the dogpile. I rushed forwards to help, but the 'wolves all shivered and fell off of Shadow. She had triggered her armor's shock mechanism. As she climbed out of the pile of bodies, I looked past her and saw Tina.

The pack alpha had grabbed Tina in the chaos and was holding her in a headlock at the entrance to the warehouse. His dark eyes were fixed squarely on me. He was waiting for me to notice him.

As our eyes locked, he Changed the hand he had across her throat into a full set of wicked claws. I raised the gun. "Let her go!"

The alpha only smiled, and drew his claws across Tina's throat. Her eyes, wide with fear, met mine for an instant before they went dull and the alpha dropped her to the ground. Blood flowed from her neck across the concrete of the warehouse. I didn't hesitate at all as I screamed and pulled the trigger.

The alpha dropped to the floor, still smiling with malice even in death. I mirrored the action and fell to my knees, the gun falling from my hands and clattering to the floor. My throat was raw from screaming. I looked up at Tina and saw her looking back at me as the her lifeblood flowed into a pool around her. Her life ticked away, and at some point she was no longer looking at me.

I Changed.

My inner Wolf, frustrated at being contained for so long, first burst through my chest with a stabbing pain. I could feel the skin changing and growing fur. The sensation spread outwards across my body, like my skin was being turned inside out. As it reached my extremities, I could feel the difference. I was trapped, a prisoner inside my own skin. My Wolf was now on the outside. He was in control; I was looking out through alien eyes at a distant world. Then came the grinding churn as my insides twisted and melted, reshaping into a wolf's insides. It came with a pain so total and terrible that all thought was driven from my mind, everything but that overwhelming, omnipresent burn. Lastly, as the pain of transformation began to fade, the warm presence of the Wolf wrapped around my mind, and consciousness slipped away...

I awoke, and immediately regretted it. The pounding post-Change headache erupted in my forehead with gusto, like the world's worst hangover. I tried opening my eyes a little, but there were lights overhead that burned into my retinas. I shut my eyes and rolled over onto my front, pointing my gaze downwards.

I started to remember last night. I sat bolt upright and looked around, my body protesting the sudden movement. I was in the Defenders' headquarters, sitting on a cot. A few meters away stood Rachel, no longer dressed in her combat gear. She was tending to Josh and Wichet, who were also lying on cots like mine. Josh had a bandage over his face, and Wichet had an IV hooked into his arm. Rachel had scratches and bite marks covering her arms and face, but they looked superficial and she didn't seem to mind.

I groaned, and Rachel looked in my direction. "Welcome back," she said. "Hope you had a nice nap."

"What happened?"

"You turned into a wolf, mate."

"And then?"

"You scared off the last of the pack, and then I knocked you out cold so you wouldn't do anything stupid. I dragged you three lunks back to the car, and brought you back here. You're welcome, by the way."

"You brought us back?"

"And sacrificed my car's back seat to do it. It's a mess back there."

"...and Tina?"

Rachel looked down and shook her head. I laid back and looked right into the halogen lights overhead, as if they could burn into my brain and erase me. "Thank you, Rachel. For pulling me out of there."

Rachel looked at me strangely. "What did you expect? You're one of us."

I smiled thinly. "How are the others?"

"They'll live. Wichet will make a full recovery, obviously. Josh isn't going to lose his eye, but he might have some scars."

"That's good. What about the pack?"

“Right now they’re scattered without their alpha. A new alpha might emerge, but I’d put my money on them leaving town regardless. There’s nothing keeping them here now.”

I rubbed my eyes. “I agree.” Whatever had allowed Tina and the pack to head north into Seattle wasn’t going to keep them here. The events of the past few days didn’t bode well for the future, but for now, my life was back to “normal”.