

"Mister. Hey, mister. Are you awake?"

I hadn't been, but someone screaming in my ear was enough to start me in that direction. Once I did, I rapidly became aware of a pounding headache and intense nausea. I moaned, rolled over, and promptly rolled back over onto my stomach when the light hit my eyes. Closed or not, that fucking *hurt*.

Something prodded my shoulder. "You have to get up, mister. My dad's plowing this field today, and you don't want him to find you here. Come on, get up."

I managed to sit up, mostly just to stop the screaming, and opened my eyes. I then vomited profusely, and judging by the smell I didn't even *want* to know what was in that vomit. Fortunately I managed not to puke on myself. It had been a lot of years since college, but apparently I hadn't forgotten *everything*.

I hadn't been hungover since I was changed. It would almost have been fun for nostalgia value, if it hadn't been so fucking awful.

After several minutes of that, I got my head together enough to look around. I was lying in the middle of a field, which presumably was corn or wheat or something. I'd never been on a farm before, so I had no real idea what the plants were supposed to look like.

The only person in sight, and apparently the one who'd woken me up, was a girl standing maybe ten feet away. She was maybe twenty, and looked about as appropriate for a rural setting as I did. Maybe I was outdated, but I didn't think of farm girls as having gauged ears, nose rings, or heavy makeup. She was pretty enough, in an unconventional sense. You got the impression she was aiming for hot instead of beautiful, and it worked for her.

I looked at her blearily. Then I realized I was stark naked, and flushed.

She laughed, clearly recognizing what was going through my head. "Don't worry," she said. "In my experience, seen one dick, seen 'em all. The collar's a fun addition, though. Where'd you get it?"

It took me a second to process what she'd said. When I did, I reached for my neck, and suddenly realized that I was holding a bottle, my fingers cramped so tightly around it that I was surprised it hadn't broken. It was empty, and from the smell, I could attribute a lot of how shitty I felt to that fact. Compared to that, absinthe smelled *nice*.

I forced myself to let go of the bottle and made another attempt to feel around my neck. This time, I managed to find the collar she'd mentioned. It was heavy, studded with large spikes, and buckled tightly around my neck.

Very tightly. I had to use both hands to get it off, dropping a piece of metal without paying much attention, and I still had to work at it for several seconds. When I did I pulled it off and looked at it for several seconds, a little dismayed. It was black leather, with bronze spikes, and it reeked of blood and liquor.

"Yeah, I didn't realize anyone sold that kind of thing around here," the girl said cheerfully, drawing my attention back to my surroundings. "And spurs? That's intense, man."

I barely glanced at the piece of metal I'd dropped, and confirmed that it was indeed a set of spurs. More bronze, it looked like. Just fucking great.

"You said someone was coming?" I said, trying to stand. It didn't go so well.

"Yeah, my dad, but he'll be maybe half an hour. Take your time." She regarded me with an impish grin. "I'll be honest, I would not have guessed there was a spring break party that intense going on in Bumfuck, Kansas."

I must have looked something like I felt, because she paused. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Kansas?" I said slowly. "I don't remember being in Kansas."

"Seriously?" she said. "Wow, that's...that's really impressive. I mean, I've *heard* about shit like this, but I've never actually seen it. So what's the last thing you do remember?"

"I was in Colorado," I said slowly. "That was on...Friday? Yeah, Friday."

"It's Tuesday now," she informed me. "Do you, like, really not remember anything? Or is it just patchy?"

"Nothing."

"Cool," she said. "Tell you what, let me go get you some clothes. My dad's overalls should fit you. Then we can go grab some coffee and get you sorted out."

"You don't have to do this," I protested halfheartedly.

She looked at me like I was an idiot. "Dude. You're hot, and you party hard enough that you wake up in a different state wearing nothing but a collar. Trust me, I'm not just doing this for you."

While I was waiting for her to go and grab clothes, I took stock of myself. I was hungover, obviously, and I still felt a little drunk, which was a little weird. It'd been *years* since I felt drunk.

Other than that, there were bite marks on my shoulders and neck, and my left thigh. They were mostly healed already, but I was pretty sure there were at least three or four mouths represented there, and at least one of them had been something other than human. I stank of alcohol and sweat, and more subtly of lemons and burnt toast. Somebody had written *Call me* on my left hand in something that looked like marker and smelled like flowers, above a phone number I didn't recognize.

All things considered, it was a pretty fucked up image. It kind of weirded me out thinking about what might have led to this situation, and I was the one that *did* it.

After that, I sat down and rested until the girl came back. I was out of it enough that my brain didn't want to work right, but I didn't actually pass out again.

I didn't *quite* pass out again, anyway.

"Here," she said, rousing me. She tossed a pair of heavy denim overalls at me.

I fumbled the catch, managed to grab them, and then dropped them again. She laughed at me while I struggled into the overalls, making no pretense of looking away to preserve my modesty.

It was just as well that I was a werewolf, really. Once I'd have blushed having a stranger watching me get dressed, but you outgrow that pretty quickly. It only took me a couple months to realize that skin's just skin, nothing special.

The overalls were comically oversized on me, but I managed to make them work. It helped that a few years of running as a wolf had put enough calluses on my feet that I didn't care too much that I didn't have any shoes.

"My name's Maggie, by the way," she said as we started walking.

"Ryan Peterson," I said automatically. "Where are we going?"

"There's a town about a mile away," Maggie said. "It isn't much, but it's what you get around here. I figure we'll get some food and coffee in you, help you sober up a little."

"Do you have enough time for that?"

"Sure. I told my dad I'm visiting friends today. I haven't been back for a few months, so he won't be suspicious."

"You don't live here, then?" I asked.

She snorted. "Hell, no. I'm going to college in California. One more year, then I start vet school, and I can say goodbye to Kansas for good."

I paused as a thought finally penetrated the pounding in my head. "That's convenient," I said, trying hard not to make it sound like an accusation. "For you to be in town to find me just before your father was going to stumble across me out in your field."

"I found you last night," she said dryly. "I was walking home from a party and saw you passed out there. I just figured you could sleep until morning."

I considered her for a moment, then shrugged. Maybe she was lying, maybe she wasn't. Some people—Kyra came to mind, as did her friend who might as well have been in the pack, we spent so much time working together—would have gotten worked up about that, trying to figure out which it was. Me, I didn't care. I was pretty used to being kept in the dark and fed on bullshit.

It isn't so bad being a pawn in the game of life. Not so bad at all.

About an hour later, I was finishing up my food. I didn't have my wallet, obviously, but Maggie had been generous enough to buy me breakfast, coffee, and a cheap pair of sandals.

The caffeine didn't affect me, no more than any other drug affected a werewolf, but it felt good drinking coffee. Routine. Between that and the food, I was feeling quite a bit better. The headache was mostly gone, and I was thinking a lot more clearly.

"Thanks," I said. "For the food."

"No big deal," she said dismissively. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I guess I need to figure out what happened. Hopefully I didn't do anything too stupid over the weekend."

"Scared you screwed your best friend's wife?" Maggie said, grinning. "Sent a dick pic to your boss? Invested all your money in a basket weaving startup?"

"I'm mostly hoping I didn't kill anybody," I said without thinking.

"Has that happened to you often?" she asked, still grinning. "Getting drunk and killing people?"

I paused and looked around. The cafe we were in was empty except for the staff, and the staff wasn't much different from empty. There was nobody close enough to overhear our conversation. "You aren't going to, like, turn me in to the cops or something, are you?"

For the first time, her cheerful attitude faltered. "I guess not. I mean...no, I guess not."

I nodded. I wasn't sure why I'd asked, really. If you have to ask that question, it doesn't matter what the answer is.

I wasn't really sure why I was telling her this, anyway. It wasn't smart. Maybe it was that I was still stupid from the alcohol, or maybe I just needed to talk about it. It wasn't like I could tell this story for sympathy in the pack. Every one of them could top it.

Sometimes it's easier to talk things out with a stranger. You don't have any investment in the relationship to get in the way. If I scared her too much, I could just walk away. Worst case, I could just shift to fur and be back in Colorado in a few days.

"It only happened once," I said. "I was in Afghanistan, and I'd just found out that my girlfriend was cheating on me back home. I was drinking with some friends, people from my unit, and we went out to the village near base. I don't even remember why, some stupid reason. One of the villagers said something, and I was feeling sensitive. I started hitting him, and another guy did too, and then things just...happened."

I looked away from her, focusing on the last of my food. It had been years, but there was still a lot of shame there.

It's one thing to kill people. I'd killed people before that, in the Marines, and I'd killed people as a werewolf. But what we'd done that day was different. That was *wrong*, on so many levels.

Maggie clearly felt similarly. "Jesus," she said. "Did you, like, go to jail for this?"

"They never reported it," I said sourly. "No investigation. They discharged me from the Marines and swept it under the rug." I ate some more food. "Thought about turning myself in, but what good would that do? Won't bring that guy back to life." I shrugged. "Anyway, that's the last time I drank. Haven't touched the stuff for years."

"Jesus," she said again. "What made you pick it up again?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know. I don't remember starting to drink." I held out my hand, showing her what was written on it. "Guess I ought to call this number. See if maybe they know what happened."

"Wow," she said. "This is...pretty crazy. It's like I'm an extra in a spy movie or something."

"Thanks for the help," I said. "Um...do you have a phone?"

"I'm in college," she said dryly. "Of course I have a phone."

I called Kyra first, checking in and telling her that I was alive. I didn't go into too much detail, not with Maggie right there, but I managed to make it sound like I was just calling my boss. She gave me the go-ahead to check up on what had happened while I'd been out of it and offered pack resources if I needed them, which was a relief. I *could* have just gone on with life and ignored what had happened, but I really didn't want to. I'd rather *know* what new skeletons were in my closet.

That dealt with, I called the number on my hand. The person who picked up didn't seem to have the clearest grasp on English—he didn't have an accent that I could tell, but he stumbled over his words and I had to say everything two or three times to get my meaning across. Eventually, I managed to get an address, although I had no idea why it mattered.

"Well," I said, handing her phone back. "That was less than helpful."

"What is it?"

"An address in California," I said sourly. "Somewhere in San Francisco."

"What happened there?" Maggie asked, sounding interested. "I'm guessing from your face it wasn't a hot chick wanting a repeat performance."

"Some guy who hardly even spoke English," I said. "Definitely didn't seem to remember writing that number on me."

"You think she gave you a false number?"

I looked at the writing on my hand, watching how it moved as I flexed and relaxed the muscles.

Markers didn't smell like flowers. Alcohol shouldn't have had an effect on me, and certainly shouldn't have been able to lay me out like *that*. Hell, the last thing I remembered was disobeying my Alpha's orders and all common sense to chase something in a crowd, and *that* sure as fuck shouldn't have happened.

"No," I said to Maggie. "I have a hunch it isn't that easy." I shrugged. "I guess it's time for a trip to California."

She hesitated, looking oddly conflicted, then said, "Could you take me with you?"

I eyed her. "Does that really seem like a good idea?"

"Not really," she said, shrugging. "But I *really* need to get the fuck out of Kansas. And you're exciting, you know? You're something *different*."

"You aren't upset by the, you know. Killing somebody thing?"

"Not really," she said, looking over my shoulder. "I mean, you were in the military. That was kind of your job, right?"

I stared at her in confusion, then looked back. One of the waitresses was standing right behind me, openly listening in on our conversation. She flushed when I looked at her, and hurried away.

"That was stupid," I said.

"No shit. See, you need me to make sure you don't do *that* kind of thing."

I sighed. It was stupid and irresponsible of her, but I couldn't exactly point fingers on that regard. Besides, I could kind of understand where she was coming from. When you're young and dumb, anything new sounds like the best idea ever. The hint of danger would just make it more exciting.

"Fine," I said reluctantly. "Go clear it with your family. I need to make some arrangements. I'll meet you back here in about an hour."

She grinned and left. I followed at a slower pace, and with much less enthusiasm.

Even in Bumfuck, Kansas, the pack had enough credit to get a foul-smelling man in too-large overalls and the cheapest sandals money could buy in the door. I rented a car and arranged for it to be driven out from Topeka. Then I got enough money from the bank to buy new clothes and a shower at the local pool.

I kept the collar, though. I had no intention of wearing the thing, but I've learned that the strangest things can be important sometimes.

Maggie took a few minutes to find me, and looked rather surprised when she did. "Wow," she said, walking up to the car. "How'd you pull this off?"

"My boss has lots of money and a liberal view of business expenses," I said, shrugging. The rental sedan was small, it smelled like cheese, and a bad serpentine belt meant that it sounded like a cat being tortured, but beggars can't be choosers. It would get me where I was going, and that was what counted.

Besides, it wasn't *my* money.

"Cool," she said, sitting in the passenger seat. She tossed a bulging backpack, apparently her only luggage, into the back seat. "Maybe I should work for your boss. Doesn't sound too bad."

I managed to restrain a laugh. "It wouldn't work out," I said. "Trust me."

Relatively little was said as we drove out Interstate 70, stopping a few times for rest and food. It was monotonous driving, not the sort of thing you'd do for pleasure, but traffic wasn't terrible.

"That's the third hamburger you've eaten today," Maggie said during one of those stops, watching me with an odd expression.

I shrugged and crammed the last of it into my mouth. "I eat a lot," I said. "You sure you don't want something?"

"Lunch was fine. How long are you planning to drive?"

I chewed for a few seconds and then swallowed. "I'm thinking we'll stop in Denver. I'm still feeling kind of crappy, so I'd rather not drive all night. Unless you wanted to trade off?"

"I don't drive," she said. "But stopping for the night works for me. I don't have to be back in school until next week, so there's no real rush."

"What'd you tell your parents, anyway?" I asked, getting back into the car. Maggie sighed and followed suit.

"Nothing much," she said. "I just told them something had come up with a friend and I needed to be back in Cali. Then I ran out the door before they could ask too many questions."

"Won't that get you in trouble?"

Maggie shrugged. "Maybe. I don't really care that much. Like I said, I've got one more year of school and then I'm done with this whole thing. Whatever."

I nodded, a little envious. She made it sound so *easy*, to walk away. So free. I'd never had that kind of freedom. Not as a kid, not with my family. Then I was in the military, and nobody's got much freedom there. Now, well, there were a lot of perks to being a werewolf, but personal liberty isn't really one of them.

Maybe twenty minutes later, Maggie stirred out of what I would have bet was a solid sleep. "Hey," she said. "You mind if I put some music on?"

"Nah," I said. Something to fill the silence would be welcome.

That was what I thought, anyway, until I heard what her idea of "music" was. I wouldn't have used that word, myself. The whine of the belt fit in pretty well, and that was saying something.

"Oh," I said. "*This* kind of music."

She was grinning. "Not your thing?"

"No. I'm more of a classic rock person. AC/DC or Metallica, maybe." I realized she was giving me a funny look, and frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, just a little too quickly. "You just seem a little young to listen to that."

"I'm older than I look," I said, smiling a little. Not so much older—only ten years or so, which was nothing to a werewolf—but enough. Enough to be a meaningful difference to someone like Maggie.

"Do you ever have the feeling that you're alone with a crazy person?" she asked after a moment.

"Frequently. But I spend a lot of time with crazy people."

"See, that isn't exactly reassuring."

"Sorry," I said dryly. "But reassuring isn't exactly my specialty."

She laughed, and if there was an edge of unease to it, we both ignored that.

We stayed the night in a cheap motel in Denver. Maggie claimed to be willing to sleep on the floor, but I bought two rooms anyway, and she seemed grateful. After a decent breakfast at a local place that the clerk recommended, it was back on the road.

"You're good at this," she commented. "Driving, I mean."

I grunted. It was a little before rush hour really started, but the traffic was still intense. "I spent a few years driving a bus," I said when I had a little room to breathe. "Next to that, this is nothing."



"Seriously?"

"Yep," I confirmed. "A Greyhound. Long-distance overnight trips." I shuddered. "Believe me, I have worse stories from that job than from Afghanistan. You don't even want to know what people got up to on those buses."

"I can imagine."

"No," I said dryly. "You really can't." After a few minutes, I said, "We'll make it to Nevada today, I think. We could press on to California, but I'm not in that much of a hurry."

"Cool with me. I haven't spent this much time in a car in a while."

"You flew out from school, then?"

"Yeah. I didn't make it out this winter, so my parents really wanted to see me." Maggie shrugged. "I thought I could handle it for a week. Turns out I was wrong."

"Are they really that bad?" I asked.

"Eh. They could be worse. They're just...very, very *Kansas*. Listening to my dad, you'd think it was still the fifties."

I could understand that. I could understand wanting to get away from that. Fortunately most of the wolves in my pack were on the younger side, the oldest less than a century old. I hadn't been so lucky in Arizona.

We stopped for food twice along the way, once in Moab and once in Wendover. By the time we reached Reno neither of us was in the mood for anything more exciting than food and sleep. The nice thing about staying in a gambling town, though, is that places are so desperate for business that they'll offer you almost anything just to get you in the door. So we ate at a fairly decent buffet and stayed in separate hotel rooms, and I didn't even have to feel guilty about how much money I was costing the pack.

The next day we drove into California, where the traffic was even worse. We weren't in L.A., but nobody does traffic quite like California. By the time we reached San Francisco I was starting to feel pretty upset, which wasn't good.

"Okay," I said, pulling over in the parking lot of a small shopping center. "Now I just need to find this address."

Maggie already had her phone out. "What is it?" she asked.

I told her, and she typed it into whatever app she was using. I might not be old by the standards of werewolves, but I was more than old enough to be fairly clueless about the most recent technology. It just moves so *fast*.

"Warehouse," she said after only a few moments. "On the edge of Chinatown. Not a good part of town."

I frowned. "Well, that's ominous." I stretched and then started the car again. "Where do you want me to drop you off at?"

"Drop me off?" she said incredulously. "I rode halfway across the fucking country with you. No way am I backing out of this story now."

"I thought you just said it was a bad part of town."

"Sure," Maggie said dryly. "'Cause *that* isn't something I've seen before. Look, I'm a smart girl, I've got my Mace and everything. And you're an ex-Marine. You can keep me safe, right?" She simpered at me, trying for puppy dog eyes. The effect was spoiled a little by the facial piercings.

I shrugged. "Your choice. Just don't come crying to me if it goes wrong."

She'd understated the badness of the neighborhood in question a little. It wasn't the worst I'd seen, not by a long shot, but it was the kind of place that would look pretty good in a movie as the crime lord's home base. I was pretty sure there were at least four or five gang members in sight.

I wasn't too concerned. You don't last long in a violent gang without learning to size up your target at least a little, and I didn't look like an easy target. It would take a while for them to nerve themselves up to start trouble with me, and I wasn't planning to stay that long.

Maggie stayed close to me on the way to the door, though, and she was looking around nervously. I couldn't blame her. Whether you wanted to look like a badass or not, this wasn't a good place for a civilian.

Nobody answered when I pounded on the door of the warehouse, and I was in a bad enough mood not to feel like I was waiting. When the doorknob didn't turn, I kicked it in.

"Wow," Maggie said. "Was that a good idea?"

"We'll find out," I said, walking in. The building was spacious, and dark. There was nobody in sight.

I waited a moment, then sighed. "Come out," I said. "You're not impressing anybody."

There was a long silence. "Okay," I called, louder. "I know you're here. I can smell you. And I'm just about out of patience. You *really* want to do this?"

A light went on in the depths of the building, casting a small circle of light without disrupting the darkness too much. There was a small desk, and a grotesquely large man sitting behind it. His fat rolls had fat rolls. His skin was pale, and between that and the red-violet color of his eyes, I thought he might actually be albino.

"You have business here?" he said, his voice clearly the same as that I'd heard on the phone.

"Maybe," I said, walking towards him. Maggie clung to my hand, reminding me that she couldn't see very well in the dark, and I slowed a little. "I was told to call this number."

"I don't do business over the phone."

"Which is why I'm here," I said dryly. "What business do you actually do here?"

"Transport," he said. "To exotic and common destinations."

"Okay," I said, getting into the circle of light. It was bright enough that I could reclaim my hand from Maggie and present it to him. "Why would someone write this on me, then?"

He grabbed my hand, his skin unpleasantly clammy, and pulled it close. *Really* close, and he bent forward at the same time, so that he ended up looking at it from maybe six inches away. "Oh," he said, releasing me. "You're *that* one."

"You know what this is about?"

"Yes. Can send you back. Is not...not *free*."

"I can get cash for you," I offered.

He shook his head, causing fat to jiggle up and down his body. "No. No money. Is no good to me." He peered at me, blinking watery eyes. "You brought girl for trade?"

Maggie stiffened. Hell, *I* stiffened. "No," I said. "I don't do that sort of thing."

"Why for not?" the man said reasonably. "She came here. Is...is dead now, yes? Why not sell?"

"That isn't going to happen," I said quietly. "You're going to let her go, and you're going to tell me where I need to go. Or I'm going to gut you and toss you in the ocean." I pulled a knife out of my pocket, startling Maggie.

Clothing hadn't been the only thing I'd purchased, that first day. You spend a few years getting into scraps, you get your priorities straight.

"You will not," he said confidently. "Would be...bad business, yes? I have many friends. I have friends from the *other* side, yes? They cause very much trouble for you."

I knew, then, what I was dealing with. The weirdness surrounding the message I'd woken up with, the nature of my disappearance, the uncanny appearance of the man, the way he'd emphasized the word *other*...it all suggested that I wasn't dealing with a normal gangster, here.

So rather than dance around the subject, I met his eye. "Maybe you don't know me," I said quietly. "I'm a werewolf. I have a history of anger management problems. History of aggression and violence. History of suicide attempts and risky behavior." I smiled, showing a few more teeth than was polite. "You really want to bet on a guy like that doing the smart, safe thing?"

He frowned at me, and nodded reluctantly. "Is understood. The girl, she may go. Will not be harmed. As for you...yes, I provide transport. Meet me in back." He stood and lumbered away without another word, moving with startling speed considering his bulk.

"Okay," I said to Maggie. "I think you should leave now. Can you make your own way back to school?"

"Were you serious about what you said?" she asked, not answering my question.

"About killing him? Yeah, I'd have done that rather than let him hurt you." I shrugged. "I said I've only killed one guy because I was drunk. Doesn't mean I've only killed one guy."

"Not that," she said impatiently. "The werewolf thing. Was that serious?"

"Oh," I said self-consciously. "Um. I probably wasn't supposed to say that. It would be nice if you kept it to yourself. Safer for everyone that way."

"So that's for real. It wasn't a hoax?"

"No. I don't know why they did that whole thing, coming out to the public, then discrediting themselves. Some kind of political bullshit, I think."

"Cool," she breathed. "Listen, I get that you're in a hurry, but after this is over, you want to look me up? It's been fun, and I kind of like the idea of having a werewolf friend."

A friend. That was...a novel concept. It had been years since I had a friend that wasn't tied up in the pack.

A few minutes later, I walked into the darkness at the back of the room with a phone number written on either hand.

"This door," the albino said, pointing at a simple wooden one. "It opens on a Way. Will lead where you are going."

"What's a Way?"

He grimaced, showing flat, ugly teeth. "Is Way. Leads to Otherside. Slower than direct route, but easier to use, more stable. Safer."

I nodded. "You know that my pack will look if something happens to me," I stated.

He grunted, an unsettlingly wet sound, and nodded. "Is honest deal. Paid in advance. Anything happens on Way, is not my fault."

I nodded and opened the door.

On the other side, I was standing on a forested hillside. I couldn't see the ocean, but from the smell of salt it couldn't be all that far away. There was a trail leading through the trees, marked with simple stone cairns.

I shrugged and started down the trail.

Maybe an hour later, I saw another door, a fancier one. It seemed pretty clear that this was my destination, so I went through it.

As I'd expected from the last time, one side of this door had nothing much in common with the other. The new location was a large clearing in the middle of a much warmer forest than I'd left. There were chairs and tables scattered around, and a long bar to one side.

I looked at the bar. Then I took a deep breath. Under the trees, I could smell strong alcohol and something not unlike lemons. It was an intense, unpleasant, familiar odor.

Bingo.

I looked around, but there was no one in sight. I walked over to the bar, figuring that if there was anywhere I could find someone it would be there.

I'd been standing at the bar for maybe thirty seconds when someone tapped me on the shoulder, without having made any noise. I jumped away and turned to face them.

The person who'd touched me was female, or at least I was assuming so. She was mostly naked, but it was still a little unclear, because she was more openly inhuman than most of the people I'd met. Her skin was greenish-brown and her proportions were more like a teenage boy's idea of what a woman's body should look like than anything that actually made sense. I thought it was supposed to be enticing, but the result was too unnatural to be sexual, at least to my tastes.

"We're closed," she said in a voice like the sighing of the breeze through leaves. "Come back later."

I presented my hand, feeling a little awkward. "I'm looking for the person that wrote this," I said. "Do you know where I could find them?"

"Ah," she sighed. "Yes. Come with me."

The not-woman led me to an arch of woven branches at the edge of the clearing. On the other side I could see a snowy beach leading down to a grey, stormy sea.

"Through here," she sighed. "She has been waiting for you." She turned and left without another word. I watched, more out of curiosity than anything, but she disappeared within three steps.

I shrugged and stepped through.

It was cold, on the other side, cold enough that my clothes felt pretty fucking inadequate. My feet were soaked in a few seconds.

I wished I'd thought to change. The wolf can handle the cold a lot better than the man.

I didn't want to take the time now, though, so I kept going, walking down to the shore. I looked out at the water, wondering whether there was something I was supposed to be doing, when I noticed something coming closer. It was moving fast, swimming more gracefully than a person could, and just barely protruding from the water. I couldn't get a look at what it was.

When it got closer, I realized that it was a seal. I didn't know enough to say more than that. It was pretty small compared to, say, a walrus, not much bigger than I was.

It occurred to me that those teeth would line up fairly well with the bite marks on my shoulders. That was...a little unsettling.

Just before it came out of the water, the seal changed, shifting in an instant into the form of a woman. She was a little shorter than me, and greyish, much the same color as the seal had been.

I pulled the collar out of my pocket. "Is this yours?"

She smiled, showing teeth just a little too sharp to be human. Rather than answer, she moved closer and hugged me.

I felt a little awkward. I mean, she was a fucking *seal* not ten seconds earlier.

Then again, I asked myself, why should I *care*? Hadn't I just been considering turning into a wolf? What was the difference, really?

Now that I thought about it, it wasn't like I'd had great luck with humans, before or after I changed. Werewolves were a little better, if only because I didn't have to worry so much about saying the wrong thing or scaring them off, but it wasn't that great. There weren't that many females around, and it wasn't like a submissive wolf was that exciting to most of them. It had been a hell of a long time since I was in a relationship lasting longer than a month or two.

Sure, I'd done some stupid stuff over the weekend. But maybe it wasn't all bad. Maybe I should at least see where this went.

*Screw it*, I thought, and hugged the seal-woman back. Answers could wait, at least for a few minutes.